

# **'Chilling' and 'hopping' in the 'teenage space network': Explorations in teenagers' geographies in the city of Mechelen**

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Within the field of children's geographies several calls have been made to develop 'teenagers' geographies' as a complementary field of research and practice. It has been stated that teenagers remain quite 'invisible' or 'marginalised' in public debates as well as in research and practice, even within childhood studies and children's geographies. Further explorations in teenagers' geographies could contribute to the research on 'diverse childhoods'.

This paper explores the spatial worlds of teenagers (appr. 12-15 years) in Flanders (Belgium), a region characterised by a dense network of smaller cities and 'urban sprawl'. Based on street interviews and observations in a small city several mental maps and patterns of teenagers' use of public space were identified. Starting from a case study in the city of Mechelen, this paper suggests how these perspectives can be integrated into urban planning by identifying and tying together relevant planning layers, thus creating a more closely knit 'teenage space network'.

Keywords: teenagers; urban planning; Belgium; Flanders; street interviews

## **Introduction: Teenagers as 'invisible' group in urban planning and design**

We define 'teenagers' as young people between 12 and 15 years old. Within this age category young people in Flanders are supposed to go to a secondary school, which is often further away from home than the primary school. Research in Flanders has shown that this mostly means that teenagers' action range increases, while it is still limited because they cannot drive cars or motorcycles (Meire 2005). From this point alone, these 'teenagers' constitute an 'in-between'-group, not really 'children' and not really 'youngsters'.

It has been argued that this age category still remains 'invisible' in research, even within childhood studies and children's geographies. Weller (2006) made a statement by introducing the idea of '*teenagers' geographies*' as a field of research and practice complementary to children's geographies. The purpose of this paper is to explore this new field of research and planning practice.

As Travlou (2003) has shown in her literature review, there has been a shift from (action) research on young people's perceptions of their local environment in the late 1970s to more radical studies since the mid-1990s. These 'second generation' studies have stressed that teenagers are 'marginalised' or 'excluded' from public debates and urban planning. Criticising

the moral panic that surrounds teenagers' presence in public space, some authors analyse the situation in terms of 'geographies of exclusion', 'landscapes of powerlessness', 'the othering of teenagers', 'teenagers as little devils'. Teenagers' use of space is then interpreted as a strategy to escape 'adult surveillance', 'the adult gaze' and 'adult hegemony' (e.g. Malone and Hasluck 2002, p. 81, Percy-Smith 2002, p. 78, Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith 1998, p. 198-199, Matthews and Limb 1999, p. 61-62, Jones 2000, p. 35, Matthews, Limb and Taylor 2000, p. 63). In line with this interpretation, teenagers are said to 'claim' or 'colonize' space to develop their own identities (e.g. Valentine 2004, p. 83-96).

Other literature tells a more complex story. Cahill (2000) showed that teenagers sometimes reproduce moral panic and social insecurity feelings by avoiding certain places, avoiding eye contact or developing other strategies for 'street literacy'. The work of Matthews, Percy-Smith and Limb (Matthews 2000; Matthews *et al.* 2000) revealed the complexity and ambiguity of young teenagers' use of streets and shopping malls. By researching teenagers in their 'fourth environment' (those public spaces beyond home, school and playgrounds), these authors introduced new concepts. The street and shopping mall are called 'thirdspaces': 'in-between spaces' wherein teenagers 'negotiate autonomy' and 'the tensions between childhood and adulthood' (Matthews *et al.* 2000, p. 279-281, Philo 2000, p. 243-256). The shopping mall is a semi-public space, a hybrid space neither entirely public nor private. Its public character allows for a certain degree of appropriation. Nevertheless, it is subject to strong supervision. This allows teenagers to explore their own identities in a safe environment: 'From this perspective the panopticon of the adult gaze provides a safety net that enables young people to develop their identity, individuality and even promulgates acts of rebellion without real danger' (Matthews *et al.* 2000, p. 292).

Streets, open parks and squares have a more public character, as compared to the shopping mall. According to Matthews *et al.*, these spaces nevertheless remain 'thirdspaces' that can never become entirely teenagers' territory:

'The street affords opportunities away from the adult gaze, where young people, devoid of other meeting places, retain some autonomy over space. To these young people the street constitutes an important cultural setting, a lived space where they affirm their own identity and celebrate their feelings of belonging. In essence, these places are 'won out' from the fabric of adult society, but are always in constant threat of being reclaimed.' (Matthews *et al.* 2000, p. 292)

This ambiguity of the shopping mall and the street is a very important quality, mirroring the intermediate position of teenagers between childhood and adulthood, between dependency and autonomy, between identity and integration in society. So 'thirdspace' becomes a 'dynamic zone of tension and discontinuity where the newness of [syncretic] hybrid identities can be articulated' (Matthews 2000, p. 103).

These ideas and concepts have recently been illustrated in an interesting study by Yuki Kato (2009) on the bodily performances of teenagers in suburban commercial spaces. The author shows that 'browsing' and manipulating the merchandise in a shop without buying or 'hanging out as customers' with just a symbolic purchase, can be interpreted in various ways (Kato 2009, p. 57-61). On the one hand, this behaviour can be read as 'prepar[ing] young people for their adult roles as consumers', thus confirming the social and commercial order. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as 'streetwise' strategies to deal with or even to challenge behavioural codes: 'Using the literacy framework, teens engaging in browsing define the commercial space as adult-oriented, and try to pass among adults by placing and moving their bodies in accordance with the behavioural norms' (Kato 2009, p. 59).



that are published are not very detailed. However, the interesting points are that (1) different mental maps are shown, referring to different types of teenagers' use of public space, and that (2) the scale for analysis comprises a large part of the city. The first point, the diversity in 'mental maps' of teenagers, illustrates the theoretical postulate that the term 'teenagers' is not a universal concept, and always has to be contextualised (e.g. Weller 2006). It also shows that even in the same study area, there can always be different subgroups and 'microgeographies' of teenagers, sometimes competing for places (Matthews, Limb and Percy-Smith 1998, Cahill 2000). The precise factors influencing teenagers' use of public space have not yet been clearly identified. It seems to be a combination of standard sociological factors (e.g. gender, age, ethnic background), (sub)cultural features (e.g. 'scenes', 'styles', 'neo-tribes'), as well as geographical characteristics (e.g. types of neighbourhood or housing). The second point brought up by Malone and Hasluck, comprises the importance of analyzing higher scale levels. This is further acknowledged by Hörschelmann and Schäfer (2005), who found that the spatial world of teenagers can be quite 'globalised'. But the use of 'mental maps' by these authors is also highly symbolic and less useful for urban planners.

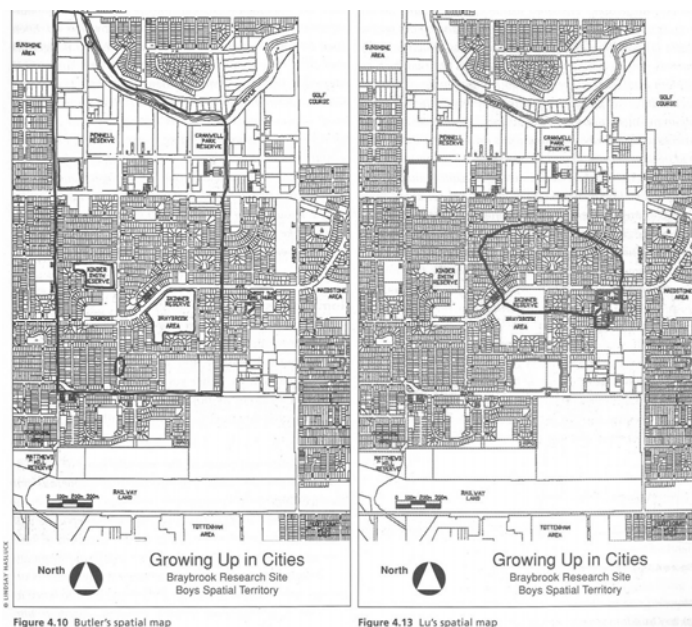


Figure 3: Mental maps of individual teenagers, on the scale of a part of the city (Malone and Haslock 2002, p. 98).

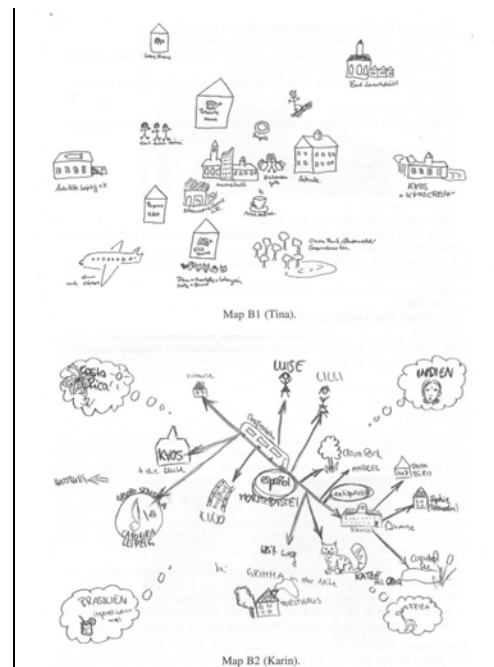


Figure 4: Mental maps of individual teenagers (Hörschelmann and Schäfer 2005, p. 232).

### Going beyond dot maps

As mentioned before, Travlou *et al.* (2008) proposed the 'place mapping'-technique for doing research with children and youth. Their research methodology is contextualised within focus groups and was tested in two cases. Focus group participants were asked to identify the most and least favourite outdoor places in their community. The characteristics of environment and behaviour associated with these places were also discussed. Teenagers placed dots on the map, marking their most and least favourite places. This was the starting point for a guided discussion on the meaning of the dots and places. Although it is stressed that 'the process of mapping, rather than the map itself as object, is a key outcome of value' (Travlou *et al.* 2008,

p. 321), the map with dots constituted a very tangible outcome of the focus group as well (see Figure 5 for the Edinburgh case).

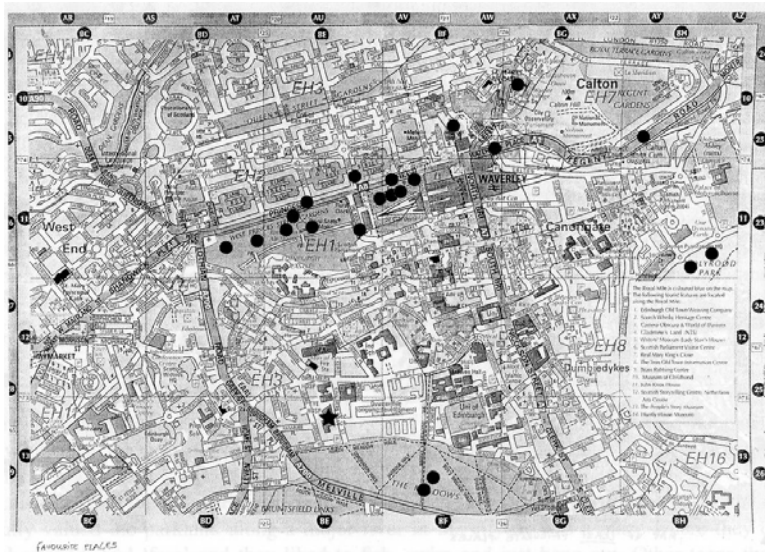


Figure 5: 'Collective map' with dots, indicating the favourite public spaces of Edinburgh teenagers. (Travlou *et al.* 2008, p. 315)

I will argue now that this dot map could be a starting point for further analysis, and deserves more elaboration to be useful for urban planning. In his well-known publication *The image of the City* Kevin Lynch (1960) identified 'paths', 'edges', 'districts', 'nodes' and 'markers' as constituting elements for mental maps. These elements underpin the (perceived) spatial structure of a city, so it is worthwhile to make these elements visible in an analysis and focus on them within urban planning and design. A closer reading of the article of Travlou *et al.* reveals that further interpretation of the 'dot maps' is legitimate. The authors write: 'The city centre is experienced as a linear route (Edinburgh's principal commercial street is Princes Street) connecting various key stopping points – mostly shops.' The teenagers themselves also seem to refer to 'the whole of Princes Street' (Travlou *et al.* 2008, p. 315). So in this case, it is adequate to indicate the shopping street as a linear figure on the map. A similar alternative figure could be proposed for the Sacramento case. Indeed: 'The Sacramento teens were less likely to name specific stores or places and, instead, talked about the area in more general terms' (Travlou *et al.* 2008, p. 317). With Kevin Lynch in our mind, we read this small remark as a plea for going 'beyond' the dot map and to highlight other constituting elements or spatial structures in the urban tissue, such as lines, areas, zones, atmospheres, barriers, scale levels, networks,... To urban planners, this makes a large difference. Their way of thinking is highly characterised by discovering, developing and managing complex spatial structures, networks, scale levels, etc.

In Flanders, this way of thinking has already been introduced within the theory and practice on child friendly planning and design (e.g. Vanderstede and Dekeyser 2007, p. 47-65). It is difficult to translate the concept of the so-called '*speelweefsel*'. The word '*speel*' means 'play' and '*weefsel*' refers to (urban) 'tissue'. Terms like 'play space layer', 'play space networks', 'play space tissue' have been proposed as translation. We will call it a 'child space network' because the ambition goes beyond 'playing' alone and aims at creating environments where children feel themselves at home in public space. In essence, the concept comprises four ideas:

- (1) Network-idea: The '*speelweefsel*' comprises a coherent network of:
  - (a) formal child/play spaces: e.g. playgrounds, schools, youth centres,...

- (b) informal child/play spaces: e.g. 'playable' and 'enjoyable' parks or squares, yet without play equipment
- (c) safe and enjoyable paths and routes connecting all places relevant for children.
- (2) Thinking in 'layers': The 'child space network' can be conceived as a synthesis of different sub-layers (e.g. green spaces network, water structure, mobility structure, recreational structure,...) wherein specific child friendly planning measures are proposed. By merging the sub-layers, a general overview of the child specific qualities of the site is obtained. The synthesis layer and sub-layers can be introduced into public space projects, to examine possible similarities or contradictions. Thus the 'child space network' is a pragmatic instrument to attune specific concepts of child friendliness and more general approaches to quality planning and design.
- (3) Mixed land-use: Children should not be isolated into separate provisions, but should be able to participate in public life and public space. Mixed land-use rather than separation is preferred.
- (4) Participation: Development of the 'child space network' takes into account the perspective of children and young people: e.g. evaluation of existent spaces by children, consulting children for public space design plans.

These four ideas have been implemented in several Flemish cities (e.g. city of Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Geel,...) and have resulted in good practices of child friendly planning. But how would a 'teenager space network' look like? Is it different from a 'child space network'? Can the principles of the 'child space network' be applied to the teenagers' geographies?

### **Mechelen as a case study**

Since teenagers' geographies are still developing, we conceived this study as an exploratory case study. A case study is an intensive study of a single phenomenon within a specific context, aiming at gaining insights into similar phenomena (adapted from Yin and Campbell 1991, p. 23). Generalizing from case studies is always a tricky thing, but it is generally accepted that an intensive case study can contribute to the development of new fields of knowledge (Gerring 2004, p. 345).

The Flanders region is characterized by suburbanization and 'urban sprawl'. However, there is a dense network of smaller cities (appr. 30,000-500,000 inhabitants), mostly originating from the Middle Ages and following a typical development model. The research site of Mechelen is one of those historic cities (appr. 80,000 inhabitants) providing supporting services for the strongly urbanized region between Brussels and Antwerp. There are approximately ten secondary schools for teenagers in Mechelen, predominantly situated in the historic city centre. Although some larger shops are located at the periphery, most of the clothing or electronic equipment shops, snack bars and official city services (e.g. library, youth centre) can be found in the core of the city. City regeneration and public space projects have chiefly been concentrated here. Most motorized traffic is banned from the shopping area, and public spaces design is supporting recreational shopping and tourism.

This compact city centre (approximately 1,5 km in diameter) is furthermore surrounded by dense residential neighborhoods, often originating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrialisation period. Public space is scarce in these areas and deprivation indicators are high. From the 1950s on, the city has known further expansion, with low density housing areas in a green environment, some social housing neighborhoods, and residential ribbon developments or

further dispersion of houses into the open space. The development pattern of the city of Mechelen is quite typical of Flemish cities.

## **Methodology**

To get hold of teenagers' use of and perspectives on public space in Mechelen, I talked with about 250 teenagers (12-15 years old) during approximately 80 interviews. So most interviews were held within small groups of teenagers (two to six persons). Roughly half of the teenagers seemed to have immigrant backgrounds (mostly Moroccan and Turkish, but also African and East-European). Boys were slightly overrepresented in the interview sample.

The teenagers were approached on the street and asked whether they were willing to contribute to a 'research project on youngsters in Mechelen'. My experience with this way of interviewing is quite similar to that of Kato:

'Young people were usually quite responsive to my request to speak with them and I was never rejected by any of them, though some were more enthusiastic about talking with me than others'.  
(Kato 2009, p. 55)

It sometimes requires some courage to engage into a conversation, but most teenagers were pleased that a person showed interest in their spatial world and were eager to talk about their living environment.

However, I learnt that the chances for a successful approach are the highest when the teenagers are looking a bit bored, are just sitting or hanging around, or are waiting for something to happen. They were less willing to cooperate when fully engaged in a conversation with friends or hurrying to an unknown destination. Some teenagers considered the interview as an opportunity to have some fun, giving non-serious answers and in a way challenging the power relations embedded in an interview. But even in that case it often was worth to 'play the game' for a while, talking about other subjects and making fun of the interview situation. It often happened that the teenagers ultimately came to the point after some initial teasing or revealed information between the lines. These situations were also an opportunity to experience the way the teenagers interact with each other and with strangers in public space. Only in two cases I felt a certain mistrust and hostility, expressed by remarkable silences and rather unfriendly replies. In both cases, this happened at a contested place where conflicts between inhabitants and youngsters had been picked up by the media shortly before our encounter. But even in this somehow unpleasant situation I learnt a lot about teenagers' perspectives on public space.

The length of the conversational interviews was highly determined by the teenagers themselves. Body language and short, standard answers showed when they felt the interview should go to an end. At that point I stopped the conversation, since further insisting or continuing the interview is not very useful, and can even result in unreliable data. In some cases the conversation was very superficial and finished in some minutes; in other cases I could talk for about half an hour or even more. Occasionally some groups invited me to join them for a while, which felt like being part of the group, and offered an ideal situation for participant observation.

Observation was a complementary method for data gathering. While seeking for new interview candidates, it often happened that I ran into the same groups again later that day or some days later. These accidental encounters were interesting for 'triangulation' (is the observed behaviour consistent with the interview data?) or for discovering recurring patterns.

Sometimes I decided to observe teenagers for a short time rather than interrupting their activities. Most of the times I managed to catch some fragments of their conversations. In that case it was not possible to discover the exact meaning of the performance but it still gave me some further insights into the teenagers' spatial behaviour.

The role of natural 'leading figures' of the groups turned out to be very important for the quality of the interviews. Peer pressure was most felt in the beginning of the conversation. Teenagers gathering in group were often waiting to react until their 'spokes(wo)man' engaged into the interview. Once the conversation was successfully started and the leading figures accepted to cooperate, it was easier to involve most teenagers, and even to confront them with the information already supplied by their friends. In some cases I had the feeling that we were in a focus group setting, in the middle of the street, teenagers reacting and adding information to the stories and opinions of their peers. In order to involve the more silent teenagers in the conversation, it was important to stress that different patterns of use of public space are possible. So probing questions like 'Is this also the case for you?' should rather be formulated like 'You live in another part of the city, maybe this is different for you?'. Of course, even with these basic interview techniques, it is not easy to involve all silent teenagers. Travlou *et al.* (2008, p. 321) proposed writing and mapping techniques to involve them (e.g. silent recording of favourite places on individual cards). Unfortunately, these techniques are not easy to apply in a public space context. Maybe this approach was even not required in our research context as the techniques were developed to eliminate the problematic character of the classroom as interview place. Our interviews took place in a more natural setting, mostly at places where the teenagers felt at ease. However it is clear that in this case peer pressure, rather than 'context' pressure, was something to deal with.

Our conversations were conceived as semi-structured interviews, thus facilitated by a standard interview guideline, but allowing for new questions to be brought up in the course of the conversation. The spatial setting of the interview seemed to be the easiest starting point for a conversation, since it provides a common framework to interviewer and teenager. I then asked to list and describe other (un)favourite places in the city and their home environment. For each place or environment I tried to talk about:

- frequency ('how often do you come there?')
- social context ('do you come alone, with friends, schoolmates, parents?')
- activities ('what kind of activities do you do exactly when you come here?')
- mobility ('do you come on foot, by bike, bus, train'? 'which routes do you choose?')
- evaluation of the place ('what makes this a good or bad place?')

It wasn't easy to have an in-depth conversation about remote places. In the first phase of the research, I searched for teenagers in the city centre. As the research progressed I felt that the place of the interview seemed to influence the conversation. Teenagers living in a suburban neighbourhood and interviewed in the city centre were more eager to call their home environment 'boring', probably legitimising their presence in the city centre. Therefore, in a second phase of the research, we moved to the residential areas themselves rather than conducting all the interviews in the city centre alone.

The interviews were not recorded on tape, since this would probably hinder a natural conversation. Recording on tape or camera gives the interview a more formal character, with opinions rather than 'lived' experiences. During the interview, we wrote down some keywords or exact phrases, that were further elaborated immediately after the conversation. Once seated at the computer, we added the data to an elementary database allowing to search for socio-personal as well as for spatial characteristics.

I conclude these reflections on methodology by an important remark. Since I approached teenagers in public space, I have focused on the users of public space. This means that the perspective of the non-users has remained out of sight. I became aware of this shortcoming by interviewing teenagers that were just underway to the supermarket or that I met outside their own neighborhoods. They clearly expressed motives for not using the public domain in their home environment. Additional focus groups in schools could have complemented the image, but time constraints did not allow for this. The reader thus should keep in mind that this research has focused on frequent users of the public space, and that the non-users remain predominantly out of scope.

### **'Chilling', 'window shopping' and 'playing football': catchall terms with multiple meanings**

One of the aims of the interviews was to discover keywords that teenagers themselves use to describe their activities in public space, rather than to adopt the Dutch equivalent for 'hanging around' / 'hanging about'. '*Rondhangen*' is often used by adults or external observers to describe spatial behaviour of young people and is increasingly evoking negative connotations (e.g. idleness, noise, litter, claiming behaviour, criminality, etc.). In my research I wanted to focus on the teenagers' own wording and definitions and the different meanings attached to them. Unfortunately, I was not able to gain a clear understanding of what teenagers exactly do in public space and how they perceive these activities. On the other hand, I found that the interviewed teenagers use broad 'catchall' terms that take on different meanings according to the (spatial) context.

The English word 'chilling' was one of the favourite words of the teenagers (much more popular than 'hanging around'). It refers to quite diverse activities and atmospheres. Most often it stands for meeting up with friends in a very 'relaxed' ambience (sitting, hanging and often lying on the ground). On the other hand the same word was used to refer to more active behaviour, like wandering, roaming or cycling around in the city, physical activity games (football, teasing each other, etc.), or even playing party games. Essential for 'chilling' is that it is an activity you do with friends and not with parents.

'Shopping' is also a word that both male and female teenagers in Mechelen frequently use. For them, 'shopping' often signifies 'windowshopping', meaning 'going into shops, looking [at the merchandise], but not buying' (cf. the term 'browsing' introduced by Yuki 2009, p. 57-60). Buying the merchandise mostly happens in weekends in the company of their parents. 'Shopping' also encompasses being together with friends in the shopping area, 'watching boys or girls', having an ice cream, crisps, sweets or drink etc. Especially for immigrant girls 'shopping' is often referred to as a very meaningful activity. It is a way to be with friends and make contact with boys in a safe environment (group of female friends, possible presence of related adults). It is their specific version of 'hanging around' in public space, although they would never call it like this since they associate the term with negative (masculine) behavior.

Except for some Dutch terms and *slang* words, other recurrent keywords were '*voetbal*' (soccer), 'basket' and 'skateboarding'. For skateboarding it is well known that it refers to a strong subculture and a 'way of life' (cf. Borden 2001). This is less acknowledged for soccer and basket. However, also in these instances, being in public space is strongly dominated by a

certain activity and subculture. The activity of '*voetbal*' (soccer) takes different forms in different spatial situations. It comprises e.g.:

- Meeting up with some friends next door and playing soccer on the street for some time.
- Agreeing on a time and place to have an informal soccer game with a larger group of boys on a more equipped field in the neighborhood.
- Organizing a more official soccer game or tournament on a official field, often in a larger recreation area.

So the group composition, characteristics of the activity, spatial context and requirements for the accommodation can vary, although this is all comprised under the term '*voetbal*'.

Observations and interviews further indicate that the activities can shift quickly from one to another. The more informal soccer activities are often interrupted for conversations, chats mobile phone chats and text messaging, a friendly romp, etc. Skaters often referred to the sequence 'skating-chilling-skating-chilling'. Different activities can also take place simultaneously. For instance, we observed three teenage boys, standing at approximately ten meters from each other, occasionally passing a soccer ball from one to another, having the MP3-player on high volume, and at the same time holding a can of coke in the hand.

According to these boys, they were playing soccer. An external observer would have called it just 'hanging around'.

### **Importance of analysing higher scale levels in the teenage space network**

The main purpose of our study was to map the collective mental maps of (groups of) teenagers, based on open interviews and observations. The challenge was to go beyond a dot map by indicating different patterns, connections, spatial structures and networks of places that are important to teenagers. We call it 'teenage space networks': the whole of spatial elements and structures relevant to teenagers. We will further show that such a 'teenage space network' can be integrated as a 'layer' into planning projects.

The first thing we learnt from the interview data, was that the teenage space network should be considered and analysed at different scale levels: not only at the scale level of the home environment, but also at the scale level of the entire city and wider region. This spatial network for the Mechelen region is shown in Figure 6. Especially the teenagers living the green suburban periphery often mentioned provisions at the level of the city and the region. We identified several types of provisions relevant for teenagers:

- large parks
- large recreation and sport facilities: sports centre, swimming pool, BMX circuit, skate park, large playground,...
- river banks and open green spaces for having a walk or a bicycle ride
- lakes with swimming opportunities (both official and unofficial)
- semi-private spaces: cinema, MacDonalds, manege, ice rink, skating rink

Free entrance was highly appreciated by the teenagers. Certain recreational areas are only for free during winter time so this period is preferred by teenagers. Swimming in lakes was found to be very attractive because of free entrance and the feeling of doing something special (and most of the time prohibited).

Since riding bikes is quite established in Flanders and considerable investments have been made in bike infrastructure, teenagers indicated a frequent use of the recreational bicycle network for moving from one place to another. The historic towpaths along river banks and canals proved to be crucial connections in this network. Public transport (bus) was also

mentioned, which is mostly concentrated on the main axes shown on the map (grey single lines).

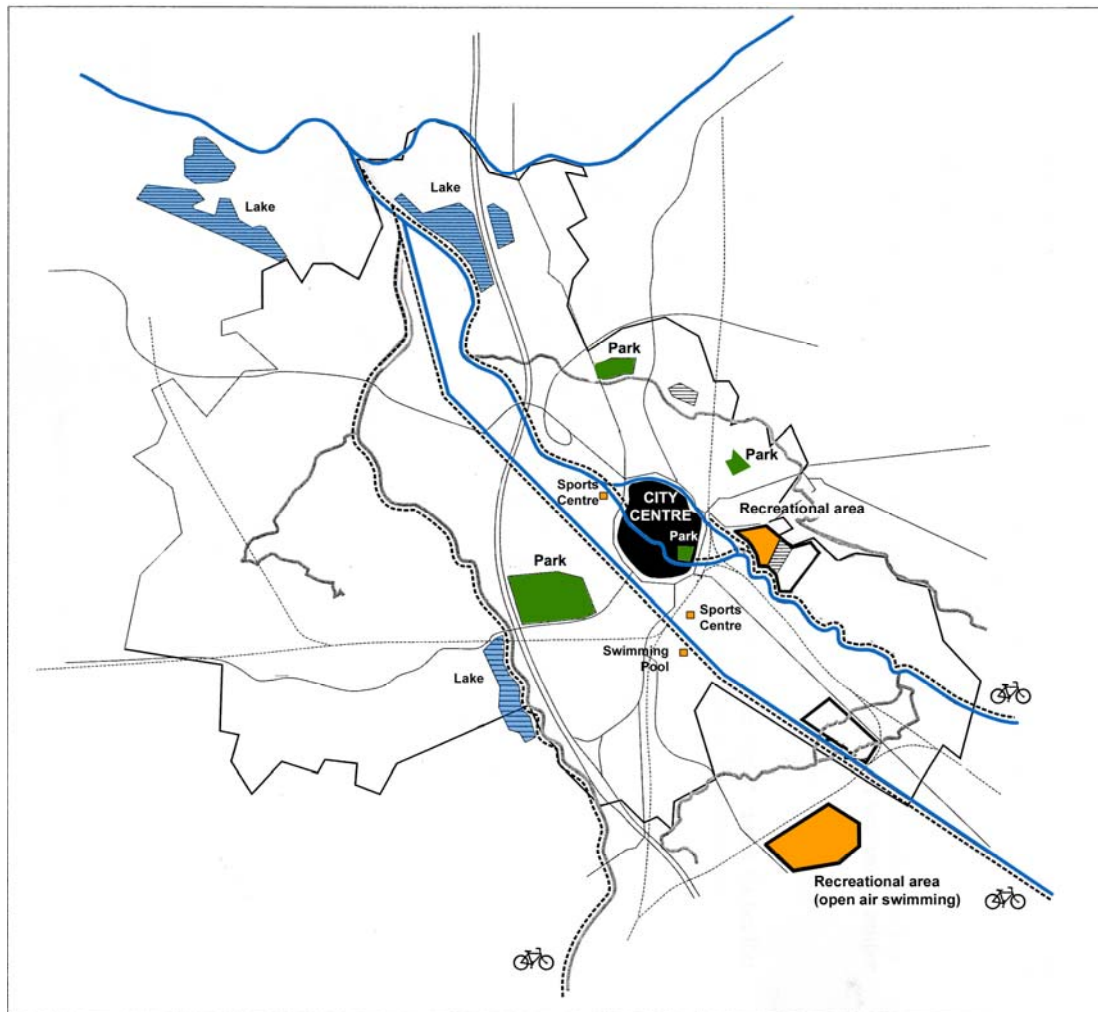


Figure 6: Teenager space network on scale of the city and region: large parks, large recreational and sports accommodation, lakes (often with swimming opportunities), and recreational bicycle network as relevant layers. (Underlayer: Figure 22 from Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Mechelen)

## Teenagers' use of the city centre: different patterns and activities

The inner city of Mechelen is an important place for teenagers living in the surrounding areas. So this area was studied more in detail. Since some teenagers come to the city centre on a daily basis to go to secondary school, and others visit the centre only occasionally for shopping or for events, different mental maps and space use patterns are to be distinguished.

### *1. 'Occasional shoppers' visiting the Mechelen-that-almost-every-teenager-knows*

Teenagers living in the wider environment (e.g. green belt) and not going to school in Mechelen, only occasionally visit the city centre, mostly attracted by special events (rock festival, fun fair) or the occasional sales period. Attending an event is often combined with shopping in the city centre. Hence we call these visits 'occasional shopping'. The mental map and spatial cognition schemes of these teenagers are mostly limited to the shopping area, the

city event locations (urban squares) and the routes from the central train and bus stations to these locations. Even the 'Botaniek', the city park near to the principal shopping street (see Figure 7a), is not well-known by these teenagers. This spatial structure shown in Figure 8a could be called the '*Mechelen-that-almost-every-teenager-knows*'.

The central point in the '*Mechelen-that-almost-every-teenager-knows*' is not the central market square, but the 'Botermarkt', a much smaller square (See Figure 7a and 8a). Teenagers call this place '*the square near the H&M*' (international clothing store) or '*the square with the fountain*'. Although the surface area is rather limited, the square is strategically situated at the crossing of two shopping streets. Teenager boys indicate e.g. that 'it is the best spot to watch the girls'. These two shopping streets are preferred above another important shopping axis (the 'Ijzerenleen'), because of the type of shops (predominance of clothing, sports, electronic equipment shops, gift shops) and the presence of multiple snack bars in the former. So the junction of the two streets is a central node in the teenage space network. This planning quality is reinforced by the design: the square is traffic free and the fountain offers a relaxed environment and sufficient sitting and play opportunities.



Figure 7a: 'Botermarkt' with fountain: centre of the 'teenage space network' in Mechelen



Figure 7b: Railway station area as interscolar meeting place



Figure 7c: Veemarkt as homebase for 'schoolhopping': around the urban square are schools, bus station and snackbars; the shopping area is nearby.

## 2. '*School commuters*' in Mechelen

Mechelen is a regional centre for education and accommodates more than ten secondary schools. Most schools for teenagers are situated in the city centre. Students from these schools are attracted from the Mechelen area, but also from the green belt and even small neighbouring cities. These students come to school by bike, train and/or bus. Quite a lot of these teenagers behave like 'real commuters': their action range is limited to the home-school trajectories, and they only occasionally visit other places for 'occasional shopping' (cf. *supra*).

Railway and bus stations are nevertheless important meeting places for these teenagers, especially during peak hours. For some teenagers meeting up with friends in the railway or bus station is part of the daily routine. Although they sometimes extend their meeting time by arriving somewhat earlier and departing later (e.g. on Friday evenings), their stay at these places is mostly limited to about one hour. This behaviour could be called 'stationing': spending some time at the railway or bus station within the context and feeling of being 'on the move'. Teenagers stressed that the railway station is an opportunity for meeting friends from different schools. Interschool encounter is an important quality of this type of hanging

out. At certain times in the school year (e.g. the last day before the holidays) this is more intensively 'celebrated' in the pubs, outdoor cafés and the pavements nearby.

The mental map of the 'school commuters' is highlighted in Figure 8b. The railway and bus stations are the most central places for teenagers going to school by public transport. The network of bus lines and bus stops are supporting elements. The pattern for teenagers going to school by bicycle is more diffuse, since they can take the shortest way from home to school. Still, there seems to be some clustering around the approach roads to the historic city centre, which coincide with the main bus lines. Important crossroads and bridges all along these approach roads are possible meeting places. Snack bars and supermarkets are supporting elements in this specific teenage space network.

### ***3. 'School(s)hoppers' en 'habitués' in the city centre***

Our research shows that secondary schools plays an important role in teenagers' use of public space. Teenagers going to school in the inner city core are more likely to have a more detailed knowledge of this area and seem to feel more attached to the city centre. Since some attractive provisions are nearby, they have more opportunities to jump to the city centre after school. We could call this '(after) school (s)hopping': the secondary school operates as 'home base' or 'stepping stone' to further explore and hop into the inner city centre, especially into the shopping area.

Some teenagers visit the city centre on an almost daily basis, including weekends and holidays. They are frequent 'habitués' there. Their main activities are, just like the school(s)hoppers: (window)shopping, meeting up with friends, chilling, watching girls or boys, hanging around with groups of friends,... It was remarkable to find that a majority of these teenagers live in the dense 19<sup>th</sup> century neighbourhoods just outside the city centre.

Their mental map of the city centre is more extended than the mental map of the 'occasional visitors' and 'school commuters' (see Figure 8c). The core area of the 'school(s)hopper' and the 'habitué' is still the '*Mechelen-that-almost-every-teenager-knows*'. But in addition to that, it also comprises the school and public space close to the school. The presence of quality public space (traffic calming measures, comfortable spaces for hanging around and sitting) and the availability of provisions (foods shops, snack bars and public transport) around secondary schools seems highly important for teenagers. Where such public spaces were available near the school, teenagers stayed much longer after school. School environments lacking such public domain or surrounded by traffic spaces, were emptied within 10 minutes after the courses.

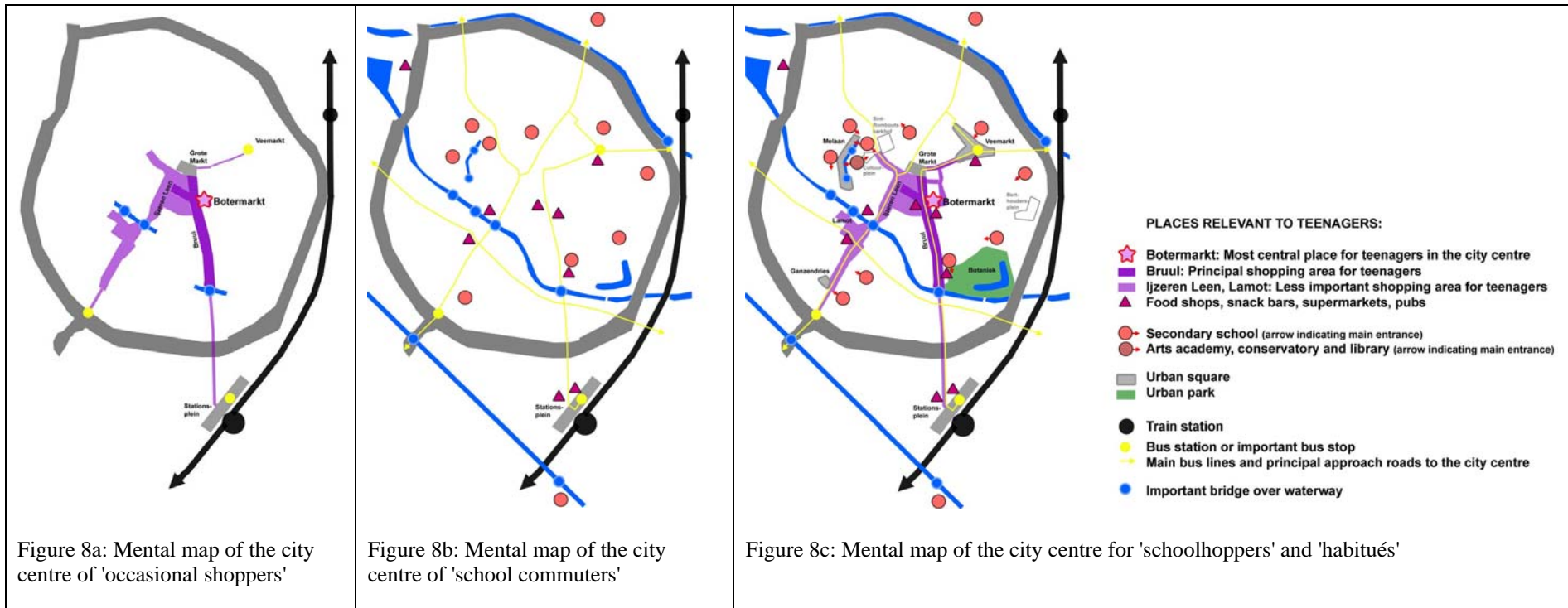


Figure 8a: Mental map of the city centre of 'occasional shoppers'

Figure 8b: Mental map of the city centre of 'school commuters'

Figure 8c: Mental map of the city centre for 'schoolhoppers' and 'habitués'

## Teenage space network components: relevant planning layers

By analysing the existent teenage space network in the Mechelen city centre, we discovered that specific planning layers are of crucial importance for teenagers. These spatial structures can be mapped to obtain a first image of the existent teenage space network in a city. We can distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' planning layers. 'Primary' layers are critical in the organisation of the teenage space network. Provisions in these layers are highly attractive to teenagers (e.g. schools, shopping areas, train stations, urban squares, large parks, sport facilities, etc.). They are 'home bases' for 'hopping' into the city. 'Secondary' layers are less crucial for the teenage space network (e.g. small scale parks, water, snack bars, etc.), but their provisions can support the attractiveness of primary layer provisions. When situated next to important routes or in neighbourhoods lacking provisions from primary layers, they can also become meaningful places.

The most important '**primary planning layers**' that were detected are:

- Educative infrastructure: secondary schools, arts academy, library and immediate surroundings
- Recreational shopping areas
- Public transport: railway stations, bus stations, important bus lines
- Urban squares (higher scale level), teenager event locations
- Large green spaces
- Large recreational areas, with a concentration of sport facilities and recreational provisions
- Primary bicycle routes (school trajectories, recreational bicycle route network)

The most important '**secondary planning layers**' that were detected are:

- Food shops, snack bars, candy shops, supermarkets
- Smaller green spaces (neighbourhood scale level)
- Water and bridges
- Sport facilities and play provisions (neighbourhood level)
- Bicycle route network

A network becomes visible when all these layers are merged, constituting a **teenage space network**. Each town, city or region will have a unique network with specific nodes. It is to be expected that the **nodes in this network will be strategic places** for improving the teenage space network.

## Tying together relevant planning layers

Existing nodes are crucial places to develop a teenage space network. Each specific spatial context will offer its own opportunities for joining and fine tuning the planning layers relevant to teenagers. This tying together is a challenge for urban planners and designers and could be described in design programmes for public spaces. Stated in broad and abstract terms, following combinations are possible:

(1) Tying together primary planning layers:

Opportunities for strengthening the teenage space network are most obvious

where provisions from two or more primary planning layers meet. At these places interweaving and tying together the layers should be the main challenge for planning and design. E.g. secondary schools should be connected and tuned to the shopping area and the urban squares nearby; green spaces close to the shopping area should be developed and connected, etc.

(2) Tying together primary and secondary planning layers:

Provisions from secondary planning layers can reinforce and enhance the attractiveness of primary planning layers for teenagers. E.g. adding water, bridges, snack bars, green and sport facilities to primary planning layers will offer a surplus value for teenagers.

(3) Tying together secondary planning layers:

In areas lacking provisions from the primary planning layers, interesting places for teenagers can be created by tying together secondary planning layers. E.g. providing a small square next to a bridge and newspaper shop, providing a small green space with sitting opportunities in the vicinity of a bicycle routes node.

Illustrating these abstract principles with our case study in Mechelen, we can identify and evaluate the nodes within the teenage space network in the city centre (See figure 9). These nodes will be strategic places to improve the teenage space network.

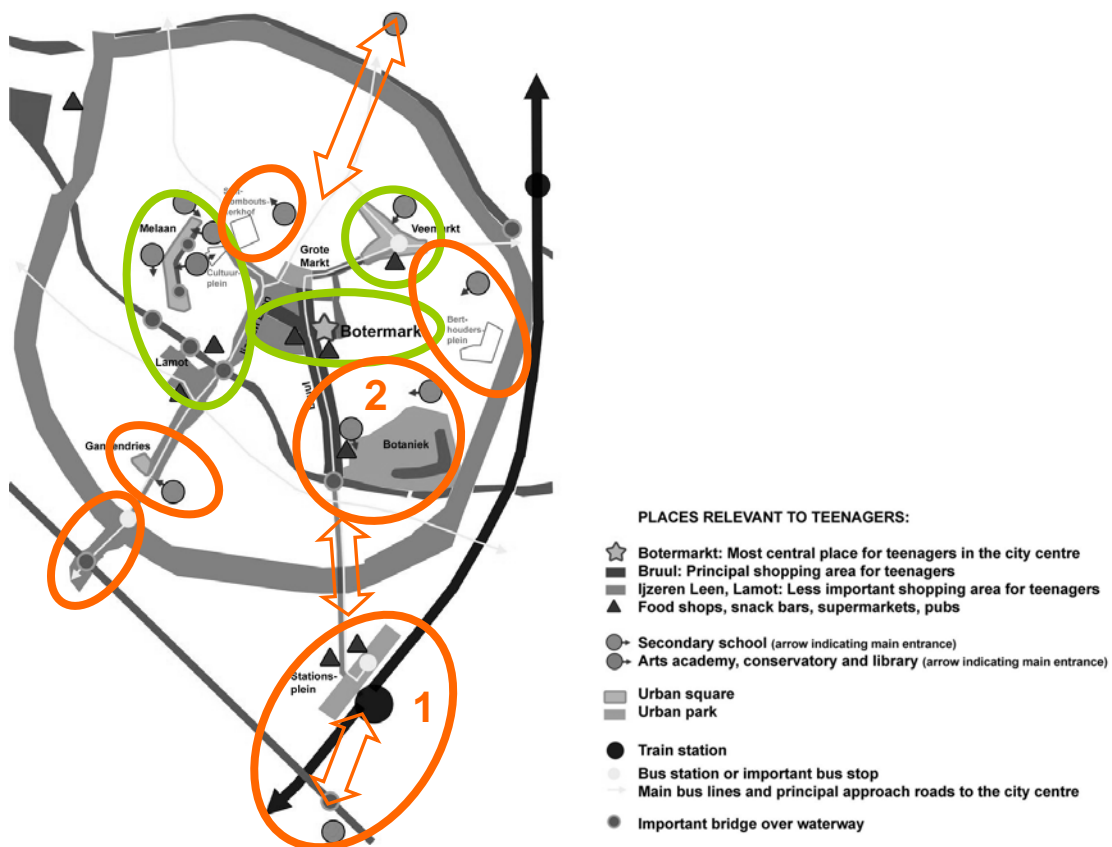


Figure 9: Strategic nodes in the teenage space network: the nodes functioning properly are indicated in green; those nodes that could be improved are indicated in orange.

Public space deserves to be reorganised around certain nodes (indicated in orange). The main challenge for these nodes is that relevant planning layers should be tied together more closely. I illustrate this with two specific areas where redevelopment plans are currently in consideration:

1. The railway station area in the south of the city centre is a key node in the teenage space network. Sufficient waiting areas should be provided in and nearby the railway station, so that waiting teenagers (especially the 'school commuters') don't obstruct travellers' streams. Bus platforms, train announcements and snack bars should preferably be within sight from these waiting areas. The public space around the railway station, currently merely a transit space, could be redeveloped and extended towards the canal as a place for 'stationing', 'chilling' and skating. This would be an opportunity to connect the secondary school situated south of the canal, to the city centre. The public space around the canal could be developed as a 'stepping stone' for 'school hopping' teenagers.

2. The 'Botaniek' park is perfectly situated in the teenage space network, adjacent to the principal shopping street, a secondary school, a mini-supermarket and snack bars. It is a challenge to improve the spatial connections between these elements, both visually and functionally. The interview data showed that most 'event shoppers' and 'school commuting' teenagers don't know the park, in spite of its strategic position in the teenage space network. Yet, a lot of 'school hopping' teens and 'regular visitors' stressed that this place offers ample opportunities for chilling, sporting and playing. The entrance to the park from the side of the shopping street is also the main entrance to a secondary school. At the same time, it is an important node in the recreational bicycle network. So plenty of layers coincide in this point, making it the perfect place to create a more enjoyable space for teenagers and to tie together the different planning layers.

These two examples show that a concrete design and planning programme can be drawn up, based on research on the teenage space network. When conceived as a specific spatial structure and network of places, areas, paths and nodes, a 'teenager space network' can be integrated as a planning layer in spatial projects and policies. It is an instrument for planners and designers to take into account the spatial perspective of teenagers, without limiting their creativity nor denying their specific expertise.

Wouter Vanderstede is an urban planner, anthropologist and historian. He is a researcher and staff member at Childhood & Society Research Centre. Child friendly and teenager friendly planning and design of public space is one of the main research themes of the institute.

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