

Impact of New Interventions on the Heterogeneity of the Plaza "De Coninckplein" in Antwerp City, Belgium.

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Abstract:

Antwerp, on the river Scheldt, is a port city and the city of diversity and different ethnicity in Belgium. The plaza "De Coninckplein" in Antwerp city, a 19th century establishment beyond the old walled city, is now an integrated part of the expanded present city. The subjected plaza along with its neighborhood areas had lost its prestige in the second half of the last century due to the shifting of business enterprises to the outskirts of the city. Today, People of the city, in general, perceive the plaza as one of the areas with antisocial activities like hijacking, drug dealing, prostituting etc. Mostly the inhabitants of the surrounding neighborhoods are responsible for the criminal activities that happen, which has stamped the plaza as one of the most notorious places in the city. Apart from the creepy reputation, the plaza is equally recognized for the heterogeneity it contains which is very diverse and rich in nature. The city authority is inserting new functions next to the plaza and in surrounding neighborhoods with the intention of changing the 'bad image' of the area through inviting new people and new economic activities. Moving the city library here along with a café is the most significant intervention, which already has taken place. Besides, a design centre, new apartments, renovations and face lifting of many old buildings etc. are being realized simultaneously. The main idea behind these initiatives was to bring new people in, which would reduce the ratio of existing users and thus the antisocial activities of the plaza. The triangular shaped plaza and the surrounding neighborhoods are occupied by diversified immigrant people and communities like the Chinese, the Africans, and the Nepalese etc. Besides, two streets used to be occupied by the prostitutes and homosexuals (Gay Street), which does not exist anymore. The concerned plaza seems a strange place with the seats, the basketball field, the restaurants, the telephone shops and finally, the new "Permeke" library building with a cafe. The plaza owns two distinct characteristics, which are antithesis to each other. This is a place with full of antisocial activities, which are not desirable and at the same time with full of heterogeneity, which is desirable. This paper presents the study based on three days extensive field survey, which reviewed the probable impact on the renowned aspect of the plaza-the heterogeneity while changing the "bad image" through new interventions.

Key words: Heterogeneity, Public plaza, Impact of New Intervention, Cultural Diversity.

1. Introduction:

The plaza "De Coninckplein", the subject of this paper is a distinguished and well-known plaza in Antwerp city of Belgium. The plaza owns two distinct significant characteristics, which are antithesis to each other. The people of the city in general perceives the plaza as a place with full of antisocial activities, which is undesired; at the same time a place with full of heterogeneity, which is appreciated. The plaza along with its neighborhood areas in 19th century was a prestigious place to live in with major radial roads, the prestigious station as a node for public transport and it counted with the presence of shops with local and supra local functions (DE MEULDER, 2003).¹ In the second half of the last century the economic power of the area started to get weakened with the shifting of the successful companies to the outskirts of the city. This phenomena lead to an increase of unoccupied houses, which was eventually taken over by the poorer section of the society, especially the immigrants. Today, the housing infrastructure is outdated and the density is four times higher than any other part of the city, which is fairly understandable why. Although the area

¹ Official Brochure of Stad Antwerpen, 13 Feb, 2003, p-4

² DE MEULDER, Bruno, HEYNEN, H, DEVOS Rob (ed), VANMARCKE Luc (ed) (red.), "The role of space in processes of exclusion and normalisation. An explanation based on a detailed case study (De Coninckplein, Antwerp)", *Uitsluiting - Insluiting. Kanttekening bij een beleid van sociale integratie*, pp. 59-88, 2003.

gradually lost its elite status and started to house poor multinational immigrants, but on the other hand, it gained a unique quality of heterogeneity with rich diverse ethnic composition and activities. The plaza area is also known as a place with antisocial and undesired activities such as hijacking, drug dealing, fighting, prostituting etc. These activities happen mainly by the inhabitants of the surrounding neighborhoods, which has given the area a 'bad image', which the concerned authority is trying to change. However, the city authority inserted the city library with a café next to the concerned plaza with the intention of bringing new people in, primarily the Belgians, along with some other interventions like new apartments, renovation and face-lifting of many old buildings for studio apartments, introducing polices and surveillance camera etc. Reasons for these interventions were to upgrade the environment and security condition, as well as, to change the tarnished reputation of the area.³ The question is, whether, the intentions are right to the context and, more importantly, how these are affecting the much coveted heterogeneity while changing the 'bad image' of the plaza.



Fig 01: Map showing the triangular shaped plaza with surrounding urban tissue. (Source: City authority)

2. Methodology:

The study explicitly stressed on the issue 'Heterogeneity' which was investigated through different rapid methodologies i.e. interviews, mapping, observations and photography documentation, which was best suited to the moment. Rapid methodologies, applied to answer ethnographic research questions, refer to certain methodologies that are useful to get quick data especially when there are time limitations and based on which an acceptable conclusion can be drawn. "As researchers, we have had to decide what would work best in a range of settings and have adapted our methods to fit the specific site and problem"(LOW,2005)⁴

Rapid methodologies greatly depend on primary sources of data collection rather than secondary sources like literature review. This particular study gathered necessary data & information mainly through individual interviews, participants' observation, mapping, photographic documentation & a limited literature survey. Collected data was then analyzed to get the answer of the research question. However, it is important to remember that rapid methodologies are especially useful to be applied in highly culturally diverse area for quick understanding and the result should be considered as a strongly probable one instead of looking for 100% accuracy.

"Rapid assessments [choose] timely, focused & qualitative information at the expense of 'scientific' sureness of results through strong probability sampling." (LOW, 2005)⁵

³ Official webpage of Antwerp City Authority: http://www.acturban.org/biennial/ElectronicCatalogue/Antwerp/antwerp_conic.htm, last retrieved 3rd March, 2008

⁴ LOW, M SETHA, TAPLIN, Dana, SCHELD, Suzanne, Rethinking Urban Parks, public space and cultural diversity, University of Texas press, Austin,2005, p-175

⁵ MANDERSON 1997, 2 quoted in LOW, M SETHA, TAPLIN, Dana, SCHELD, Suzanne, Rethinking Urban Parks, public space and cultural diversity, University of Texas press, Austin,2005, p-185 .

3. The concept of heterogeneity and the plaza:

The success or failure of a public plaza depends on many aspects such as, heterogeneity, cultural diversity, controls, security, management, design decision etc. A new or critical decision on any of the above aspects can turn a successful plaza into an unsuccessful one or vice versa by enhancing or reducing the diversity of the place. In fact, aspects like successful control; management and good design for a plaza can be achieved through sensitive policies and decisions. But, ensuring heterogeneity and cultural diversity, the most important aspects of all according to many researchers of this field, is rather more difficult and is dependent on many other variables like the social and economic status of the users and neighborhood people, accessibility to public transport and so on" (LOW,2005). Cultural diversity is important since it is one of the essential components of heterogeneity, which can significantly enhance the liveliness and vibrancy of a plaza through diverse uses and activities by the different cultural groups. Interestingly in recent days, conserving already present cultural diversity is rather getting more arduous than providing or ensuring it. According to Low, Taplin, Scheld (2005),

"In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity" (LOW,2000).⁷ Heterogeneity or the state of being heterogeneous is like a precious gift for any public place since it provides the unique opportunity of getting acquainted with different cultures and activities and this is one quality, which is not easily available.

The survey confirmed that the concerned plaza still has a unique heterogeneous character, not only due to the presence of people from at least twenty different countries but, also, for diverse and vibrant activities. The heterogeneity of people seemed very high in the place. One can find people from Middle East, Asia, and Far East to Africa along with Europeans. The signboards on the buildings, mainly shops next to the plaza, were adorned with Asian, Oriental, Arab or African names and decorative elements. The posters of African Churches, Rasta shows and Communist Labour Party on De Coninckplein were stating the strong heterogeneous character of the area. Although these people hardly mixed with each other, still they all together formed a vibrant environment.



Fig 02: Figure showing activities by different group of people

It was astonishing to observe during the survey that these different groups on the plaza showed no or very little interest in each other. As one of the Croatian inhabitants of the neighborhood said, "I don't have any interest about any people in the plaza and normally I never talk to anybody." Different user groups never mingled, even though they coexisted on the plaza at the same time, still all the groups had expressed a close attachment with the plaza, which seemed an interesting dimension of De ConinckPlein where all the

⁶ LOW, M SETHA, TAPLIN, Dana, SCHELD, Suzanne, "Rethinking Urban Park" University of Texas press, Austin, pp-01 ,2005.

⁷ LOW, M SETHA, "on The Plaza, The Politics Of Public Space And Culture." University of Texas press, Austin, 2000.

groups are attached to a common place still not behaving as one. Of course, the new interventions already have started to bring new people in and to exclude some old ones. The interviewed Library users admitted that they do not feel any attachment or belongingness to the plaza, for them it is a non-space. Whereas, on the other hand, the former addicts believe that they are not welcomed in the place anymore.

A feeling of temporality was quite evident in some people probably because, many people there are from Eastern Europe came due to economic reasons for a short period of time living in the neighbourhoods around the plaza. Most of these people cannot speak English or any of the local languages such as Dutch or French. These comparatively new ethnic groups, who are there mainly on temporary basis, are making some neighbourhoods very fragile and temporal since they did not express any belongingness to the concerned place and get easily involved in many undesired activities such as illegal drug taking and fighting. But there were also some people such as the Chinese, who have been living there permanently for more than a decade and to whom the sense of belongingness to the neighbourhood is very much important.

4. The Virtual Boundaries of the plaza:

As it is mentioned earlier, different areas of the plaza were occupied by different user groups and functions, which resulted in several different spaces within a single place. Different activities at different times of day and night took place at their own designated corners that hardly go beyond limits. This phenomenon created a kind of mental or virtual boundaries. For instance, the people who were waiting for trams at the tram stop next to the library never stepped down into the plaza or towards the wooden raised platform at the opposite corner, whereas, on the other hand, the platform was always occupied by the junkies (drug addicts and alcoholics) who never approached the other corner of the plaza. Also, the youngsters playing basketball limited themselves within the basketball court area. Besides, other people who came to the plaza for recreation and other purposes used only the seats next to the basket ball court at the middle of the plaza and not the seats next to the wooden platform. The people waiting on the plaza and tram stop for opening the library, junkies hanging around at the plaza corner, playing basket ball, all are totally different kinds of activities within one boundary. The surveillance camera restricted the junkies to be concentrated at the corner and their activities, to some extent, were controlled.

According to a former drug-addict, currently there are about six groups of users of the plaza, the Addicts, the Ex-addicts, the Moroccans, the Youngsters who play basketball, the Library users, the Africans and the "scum that come to get drunk and fight at night". The pattern of gatherings and different activities happened on the plaza are shown in the following maps, which had been developed following rapid methodologies during the field survey.

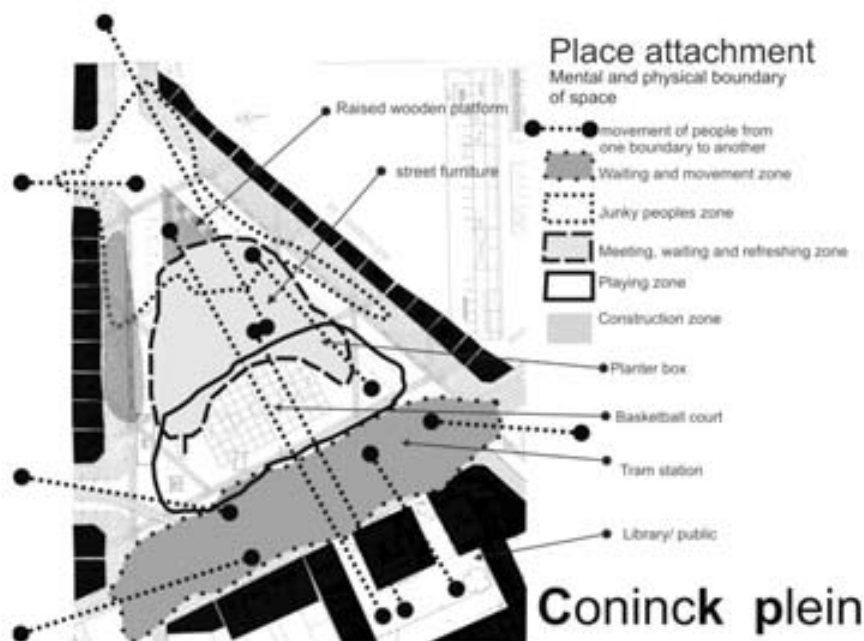


Fig 03: Showing the virtual boundaries of the plaza (prepared by: Fahmid Ahmed, Field survey)

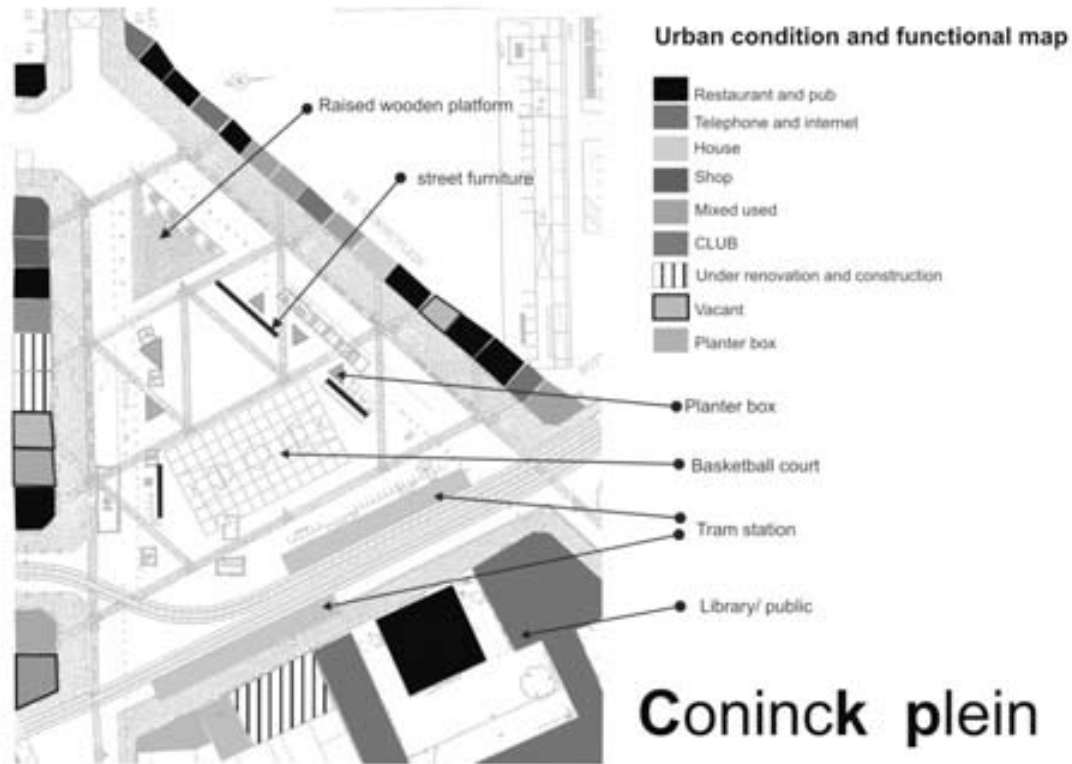


Fig 04: Showing the functional map of the subjected area (prepared by: Fahmid Ahmed, Field survey)

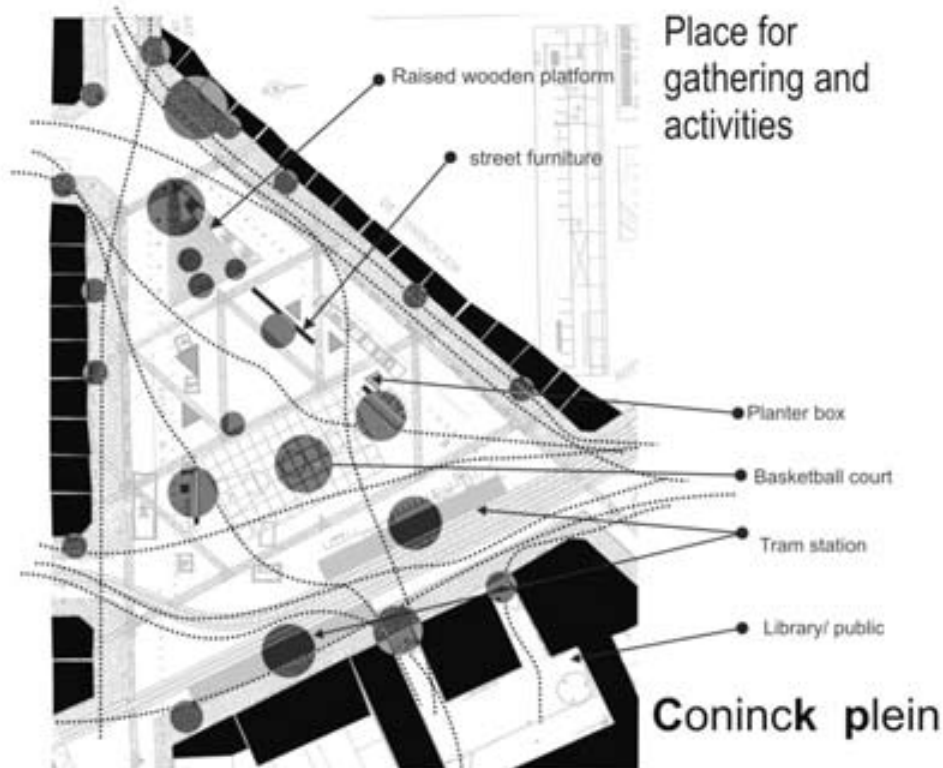


Fig 05: Showing the gathering places and flow diagram of people in the area (source: Fahmid Ahmed, field survey)

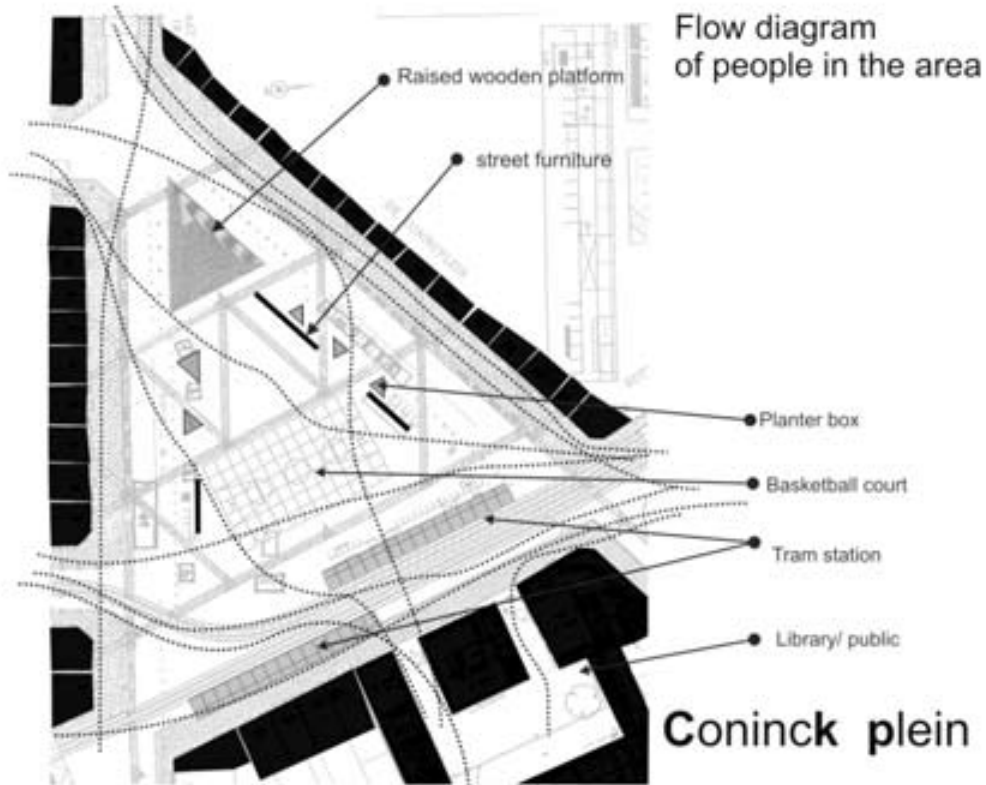


Fig 06: The pattern of movements (Source: field survey)

5. The new Interventions and the process of Transformation:

The process of transformation had already been started, which was fairly evident during the survey, with the new development of posh café and restaurants, the renovation of old dilapidated buildings to new exclusive apartments and design centre, the introduction of surveillance camera etc. Certainly these are the physical transformations which were more evident than the social or mental transformations. The people interviewed during the survey confirmed, many of the old activities and inhabitants had become non-existent. The cheap shops and restaurants for the immigrants, the beauty salons and shops for the prostitutes who used to live in the nearby neighborhoods and to deal with their clients at different spots on the plaza are now past. Also, the homosexuals are diminishing in numbers.



Fig 07: The new plan for the Coninckplein and the surrounding neighborhood (source: city authority)

The survey also found different opinions and interests about the concerned area many of which were antithesis to each other. Some people said, "I like the place and the plaza, and I use the library every time, it is a very good place for refreshing". Other people said "it is a very bad neighborhood, police do almost nothing to those junkies, they sit in front of my shop and the customers do not feel comfortable to come inside that hampers my business a lot". The people

gathered in front of the library came only to use the new Permeke library building and the cafe or to get the tram. Most people of these two particular groups do not use the plaza and said that they do not feel comfortable to use that. Lots of people crossed the plaza to take a short cut but did not pause on the plaza. The drug addicts and the alcoholics were always found moving in groups. The children came every afternoon for playing in the plaza. The café of Permeke library was found very expensive for high class people. The plaza was found under surveillance all the time by the camera and the police, which turned the place into an unfriendly one for certain groups. The new restrictions by the city authority of closing the café and restaurants in the early evening turned the plaza dead and even more vulnerable at night.

The library users found were diverse in terms of age and sex. It seemed, also the users interviewed supported, more and more women, young and old people are coming to the Library, although, the users dominantly represent the middle and higher income group and majority are the Belgian people. Asian people were lesser in number in the library even though a large number of permanent residents near the library are the Chinese. According to a user (Romanian) of the library and the Coninckplein, "a lot has changed since the Library has come". According to a woman from Ghana, "before, if you said, you are going to the Coninckplein, everybody would stare at you." Another woman from same country said, "nothing has changed." According to another European woman, "the square is now better; it is more safe and lively," although she was bothered about the traffic. According to some library users, "Accessibility cannot be better than now since the tram stops in front of the Library". According to the Librarian "everybody thinks that the new one is better than the old one. Emphasis on the combination of functions makes the Library a success. People like it more now".

Hence, the opinions found about the interventions were different and contrasting in nature. Most of the library and non-resident users of the plaza believe that it is a positive move. On the contrary, the resident users think that the library does not fit with the neighbourhood and has nothing to do with the people who actually live there. The sense of place is different for different groups of people using the plaza, and the heterogeneous people truly expressed diverse interpretation regarding the interventions and the subsequent consequences.



Fig 08: The new intervention for the Coninckplein and the surrounding neighborhood

Examining the impact of the interventions on heterogeneity:

This study initially examined the physical impact of the new interventions by the Antwerp city authority, which were meant to improve the reputation, security and physical quality of the notorious plaza "De Coninckplein". Later, it investigated the impact on the aspect heterogeneity, the unique and appreciated character of the plaza while changing the 'bad image'.

The new interventions were to bring some new people into the concerned area and to restrict some old users that all together in turn will change the 'bad image' of the area. The new library building truly has managed to bring a lot of new people on the plaza, but these new people do not use the plaza and remain aloof within the proximity of the library building and tram stop. The building has increased the economic value of the plaza neighborhoods and indirectly affecting the heterogeneous character of the plaza users by compelling the poor multinational immigrants to leave the place. Although, Majority of the library workers and users who mostly are Belgians expressed their satisfaction about the new building pointing that the old library building was not attractive, where as, the new one is a modern building designed by an eminent Architect, which is fascinating indeed from aesthetic and functional point of view. Besides, the accessibility is also better since the tram stops just in front of the library building.

The initial aim of bringing in more new people into the area, especially the Belgians, is successful, but the associated intention of their using the plaza, which eventually will lessen the prevailing antisocial activities, has not succeeded. Several reasons could be pointed out; first of all, since the tram stop is just next to the library and the plaza is on the other side, the library users do not need to cross the plaza. If the library was situated at the other corner; it possibly would have more impact on the issue of using the plaza since it would make the library users to cross the plaza, and the possibilities of using the plaza by some of them would increase. Now, they can avail the facilities without being a part of the plaza. Secondly, the library is closed at 5:00pm and most of the antisocial and undesired activities such as drugs taking, hijacking, dealings with the prostitutes and fighting occur in the late evening; therefore, the library users hardly can affect these activities. It is true that the previous overall creepy perception of the plaza in general city dwellers' mind has been reduced now; but, that is due to the constant surveillance by the camera and police, not due to the presence of more new people. On the contrary, the new decision of closing the restaurants in early evening has enhanced the vulnerability of the area at night since the plaza becomes dead without any people. Previously, it was more people in the restaurants and shops with the prostitutes and their clients for buying their stuffs and so on. The new interventions could not stop most of the antisocial activities; though it is quite successful to stop some of the undesired activities according to city authority. It is rather more successful in obtaining the other intention of the interventions, which is to increase the number of Belgians in the area.

On the other hand, the neighborhood people and the existent plaza users next to the library showed least interest towards it. It was quite clear that the new interventions could not be integrated with the surrounding area and the library itself is acting like an isolated island. Both the library and the expensive café failed to attract the interest of the neighborhood people. Instead, it along with other ongoing renovation projects has increased the price of the land and accommodation. As a result, many of the old inhabitants are moving out of the area. On the contrary, more and more upper class people, mainly the Belgians, are getting in. Here comes the impact on the heterogeneous ethnic composition. The plaza and the surrounding neighborhood, which was the place for poor immigrants, of course with a bad name, are getting beyond their reach and a transformation slowly towards a place for upper class people is taking place. It can be said almost without any hesitation that this will reduce the precious heterogeneity of the plaza since the Belgians or rich Europeans, instead of people from almost every continent of the world with their different cultural activities, will occupy the plaza more. It could have been more contextual and sensitive if, it considered the status and affordability of the surrounding inhabitants, since the executed and planned ones are so expensive that can only be availed by the comparatively wealthy group, which shows a kind of ignorance to the context and the users of the plaza. Where as, the interventions incorporating and integrating the local people would ensure the preservation of the unique heterogeneity of the plaza, which is an essential and important parameter for a successful and sustainable public space. The plaza "De Coninckplein" is always transforming from one event to another at different times of the day and night, which gives it a vibrant character and, has the potentiality to play a vital role for integration, communication and sharing among different ethnic groups. The only thing it needed was to improve the security but not at the cost of heterogeneity, not by excluding the poor immigrants. It is for sure that the proposed interventions did not consider the existing inhabitants; rather, it targeted the upper class of the society, which will enhance the reduction of the cultural diversity.

7. Conclusion:

In a nutshell, the study can be concluded by saying that; the new interventions are gradually transforming the concerned area from poor multicultural immigrants' neighborhood to an upper class monoculture neighborhood, which holds the danger of becoming less heterogeneous. But, as it is mentioned earlier, a vibrant and successful plaza or urban space possessing heterogeneity in the long run can bring many positive results not only to the micro level like individual users but also to the macro level such as the society. This is such since it offers people the opportunity of getting acquainted with diverse people and activities, which enable them to broaden the horizon and to increase the potentiality of communication, and thus they are better groomed to serve the society. The new interventions by the concerned authority were not as sensitive as it could be. The only intention was to erase the 'bad image' of the plaza and ignore the other aspect, the unique heterogeneity. It didn't consider the current users of the plaza or the inhabitants of the nearby neighborhoods rather; it constantly injected such functions that only can be availed by the nonresident wealthy section of the society, primarily the Belgians and directly excluded the poor immigrants from using them, even the appearance of the library is very posh and unfriendly. In fact increasing the number of the Belgians was one of the agendas of the city authority.

Finally, the new design of the plaza and the library building with cafe seems a kind of forceful gentrification, which couldn't be integrated with its surrounding context. It is true, the disrepute of the plaza concerning antisocial activities has been lessened, even the status to some extent has already been upgraded, but, at the same time, it has been failed to conserve the heterogeneity of "De Coninckplein".

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