

RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
1b/2013

# How public are Turku's public places?

Georgiana Varna

## Key messages

- Public spaces are crucial to our urban well-being, and also an increasingly important topic of academic research and practical policy-making.
- The historic riverfront of the River Aura has been greatly transformed in the past decades from a derelict area to the most active public space in Turku.
- Nonetheless, Turku still needs a concentrated effort to make many of its public spaces livelier; this should combine strong political will, careful urban design, and fast capitalisation of the legacy of the European Capital of Culture event in 2011.

**P**ublic spaces are part of our daily lives. They are the pavements we walk or cycle to work or to school, the parks where we go to relax and reconnect with nature, the playgrounds where we take our children, and the squares where we meet our friends. Today, urban public space has become a central feature all over the world in the development of towns and cities, which are struggling to create an image of 'friendliness', 'smartness', and 'quality of life'. This is done in order to attract flows of capital, tourists, and new residents, and to prevent the loss of inhabitants and businesses. Public spaces, through their multiple functions, have become crucial in achieving these two purposes. Well-designed, lively, and attractive parks, squares, or walkways create a good impression for residents, tourists, or investors. In addition, the knowledge economy attracts employees that highly appreciate an active city life of cafés, pubs, and cultural venues. Successful public spaces with active flows of people are highly favourable to the local shops, restaurants, bars, and all types of service orientated businesses. On a more individual level, next to good schools and roads, city dwellers want to live in safe, pleasant, and attractive environments, and a local authority that can provide this is one that will be highly appreciated.

In areas with difficult climates, such as the cities of Finland, the quality of the public space becomes even more crucial due to the weather conditions. It is of paramount importance here to create well-functioning places for the entire year, so that the inhabitants feel both comfortable and actively engaged in their city's public life. These public spaces also need to have a strong sense of

identity, so that they can easily be remembered by visitors while conveying a sense of local pride to the inhabitants.

In this research briefing, I report the results of a project that analysed the publicness of three squares – Vanha Suurtori, Varvintori, and Vähätori – developed on the waterfront of the River Aura, each with a particular identity and developed in a different period of time. The research question was how public Turku's public spaces are, with a focus on the three squares. The waterfront was chosen because it is, on the whole, the most active and popular public space in the city nowadays.

A mixed methods approach was used. Firstly, my main method was quantitative measuring of 'publicness' with the nineteen indicators of the Star Model developed in my PhD thesis (1). The values for indicators were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest publicness and 5 being the highest; these were averaged using the normal mean. The Star Model comprises five meta-themes, each being rated on a star diagram of publicness. Secondly, in order to study public opinion, a survey was run with the people present in the public spaces during the observation days. In total, more than 200 people were asked to fill in the questionnaire, and the response rate was 61 per cent. Altogether, 135 people gave their opinions on the publicness of one of the three public spaces studied. The Star Model, as well as the purpose of the questionnaire, will be explained more thoroughly below, in context. Thirdly, to gain background knowledge and learn more about the development of the three squares, the importance of the River Aura's waterfront, the current policies, and Turku's development challenges, I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the development of Turku's urban environment (architects, planners, politicians, and academic experts in urban issues). Fourthly, I also conducted document analysis of the main planning documents for Turku from the 1950s until today.

## The concept of public space from an academic perspective

On an international level, public space has increasingly become a subject of discussion in the academic world, in the practice of city making and the general public debate in the past fifty years or so. Although there is a wide and varied literature on the topic, from a multitude of disciplines such as architecture and urban planning, geography, environmental sciences, law, economics, criminology, or politics, confusion still arises when trying to answer the deceptively simple question "What is public space?" Staeheli and Mitchell, reflecting on the problematic understanding of public space, despite its apparent

straightforward meaning, state that their research in the field has "...demonstrated that 'public space' is a slippery, complicated and shifting kind of space".<sup>2</sup>

This can be explained by two factors. First, all the different actors that are involved in the practice of city making (architects, businessmen, consultants, civil or traffic engineers, funders, and others) understand the meaning, the importance, and the value of public space from different points of view. Second, each academic discipline sees public space through a single lens, with different concerns and interests to the fore. Political scientists, for example, focus on democratisation and on rights in public space; geographers on 'sense of place' and 'placelessness'; legal scholars on the ownership of and access to public places; sociologists on human interactions and social exclusion; and so on. The result is a diverse array of multi-disciplinary approaches towards understanding 'public space'.

The Star Model of Publicness was born from the desire to organise and clarify this multi-disciplinary literature and to understand those key characteristics or qualities of publicness that make 'public space' public. These are:

- Ownership – referring to who owns a public space. There are spaces such as shopping centres and bars, which are privately owned but publicly used. These places rate lower than open squares or parks, which are owned by a democratically elected body, and as such by the local inhabitants. What seems to have happened more and more in the past decades, to a background of increasingly lower public budgets, is the 'privatisation' of public space. This refers to the fact that more and more, public life is happening in shopping malls, where private owners can dictate 'the rules of the game' and drive the general public towards a culture of consumption, while stopping political expression.<sup>3-5</sup>
- Physical configuration – referring to all the 'hard' elements related to the material part of a public space, from benches, pavements, and attractive elements such as fountains to cycle paths and connections (bridges, street crossings). A place that is well connected to its surrounding urban environment and that benefits from easily walkable pavements, comfortable and well-positioned benches, and interesting design elements (statues, fountains, stairs) will be more used and, as such, will attract more public than a place with bad design.
- Animation – referring to the presence of different groups of people, who can appropriate the space according to their own needs, while feeling safe and free to do so. Of course, a playground will mostly be used by children; however, here we refer to 'gen-

eral public spaces', designed with the entire public in mind, and for this research, the case study was squares. A square where different activities happen at the same time, with different groups of people interacting or just being present alongside each other without any conflicts, will be more public than an empty, deserted one.

- **Control** – referring to the historic quality of a public space of being a democratic arena for public life, where the fundamental rights guaranteed by a democratic society, such as the right to speak freely and assemble, are manifested. What appears to have happened recently is an increase in surveillance and control measures in public space, with more surveillance cameras and more active police patrols limiting the rights of free citizens.
- **Civility** – referring to the importance of maintaining public spaces in a clean and good state. A space with public toilets, important especially for old or sick people and children, with well-kept greenery and well lit at night will be more public than a dirty space, without bins and with broken furniture and a dark and unsafe night-time atmosphere.

Through the interaction of all five meta-themes, a public space achieves a high, medium, or low level of publicness. Therefore, the Star Diagram of Publicness was created, where each point of the star represents a different meta-theme. It needs to be kept in mind, though, that this is a model, and as such does not reflect the reality completely, but only simplifies it so that quality informed judgements can be made about where and why some spaces succeed and others fail.

## The Aura riverfront –Turku's most prominent public space

One cannot imagine Turku today without the River Aura. The city has grown organically on its banks and it owes a lot of its growth, economically and population wise, to the shipping industries that have developed due to the advantageous position at the mouth of the river.

"In his account, Topelius places Turku in a special, spatio-temporal environment: this city is on the shore packed with all the meaning that seven centuries of urban life bring along. From the inner city and the Cathedral, the shores of the river Aura take one to the Castle, and further on to the nearby shores of the Baltic Sea, thus connecting Turku to the rest of the world. Seen from the opposite direction, the sea and the river bring the rest of the world into the very heart of Turku."<sup>6</sup>

The industrialisation period started to decline, in a similar manner to other cities in the developed European countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, leaving a landscape of former industrial buildings, brownfield sites, a dilapidated waterfront, and polluted river waters. However, a great change happened in the past decades, and the Aura was transformed from a sewer into the main "living room of the city" (Interview with Turku architect). There is now a National City Park along its banks, designated by the Ministry of the Environment; former boats are now restaurants and party venues, and often in the summer the banks of the river are occupied by many inhabitants, celebrating the warm weather or different events (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Turku during a local music concert in summer 2011 (All pictures by Georgiana Varna)



Figure 2. Turku during an average summer day in 2012



During this research, it appeared clear that most of the interviewees agreed on the importance of the river for Turku's urban landscape, identity, and public life:

"The river is the spine of the city (...) and of the whole country as you have on the riverside all the important moments of Finland's history." (Interview with Turku architect)

"The area around the cathedral and the river – the birth place of urban culture in Finland." (Interview with Turku academic)

"The most important and the most typical public space is the riverfront. Thirty years ago very few people went there, it was some kind of backyard, nobody was very interested. There were shipyards and harbour areas, closed to the public. What happened from the early 80s was a very quick change in the cityscape in understanding and using public space." (Interview with Turku architect from the planning department)

"I couldn't imagine Turku without the river, it would be a completely different city. The role of the river is crucial." (Interview with Turku politician)

This view is also present in the 'Turku 2031 Vision' document, where it is stated:

"The river is the most meaningful urban river in Finland, giving an industrial and nowadays also a cultural image for the city."<sup>7</sup>

However, the riverfront could become more active. There are propositions for an urban beach and also for a water taxi, which could connect the city centre with the newly built housing areas on Hirvensalo island, as well as the recreational island Ruissalo, both of which could be privately funded. These should be supported, along with all types of commercial activities in the close vicinity of the water. For example, the biannual fish market could become a monthly event during the spring-autumn period. This is a highly successful event and its presence would energise the river banks, support the local tradesmen, and also give an opportunity to the inhabitants to re-connect with the river that has always supported the life of the city.

### Three case studies of public places

The three squares chosen as case studies, Vanha Suurtori, Varvintori, and Vähätori, are all located along the waterfront of the River Aura, which is, as already mentioned, all-in-all considered the most vibrant public space of the city and the stage of its contemporary public life. The particular sites were chosen for two main reasons: they needed to be important spaces for the city life, and they needed to be developed in different time

periods and different locations (centre, more peripheral, West and East bank) for a better comparison. During the research, it was found out that there are other problematic public places in the city, the market square (Kaupatori) and Puutori, for example, but they can be the subject of a further study.

The squares were observed in order to grade each of the nineteen indicators belonging to the five meta-themes that give a space a rating for its 'publicness'.<sup>1</sup> The hardest meta-theme to measure is animation, due to its time-dependent indicator, referring to how many activities are present at any given moment in time in a public space. This gives an average snapshot of a public space, reflecting the most likely image that a visitor would have of the vibrancy of that space when they are present there. Therefore, observations were made of how animated the three case-study public places were, for a five minute period, every 15 minutes, from 8 a.m. until 8.00 p.m. Each public place was observed for three days, Mondays and Fridays to account for weekday use and Sundays for weekend use, from September until the beginning of December, to understand the average use of these public spaces in the climate of Turku.

### Vanha Suurtori

Vanha Suurtori is one of the very few places in Turku where "... you can really see the coherent historic environment" (Interview with Turku academic). In a (mostly wooden) city devastated by many fires, out of which the most dramatic was the one of 1827, most of medieval Turku lies underground. However, the quarter in the close vicinity of the cathedral, which includes the observation public space, is the most clearly defined area that reminds the locals of, and points out to visitors, the rich historic past of the city. Although there have been many attempts to enliven this space, as the planners of the city have acknowledged for years its general lack of activity, the space is still used very little.

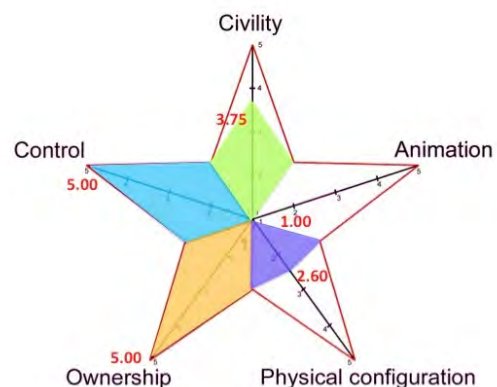


Figure 3. The Star Model of Publicness for Vanha Suurtori



The publicness analysis revealed an average value of 3.47, which shows a medium level of publicness. The star of publicness showed very distorted values (Figure 3); the square is in public ownership and not overtly controlled, and is therefore a true democratic space. Regarding civility, the greenery is well kept and the space is cleaned regularly.

However, there are no public toilets and the lighting could be made friendlier, as some users noticed that they feel unsafe at night here. Of course, the feeling of being unsafe can also be attributed to the lack of people. It was noticed during the observation that generally after 6 p.m., there is no one in the space (Figure 5). The very low animation value illustrates the deserted aspect of the place, with an average of 3 people seen in a 5-minute interval. This can be explained by the very low value of physical configuration. Although it occupies a central urban position, Suurtori occupies "...a peripheral location in a way" (Interview with Turku academic). This

is due to the poor connectivity to the surrounding urban environment. Towards the North, the old buildings block the square completely, and in the Southern direction, although there is a passage towards the river, the Pinella restaurant acts as a visible blockage, diminishing permeability. Towards the West, there is a small passage towards the Book Café, which is the principal attractor for most people seen in Vanha Suurtori. Towards the East, there is the poorest connection; the Uudenmaankatu road functions as a great barrier, and already propositions have been made to close it temporarily and see how the traffic could flow. There are also two other options: submerging the entire road underground, which although expensive would be the best choice, or a cheaper option would be a light bridge structure over it. Local architects could be commissioned and such a passage would connect much better the busy area in front of the cathedral, used now as a passage by many of the students living in the student area, and the Old Square.

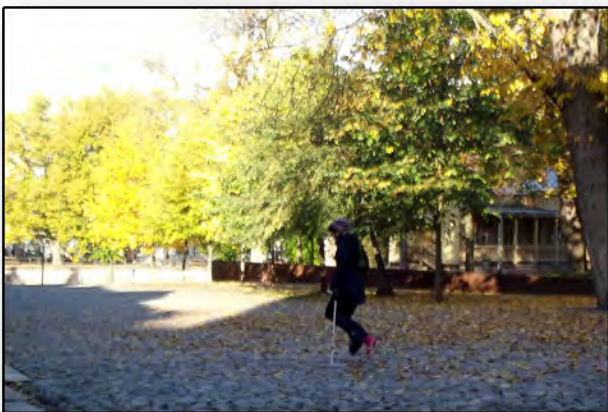


Figure 4. The pavement in Vanha Suurtori causing problems for disabled/injured users



Figure 5. A typical view of the 'users' in Vanha Suurtori

Regarding the micro-design elements, the square has a poor overall layout: the leafy park area is used more often due to the presence of the comfortable benches, but the rest of the square has a cumbersome-to-walk pavement, no benches, and no elements to attract people, and it is used now either for bicycle parking or as a passage to the Book Café. There were a few instances when tourists were seen at the edge of the square, looking in

and then carrying on, obviously not having anything to attract them into the space. Glass panels placed on the ground, with the ruins of Turku underneath, could become an attractive point for visitors and a reminder for locals of their history. The medieval market is a success and that is a good step forward in showing what the place could be like, not at all times of the year, but at least during the summer (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Vanha Suurtori during the Medieval Market in the summer of 2012

The entire square should be re-thought, and if indeed the leaders, the public, and the planners want to re-enliven the old core of the city, then this can be done. It seems that the ideas are in place, with a brewery or a hotel being created there and the facades of the old buildings being activated, but, so far, "the square has not been a priority" (Interview with Turku politician).

Based on the analysis, I believe that several actions should be taken if the square is going to be considered a priority. The old pavement needs to be kept only to a lesser degree and better walking opportunities need to be provided. A general new design of the space should be adopted, maybe based on a local competition among Turku architects to propose a more 'people-friendly' design. This should look at integrating the square better into the general moving patterns, and if Uudenmaankatu cannot be submerged as a tunnel, at least it could be closed temporarily, as has already been proposed. Alternatively, a pedestrian and cycle overpass could be built to connect the pedestrian area in front of the cathedral with Suurtori, as used to be the case in the old times of Turku.

The square needs to gain some attractions to make people come here; therefore, making it the place where one could identify oneself with the history of Turku, taking into consideration the vicinity with Aboa Vetus, could be its image. Therefore, glass panels showing the old remains underneath and exhibiting some artefacts could be attraction elements; or maybe a competition should be organised with local artists and they could exhibit here, monthly or every two months, installations related to the history of the city. Whatever the theme is, some-

thing needs to be put in place to give some identity to this forgotten place.

Last but not least, the lower parts of the buildings need to gain active frontages; be they organic food shops, Finnish arts and crafts, or cafés, they need to be present to create a more steady pedestrian flow.

## Varvintori

Varvintori square was created in the 1980s, as part of the regeneration of the Western riverbank. After an ideas competition was organised, in 1987, the proposal Despina by the Lund architects won the bid. The two old industrial workshops became a place for the Conservatory and the Art Academy, while a series of three squares was proposed between them. Varvintori is the biggest of these three, situated by the river. Across the river,

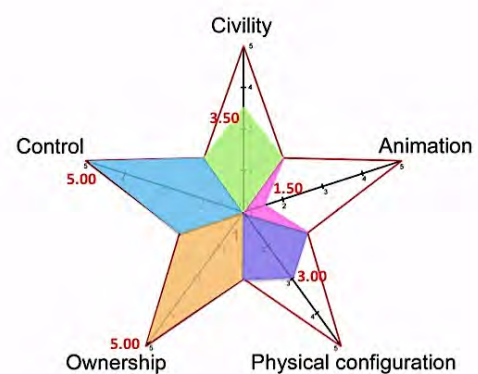


Figure 7. The Star Model of Publicness for Varvintori



the regeneration of the eastern riverbank started later, in the 1990s. There, in the vicinity, is located a newly established cultural centre, Manilla, occupying a former rope factory building.

The publicness analysis revealed an average value of publicness of 3.6, only slightly higher than Vanha Suurtori. Similarly to the Old Square, the ownership and control dimensions rate maximum, showing that this place is also a democratic space for free expression. Also in

a similar manner, the values of animation and physical configuration

are the lowest, although they score marginally better than in the Old Square. Even a first look at the place shows its poor design; the overall look is of an empty square with an impressive cascade of stairs in its upper part. There are very few benches, which are also uninviting, uncomfortable and positioned awkwardly (Figure 8 and 9).



Figure 8. The empty look of Varvintori, where users seem lost in a 'sea of asphalt'



Figure 9. The lack of sitting opportunities makes people use what it is available

There is no central point, like a statue or a fountain, which would make the space more comfortable and take away the feeling of emptiness. There is nothing to attract the people working and rehearsing in the two cultural buildings on the outside of the space, except for smoking. Moreover, although the space is well connected on the East-West axis, being part of the promenade along the Aura, there is no connection across the river. Although this is a lower point on the downstream of the Aura, an open bridge or a modern ferry could be a solution. Although, in a similar way to the sinking of Uudenmaankatu, this is an expensive proposition, the question of the future of the downstream of the Aura River needs to be asked. There are two big residential development projects proposed in the close vicinity, on Kakola Hill and in the Linnankaupunki district, the new housing development on the other side of the river in Telakkaranta has just been started, and many projects are also planned further along, on Hirvensalo island.

Could this become the new cultural hub of Turku? With a mixture of houses to attract a diversity of users from sin-

gle professionals to young families with children, based on the cultural attractions that are already in place: Manilla, the Conservatory and Art Academy buildings, the Forum Marina, and the Castle, which could host more activities outside, punctuated by an attractive riverside based on a series of 'rooms', and situated in a beautiful natural landscape, with a seashore opened to more activities. This could become the necessary 'postcard' for Turku's image as a creative, cultural, and dynamic city. In this scenario, Varvintori could become a much more active public space, with a special identity.

Right now, apart from the poor design, there are also no amenities for the local inhabitants: no ATM machine and no grocery shop, only a café and a pub. In addition, skateboarders have been noticed using their own installations in the upper part of the square, and many children pass by with their parents (Figures 10 and 11).





Figure 10. Skateboarders enjoying the upper part of the square



Figure 11. The lack of playing opportunities in Varvintori square

If a hub of activity was created here, it could include a few playing elements for children and/or several elements for skateboarders. Right now, most people stroll up and down the river (including 33% of our 78 interviewees), several visit the boat, but even on Turku Day, almost no one would venture inside the square as "there is nothing to do." Furthermore, shops are necessary for the local inhabitants, so there should be some initiative from the City Council to provide a grocery store. More greenery and comfortable benches are a must if there is a desire to make this a more vibrant and attractive public space. Moreover, an identity for this square needs to

be found, either as a display stage for current artistic installations produced in the neighbouring Art Academy, or as a place to display the forgotten era when Turku was a fishing town – the choice belongs to the inhabitants of the city and their leaders. Varvintori deserves policy-makers' attention, since it could become a much more important public space in renewing Turku. In this respect, a crossing on the river should be considered, be it an opening bridge or another Föri (crossing ferry). This would help with the overall connectivity of the square, but would also link it to Manilla and the future housing on the Eastern riverfront.

## Vähätori

The small pocket square in front of the public library was created in the 2000s. It is the 'youngest' of the three case studies, being opened in its current form in 2009, and the most public. The area used to be a busy traffic road, and at the insistence of the local architect Benito Casagrande, it was pedestrianised and transformed into a square.

The process took more than a decade, though, from the moment the planning process started, in 1997. Now, it is one of the most successful public spaces in Turku. The overall publicness is 4.08, with high values for all meta-themes except animation. Although there were on average 22 people recorded in a 5-minute interval, there was not a large diversity of activities recorded in the square. Most people were seen strolling, jogging, or cycling, which shows that the space is mostly used as a corridor. Out of the 36 people that agreed to fill in the questionnaire, 16 (45%) use the space for strolling through, as part of the river walk. This can be explained by the fact that it is next to the busiest river crossing point in the

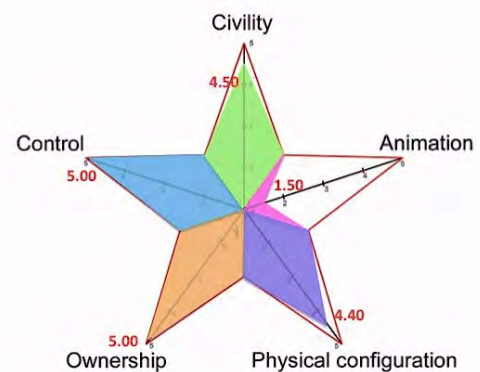


Figure 12. The Star Model of Publicness for Vähätori

city, as well as one of the most active links between the university area and the city centre. However, the space is also used as an end in itself, as it is today "one major concentration of Turku's flourishing restaurant scene" (Interview with Turku academic). Especially during the warm

days, when the restaurants expand to outdoor terraces, the place becomes very lively. In addition, the library is a main attraction in the space, with a large number of people being observed entering or leaving it. Similarly to the other two squares, ownership and control rated maximum; therefore, it can be inferred that there is no noticeable tendency in Turku towards privatisation and control of public space. The physical configuration also

rated high, as the space is well connected to the surrounding urban grid and the walking and sitting opportunities are well designed. The statue and the library provide focal points, although it appeared obvious from events such as the French Market that something to invite people into the space leads to much more animation and a diversity of activities (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Vähätori during the French Market (summer 2012, left) and on an average day (autumn 2012, right)

Regarding the civility dimension, it was considered that the public toilets available in the library could be used by anyone, if one asks for the key from the reception. However, the library does close at certain hours, and therefore often on summer days, people can be seen urinating by the river. Overall, Vähätori (the Library Square) seems a highly public 'public space' without major improvements needed; although there is a bridge linking this area to Vanha Suurtori, during the French Market,

the activity in the Old Square was much more diminished (Figure 14).

Overall, Vähätori has a high publicness, so it does not require changes. It should be taken as an example of a successful public space, created when traffic was not considered a priority, which has highly improved a small but key area in Turku city centre.

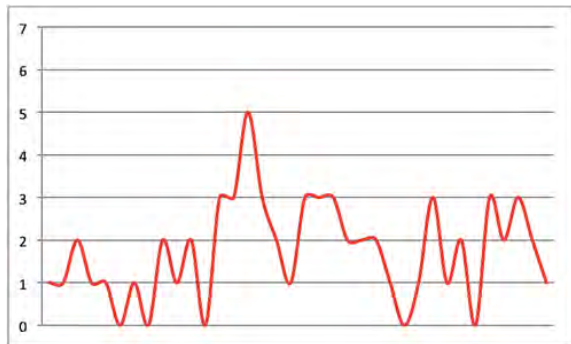


Figure 14. Vähätori during the French Market (summer 2012, left) and Vanha Suurtori (summer 2012, picture taken 5 minutes later, right)

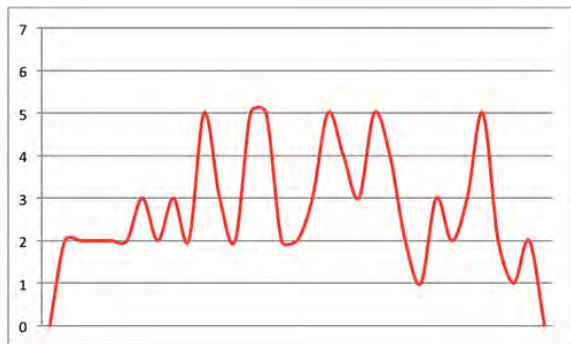
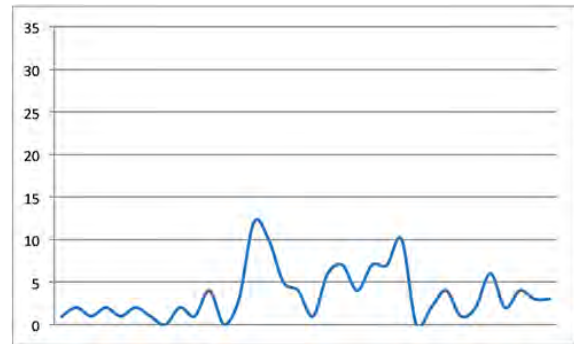


## Comparison of the three squares

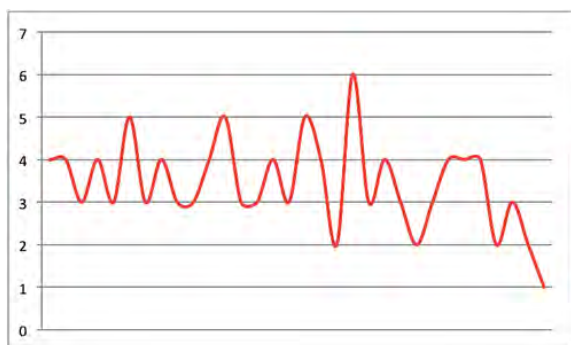
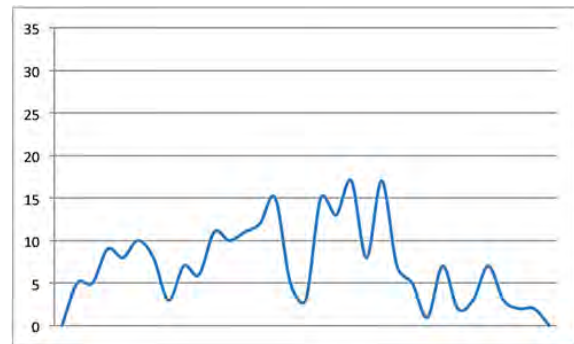
Figure 15 shows the number of activities performed during a five-minute observation slot, and the number of people present during the same time interval, in each of the public places, on an average Friday.



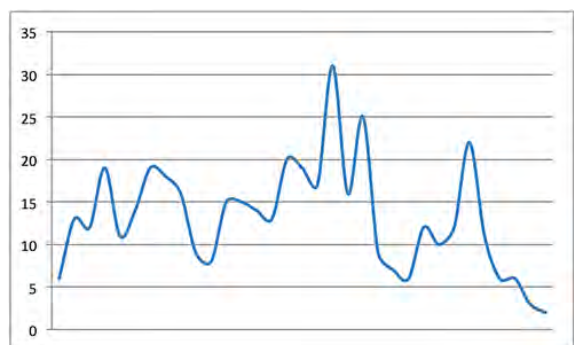
a) Vanha Suurtori



b) Varvintori



c) Vähätori



**Figure 15.** Comparing the three squares according to number of activities per 5 minutes (left) and number of people per 5 minutes (right) on an average Friday during the autumn season



The data reveals that Vähätori (the Library Square) is the most animated public space, as there were on average 22 people present in the space in a short time, irrespective of the weather conditions, be it a sunny or a snowy day. Varvintori, on the other hand, was highly animated on a Sunday, with 30 people on average in a five-minute time interval, and was far less animated during Monday and Friday, when seven and five people on average, respectively, were present in the square. The users were mostly cycling or strolling along the riverside, moving along the edge of the square. This can be explained by the fact that the Sunday observations were made on 16 September 2012, when the event 'Turku Days' was taking place. Many users were observed then strolling up and down the river by the edge of the square or visiting a ship, on their way to and from the Forum Marina museum. Varvintori was found overall to be less animated than Vähätori, which had on average 14 people present in a short interval, at any given time.

Vanha Suurtori was the least animated of the three spaces, with an average of three people present, which is a very low number for the historic centre of the city and for a place with a highly central position. No matter the weather conditions or the time of the week, the square always looks quite empty. Immediate action should be taken to activate this site, which is a key for the city's identity. Nowadays, the Old Square has on average only two activities happening, often strolling and cycling, which shows its use as a transition space. The other two squares have on average 3 to 4 activities happening, these being, apart from strolling and cycling, jogging and standing, enjoying the view of the river. This is an activity that is blocked in Vanha Suurtori due to the Pinella restaurant. Therefore, although close to the River Aura, Suurtori is actually quite segregated from it. The connection between the river and this historical site should be an important factor when re-thinking the square.

Other activities performed in Vähätori were Nordic walking, dog walking, taking pictures of the river, and sitting on the benches and enjoying the river view. In Varvintori, similar activities were recorded, with the addition of skateboarding.

## The voice of the public

Apart from analysing the squares from an academic point of view, I thought it was also important to listen to the voice of the public, and therefore I decided to ask the local people about their public places. During the entire time that I was present in the squares, doing my analysis, my Finnish-speaking friends were helping by asking the people present to fill in the questionnaire. In

the three squares in total, we obtained a 61 per cent response rate. This means that a total of 135 people filled in the questionnaire, which was about the publicness of the particular studied space they were visiting or transiting. Their responses can be summed up as follows.

For Vanha Suurtori, two key recommendations emerged. Firstly, more walkable surfaces and better disabled access should be implemented. This was confirmed by the observations, as in two separate instances, senior visitors to the square were seen having real difficulties walking through the cobbled area. Secondly, the space could be used more by the city "as a parade space and to show off". In this respect, one respondent said: "It should be recognised for what it is - the historic centre of the city. In a way, it is the best place and it should be made fuller of life. Although it has a central position, it is more than often, empty".

For Varvintori, the main concern was the emptiness of the space. The users wanted more life in the square, and the suggestions referred to more events or a market to be organised, a playground for children to be built, art exhibitions and music events to be facilitated. Other recommendations included more plants and better seating; the lack of benches was often noted and a fountain was also suggested. People also requested the presence of public toilets and a big requirement is a shop, as there are no local places to buy food.

Most users from Vähätori did not make any comments, appreciating greatly the space as it is. A few suggestions were made, such as a coffee kiosk, a public toilet, and more notes about the history of the place.

## Reflections and policy recommendations

This research showed very clearly that the public spaces of Turku need more activity and that more concentrated attention on urban design is necessary in order to support this. All the squares rated low in animation, although each had certain advantages: Vanha Suurtori and Vähätori benefit from their central position in the urban framework, while Varvintori occupies a central position on the main axis between the city's cathedral and the castle, and is close to important cultural amenities – the Conservatory and Art Academy buildings, the museum Forum Marina, and over the river, the cultural centre Manilla. The city has this vision for 2031:

"Life in the centre is active and refreshingly full of surprises: trade is active, things happen on squares and in parks (...) The city is a popular place of trade and social encounters. People like spending time in the centre - there are places to sit, and the environ-

ment provides a framework for many kinds of activities for people of all ages.”<sup>7</sup>

If the city wants to fulfil this vision, then it needs to be translated into a more concrete agenda, which needs to be politically supported over a few decades, no matter the changes in the council or the economic cycles. In a broader public-space development perspective, this should include five key things.

First, the city centre should be opened to the riverside. Today, when someone is standing in the market square, which we can hope will soon gain its role as the centre of the public life of the city, there is no indication or feeling of where the river is.

Second, the city should apply a coherent, multilingual signage strategy in Finnish, Swedish, English, and Russian to guide all visitors around the city. Each sign should include a map of the city to locate that point in the urban grid and indicate the best viewing and attraction points nearby. The river is one of the urban spaces that could benefit the most from adequate signage, both to show its history and to guide visitors along its banks. The cathedral–castle axis should become the main tourist artery of the city, and this cannot happen without a clear signage strategy.

Third, more life can be breathed into the waterfront by creating a series of individual public spaces, designed as ‘rooms’, each with its own identity and specific activities, along the river from Halistenkoski in the upper stream to downstream by the harbour. Those activities can include, for instance, picnic/relaxation, physical exercise (outdoor gym), a children’s playground, or (a display of) historic river activities. The latter two could be appropriate for Varvintori Square. Downstream, the space next to Forum Marina can easily be transformed into a sailing-related outdoor area, and the one in the vicinity of the castle could use medieval themes. At this moment, there is not much for locals or tourists than just to walk up and down the river, jog, or walk their dogs.

Fourth, the city could highly benefit from the creation of a network of pedestrian areas and small-pocket public spaces, each with a specific identity, all over the city centre, not just along the river. During Turku’s European Capital of Culture year (2011), a great success was bringing art and other interesting dimensions to the places of Turku.<sup>8</sup> This is one important legacy of the culture year that Turku should build on. This could be done, for example, with different themes each year or each season. Local artists and other talented people can be commissioned to contribute to their city. The inhabitants will

have something interesting to enliven their city’s streets, while tourists will feel that they are in a ‘unique’ place.

Fifth, the activation of the river – the busiest public space – needs to continue. I found out that many researchers before me have drawn attention to the River Aura becoming enlivened. During Turku’s European Capital of Culture year 2011, a great success was the events on the water, such as the Tall Ship Race and the event where musicians were playing in large bubbles on the water. The City Council can encourage events, commission artists’ activities related to water, or arrange more frequent fishermen’s markets.

A city can be changed around, and even with the close competition of Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Helsinki, Turku can become, as one lead councillor said, “the trendy city of Scandinavia”. This will need brave and quick decisions and political backup, as most successful regeneration stories seem to follow a ‘simple’ formula:



Although efforts have been made to transform the riverside into an active public space, and there are ideas on how to make other central public spaces livelier and more comfortable, steadier political support seems to be needed, stemming perhaps from a change in the mentality of decision-makers about the value of public space. As one politician from Turku City Council stated:

“What is needed is real political will to make the 2031 vision true. We have political will and we do have money but not enough. This is because the traffic is one of the priorities and also because (...) when dividing money, many politicians do not see good public places as having to do with the well-being of people. (...) Understanding the value of these small things – to sit somewhere and look at a nice view and live in an attractive city, is crucial. Many old people live in the city centre and they have asked for seats. That would not be very expensive and the value of that for their daily well-being would be great...” (Interview with Turku politician)

In Turku, the vision has already started to be sketched, as seen in the Turku 2031 vision, but this needs to be translated into a clearer programme of policies and measures to achieve it. It also seems that this vision is not yet em-

braced by everyone, and therefore the people of the city (political leaders, policy makers, private entrepreneurs, and the general public) need to make a quick decision regarding what the city wants to become in the future. For example, in Copenhagen, there was a lot of debate around the idea of having no car parks in the city centre, which in time became an entirely pedestrian area.<sup>8,9</sup> In Turku, the issue of parking under the main square is still being debated after decades of conflicts and indecision. As we live in an age of fast changes, Turku needs to know where it is going and to follow that road. The city has to prioritise what it needs the most for development in the future, and understand that some compromises, such as the one between intensive car use and lively pedestrian and cycle areas, cannot easily be made. An active network of well-connected public spaces cannot happen if there are car parks and busy traffic roads segregating it. Things need to move fast, as real concerns include slower growth than other major Finnish urban regions, a brain drain of young graduates, and the fact that Turku is almost unknown on an international level.

It seems that today Turku is experiencing a transition period, and that it is looking for an image and an identity again. From being the old capital of Finland, it became a 'dockyard city', and in 2011 a European Capital of Culture. Where does the future of the city lie? Will it become a 'trendy city in Scandinavia' with a strong creative and knowledge industry, or will it try to capitalise on its historical legacy? Or will it want to prioritise fast transport connectivity, car use, and suburban living with a centre dedicated only to administrative and working activities? The decision belongs to the people of Turku and the leaders they elected. However, this decision needs to be made fast, and a concentrated effort of political will and resources needs to be put together so that Turku does not lose in today's tough urban competitive race.



## References

1. Varna, G. (2011) Assessing the publicness of public places. Towards a new model. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, Glasgow.
2. Staeheli, L., and Mitchell, D. (2008) *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public*. New York, Routledge.
3. Koskela, H. (2000) 'The gaze without eyes': video-surveillance and the changing nature of urban space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 24 (2), pp. 243-265.
4. Atkinson, R. (2003) Domestication by Cappuccino or a Revenge on Urban Space? Control and empowerment in the management of public spaces. *Urban Studies*, 40 (9), pp. 1829 – 1843.
5. Kohn, M. (2004) *Brave New Neighbourhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*. London, Routledge.
6. Aarnipuu T. (2006) The medieval Turku under image construction, in *Memories and Visions* (eds. Owe Ronström & Ulf Palmenfelt), Tartu University Press, 2006.
7. Turku 2031 Visio, Turku City Council, 2011.
8. Andersson H. and Ruoppila, S. (2011), Culture and urban space in academic research projects of Turku 2011 European Capital of Culture. *Tafer Journal* n. 42 (online).
9. Gehl, J. and Gemzøe, L. (1999) *Public Spaces Public Life - Copenhagen 1996*. Copenhagen, The Danish Architectural Press and The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture Publishers
10. Gehl, J. and Gemzøe, L. (2000) *New City Spaces*. Copenhagen, The Danish Architectural Press.

---

**Research Briefings (Tutkimuskatsauksia)** is published by the City of Turku, as a part of Turku Urban Research Programme. It is published regularly in Finnish and occasionally in English or other languages. The briefings reflect the views of their author(s) and these are not necessarily those of the City of Turku.

PhD **Georgiana Varna** is working for the Scottish Cities Knowledge Centre at the University of Glasgow, UK. During 2011-2013, she worked for 18 months as a researcher at the University of Turku, Department of Social Research. This study was financed by a research grant provided by the Turku Urban Research Programme.

### Editor of Research Briefings:

Sampo Ruoppila, Research Director  
sampo.ruoppila@turku.fi

ISSN 1799-5124 (online publication)

### Publisher:

The City of Turku Administration  
City Development Group  
P.O.Box 355 (Yliopistonkatu 27a), FI-20101 Turku

[www.turku.fi/kaupunkitutkimus/julkaisut/](http://www.turku.fi/kaupunkitutkimus/julkaisut/)