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Space, Interaction and Communication. Sociology in Dialogue with Spatial Studies: An Introduction

Ente di afferenza:
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Space, Interaction and Communication

Sociology in Dialogue with Spatial Studies: An Introduction

by Barbara Grüning *and* René Tuma

1.   Space after the Spatial Turn

The so-called *Spatial Turn* in contemporary social theory [cf. Warf and Arias 2009; Döring and Thielmann 2009] has brought attention to discussions of physical space from different angles, on different levels and in the multidisciplinary field of social sciences and humanities (SSH).

The turning point of renewed interest in space on the threshold of the 1990s was *Postmodern Geographies* [1989], the work of the post-Marxist human geographer Edward Soja. Soja initially used this expression to indicate a shift from a discursive to a spatial perspective in critical social thought, especially with reference to Foucault's work in *Of Other Spaces* [1967/1986]. Furthermore, he appropriated Lefebvre's idea of "struggles over the right to the city" for analyzing how the spatialization of neo-liberal capitalism produced social inequalities [e.g. Soja 2010], a critical perspective which mostly found success in the field of gentrification studies [e.g. Smith 1996; Butler 1997; Less 1998; Brenner and Theodor 2002, Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Triece 2016]. Thus, for Soja [1989; 2010], bringing the space-category back to life corresponded to the completion of a threefold task: the reintroduction of a materialist view on space; the assertion of the independence of space from time, i.e. from historical thinking; and an emphasis on the influence of spatial processes on society, instead of looking at how social processes affect space [e.g. Gregory 1994; Warf and Arias 2009].

According to Döring and Thielman [2009], the objective of post-Marxist thinkers was more to contrast the hegemony of postmodern media theories than to introduce a paradigm shift. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, "space" was irrelevant for social analysis in globalization discourses. The idea of "time-space compression" [Harvey 1989], the metaphor of the "global village" [McLuhan 1964], the image of a network society [Castells 1996] and the emphasis on (time) acceleration [e.g. Virilio 1984; 1990], resulted in the main ideas of a deterritorialization of social life caused by global media processes [e.g. Rothfuß and Dörfler 2013]. In other words, the main risk consisted in making *virtual technologies* synonymous to *virtual geographies* [e.g. Crang, Crang and May 1999; see also Crang and Thrift 2000]. Not least of all, semiotics and media analyzes based on the ideas of text, cognitive maps or spatial representation contributed to making "concrete spaces", if not space itself, as diagnosed by Baudrillard [1981/1994] and Virilio [1990], disappear from social scientists' agendas [e.g. Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014].

Of course, Soja's emphasis on the materialist nature of space exacerbated a dichotomous categorization of real vs. virtual spaces, historical vs. a spatial perspective, and a textual vs. a material analysis of space that led to a selection of authors, theories and interpretations of their theories that were "legitimated" to define space and spatialization processes [e.g. Philo 2000]. While this kind of categorization has rarely been adopted, the increasing production of work addressing spatial issues and theories highlight to what extent Soja's undertaking gave scholars of other SSH disciplines a new impetuous for studying social processes from a *critical* spatial perspective, adopting, however, different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. This is mostly evident if we look at the proliferation of turns - "the performative", "the practice", "the mobility", "the relational", "the materiality", "the visual", "the topological" turn, etc. - which continuously reshape the social (critical) understanding of space and spatial processes. As a result, in the last three decades both research and theories focusing on spatial issues have multiplied.

2.   The Interdisciplinary Reception of a Social Concept

The extent to which the "spatial turn" revitalized interest in space is made evident by its progressive institutionalization and legitimation in the SSH-disciplines. For a general overview, here we can consider three indicators: books, journals and

handbooks devoted to spatial theories or issues in one core and two semi-peripheral languages (English, German and French).[1]

The data on books clearly highlights a growing interest in space in the social sciences since the 1990s for all three of the selected languages.
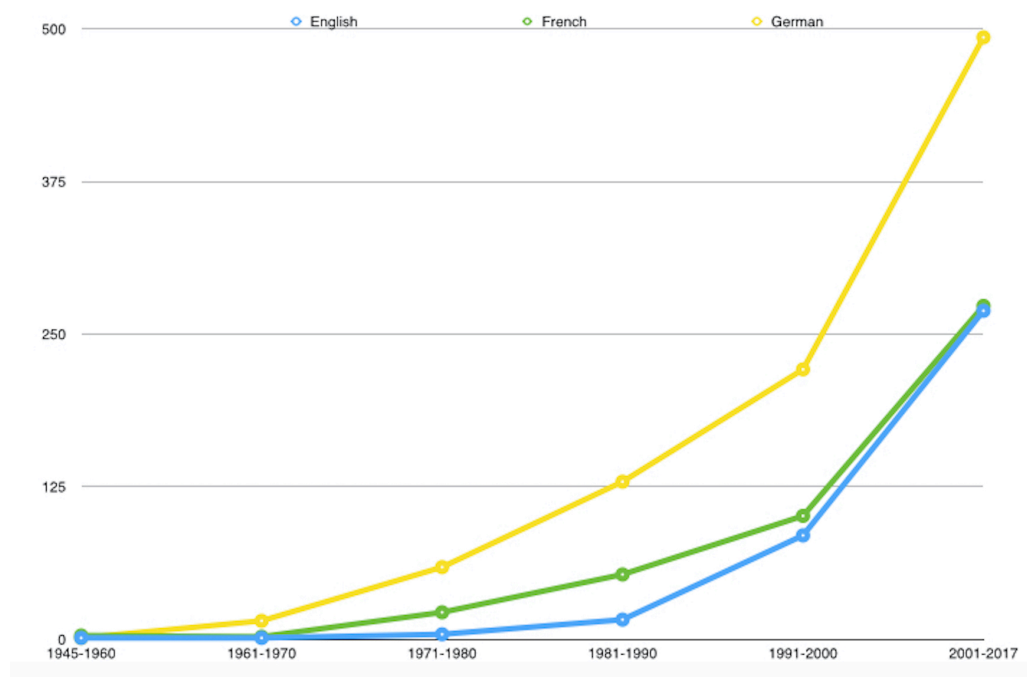

F*IG*. 1. Social scientific books with include the word "space" in the title by language (1945-2017).

Source: Authors' analysis.

Surprisingly, the largest portion of social scientific work is in the German language (918 items), followed by French (454 items) and English (379 items). With regard to the English language, it should be noted that books about space are almost non-existent until the 1990s. On the other hand, starting in the 1990s, the increase in the number of French books devoted to spatial issues is less marked than in German and English. This could indicate a stronger influence of postmodernist media theories in French-language social sciences.

[1] Sources: The National British Library; the Deutsche National Bibliothek and the Bibliothèque National de France. The data includes reedited or translated works. The selection is based on two criteria: books which include the words *space* or *spatial* in the title and books classified in the database either as sociological or as belonging to the social sciences. The aim of this comparative analysis was not to create an exact image of social scientific literature on space, but more modestly to show the increasing interest on space in the social sciences.

In this regard, it is interesting to observe to what extent and how the category of space has been appropriated by sociologists. For this second analysis, the collected data specifically concerns scholars of the discipline who published in one of the three selected languages.[2]
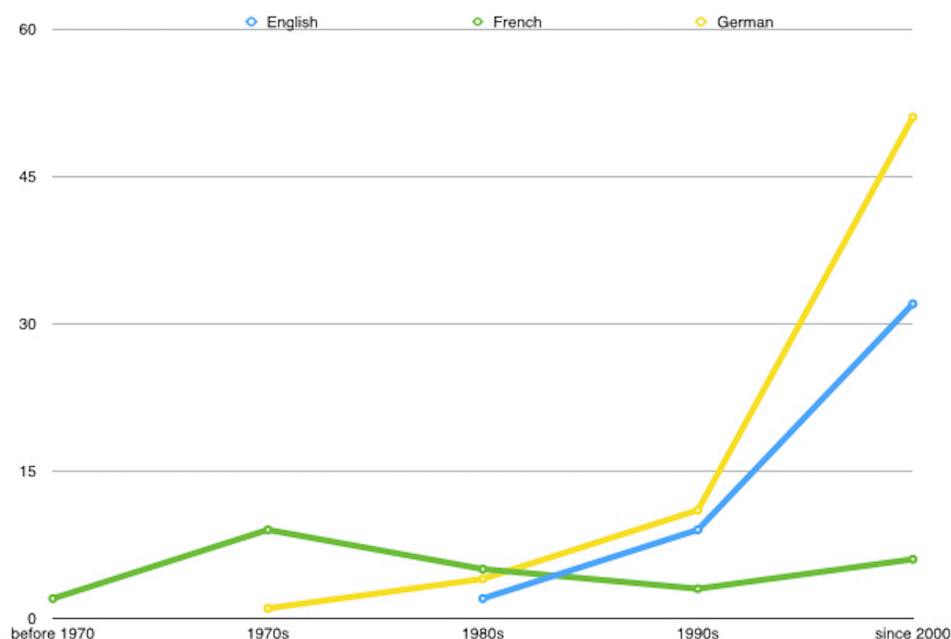

FIG. 2. Books by sociologists with include the word "space" in the title by languages (1945-2017).

Source: Authors' analysis.

With respect to Fig.1, the main difference regards the trend seen in French sociological works. First of all, French sociologists had already begun using the concept of space for their analyzes in the 1960s. The 1970s were an even more intense phase of scientific production on spatial issues, though the trend has been negative since the 1980s. The first works on space address housing questions. In the 1970s, the main topics covered were related to the work sphere. Surprisingly, some crucial French publications on spatial thinking, which had broad international and interdisciplinary success, such as *La production de l'espace* [1974/1991] by Lefebvre, *Sociologie de l'espace industriel* [1975/1978] by Castell and even *La poétique de l'espace* [1958/1964], an even earlier book by Gaston Bachelard, received little attention by French sociologists. By contrast, Bachelard and Lefebvre's phenomenological perspective and their

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[2] In this second analysis we excluded both reedited and translated works.

key concepts on the construction and representation of space have mostly been appropriated in philosophy and literature. Since the 1990s, the main topic covered has been related to the aesthetic and architectonical figuration of "public spaces", whereas urban politics and practices in public spaces are not thematized. Last but not least, concepts such as "emptiness" or "fragmentation", which disclose the imprinting of postmodernist thought, seem to constitute the main framework for spatial thinking.

Until the mid-2000s, we find a homogenous corpus of English books on space, devoted to cultural and social differences such as gender, race, and, to a lesser extent, class. The focus is mostly on conflictual dynamics created by the spatialization of these differences in the public space. Since the mid-2000s, the new interest in mobilities studies can be credited with reintroducing a temporal dimension in the analysis of (social) space, which post-Marxists had shelved [e.g. Cresswell 2001; Urry 2007; Günzel 2009]. This temporal dimension emerges in particular in analyzes [inspired by the work of De Certeau 1980/1984 and Lefebvre 1992/1994] of the "urban rhythms" produced by spatial practices and interactions in everyday life, which in turn define its spatial-temporal organization [Smith and Kerringhton 2013, Hillier 2008]. On the other hand, if this perspective allows one to explore how people perceive space through their "daily mobility", it does not exclude a socio-structural understanding of space. For example, according to Brown and Shortell, different ways of walking reflect "the systematic inequalities, that order contemporary urban life" [2016, 3]. In this regard, mobility studies offer also a critical point of view on the "nomadic theories" which introduced a dichotomous understanding of the category of mobility/moorings [Adey 2006] for studying "themes such as immigration, diasporic cultures, cosmopolitanism, mobile communications, technologies, performance, globalization and post-colonialism" [Merriman 2012, 5].

The German books devoted to space highlight the attempt to introduce the category of space in sociological thought [e.g. Konau 1977] since the end of 1970s, albeit this undertaking has been carried out systematically only after 2000.[3] One further peculiarity concerns a discrete interest in the Bourdieusian concept of "social space" in the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to the early reception of Bourdieu's *Espace sociale et genèse de 'classe'* [1984/1985], translated in German first in 1985 and re-issued twice, first in 1991 and then in 1995. More recently, scholars (and not only in Germany) have adopted three further Bourdieusian concepts to analyze the socio-cultural dimension of space: capital, habitus and space of lifestyle [e.g. Bourdieu 1979/1984]. With respect to the materialist analysis of urban capitalism, the Bourdieusian capital

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[3] For example: Häußermann [2000], Löw [2001], Krämer-Badoni and Klaus Kuhm [2003], Holm [2004], Schroer [2006] and Löw, Steets and Stötzer [2007].

concept has been used to identify the multiple types of capital (economic, political, cultural and social) at stake to (re)produce power relationships in urban spaces [e.g. Lewandowski and Streich 2009; Häkli and Minca 2016]. The concepts of habitus and space of lifestyle instead enabled the linking of "the space of social positions and the space of classifying and classified tastes and lifestyles" [Christensen, Janson and Christensen 2011, 2; see also Dünne and Günzel 2006], and consequently an examination of both the structural and phenomenological dimensions of "concrete spaces". More generally, German sociological works highlight the mixing of three perspectives on space: one related to the Bourdieusian theory; one related to the phenomenological tradition, as made evident mostly by the reference to time-space and "life world/space"; and one related to cultural studies, with a focus on identity and questions relating to women in particular.

Journals offer further insight into the dissemination of the space category in SSH-disciplines. Until the 1990s, SSH-journals devoted to space issues were almost non-existent. Probably the first journal explicitly devoted to spatial research, *Raumforschung und Raumordnung* was founded in Germany during the Nazi Regime [1936] by the agronomist and spatial planner Konrad Meyer (a SS-officer who also collaborated under the "Master Plan for the East"). Its main topics up until 2010 regarded spatial planning, developments and politics. In France we can enumerate three journals founded in the 1970s and 1980s devoted to spatial issues: *Espace geographique* [1970], which is still oriented towards traditional physical geographical issues; *Espace et société*, founded in 1970 by the philosopher and sociologist Henry Lefebvre, centered around architecture, urban planning and design; and *Espace, populations, société* [1983], which focuses nowadays on demographic, social and spatial differentiations and practices in lived space, even if demographic analyzes dominated until the end of the 1980s.

In the Anglo-Saxon cultural-linguistic area, the first SSH journal on space was *Space Policy.* Published by Elsevier since 1985, it covers the field of international relations, economics, history, and aerospace security and development studies. An important step towards the inclusion of spatial topics in SSH journals is represented by the foundation of three journals in the 1990s: *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* [1992], oriented towards political and social justice issues, similar to the critical spatial perspective introduced by Soja; *Space and Culture* [1997], also inspired by a "critical interdisciplinary theory" but whose main topics regard social spaces, everyday rhythms and cultural topologies; and *Space & Polity* [1997], which focuses on the relationships between space, place and politics in less-developed and advanced economies. Finally, since the mid-2000s, a new wave of social scientific journals on space has emerged. The publisher Wiley and Sons founded *Population, Space and*

Place in 2004, a journal devoted to immigration and spatial policies, even if it does turn at times to more traditional issues in the fields of geography and demography. In 2006, Routledge founded two journals: *Spatial Economic Analysis,* which inaugurated a new research stream in economics; and *Mobilities*, the latter being launched thanks to the efforts of John Urry also. In 2008, Elsevier founded *Emotion Space and Society* and in 2010 Common Ground launched *Space and Flows*. Not least of all, the journal *Environment and Planning C*, published from 1983 to 2015 with the subtitle "Government & Policy", reopened in 2017 with the new subtitle of "Politics & Space".

Thus, the increasing number of journals devoted to space topics highlights not only the internationalization and interdisciplinarization of the research field, but also its increasing institutionalization, despite the growing complexity of its epistemological and cognitive boundaries. This latter process is partially mirrored also by the publication of handbooks, textbooks and readers devoted to space in SSH disciplines. Once again, the German literature seems to be the most prolific. In French, however, there is almost no work that can bed categorize in this sense, with few exceptions, such as *Introduction à l'analyse de l'espace* [1977] by the geographer Cicérim, *Pour une anthropologie de l'espace* [2006] by architecture historian Françoise Choay, and, last but not least, *L'espace, un objet central de la sociologie* [2015] by the sociologist Remy. In English, there are four readers which highlight the dominance of an anthropological-geographical perspective: *Anthropology of Space and Place: A Reader* [2002]; *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* [2004], edited by geographers Phil Hubbard; Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine; *State/Space: A Reader* [2008], co-edited by the human geographer Neil Brenner; and *The People, Place, and Space Reade*r [2014], co-edited by anthropologist Setha M. Low, among others. The German language category, with six handbooks published in the last decade (and one in project), shows the systematic attempt in German-speaking countries at to legitimize the space concept in several SSH-disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields: *Handbuch zum Stadtrand: Gestaltungsstrategien für den suburbanen Raum* [2007]; *Handbuch Diskurs und Raum: Theorien und Methoden für die Humangeographie sowie die sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Raumforschung* [2009]; *Raum: ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* [2010]; *Theorien in der Raum- und Stadtforschung: Einführungen* [2014]; Handbuch Literatur und Raum [2015]; *Raum: eine kulturwissenschaftliche Einführung* [2017] and *Handbuch Mediatektur: Medien, Raum und Interaktion als Einheit gestalten. Methoden und Instrumente* [forth.].

3.   Space, Interaction and Communication

The overview presented above highlights how the growing complexity of theories, concepts and issues on space regards not only different disciplinary and epistemological perspectives, but also the different schools of thought within each discipline and national disciplinary traditions. Thus, we want to address these developments with this issue, while focusing on a theoretical intersection with the concepts of communication and interaction. This focus is based on the assumption that, from a sociological perspective, social interactions are constitutive of the social and (symbolic/material) cultural dimensions of space.

However, the importance of space as an analytical category for social research and theories has been stressed only in recent decades. For example, according to Zieleniec [2007], with few exceptions [Simmel 1908; see also Lechner 1991], classical sociologists paid little attention to the category of space for understanding social relations and interactions up until now. For Schroer [2009], this mostly depended on the priority given to the temporal dimension for analyzing modernity and, on the other hand, on the fact that space has also been taken for granted for a long time in urban ethnographic research. Similarly, Dahms [2009] argues that the initial neglect of space in sociology is a consequence of how the "discipline's classics framed the systematic study of society" and of the disregard for how concrete environments "may influence, shape and reinforce social relations, forms of interaction, and modes of coexistence" [*Ibidem*, 89]. In recent decades, the claim for a sociology of space [Gans 2002] takes a twofold process into account: how social actors transform a natural space into a social one, and how spaces influence social actors and processes. In other words, as Löw argued [2008], returning to Giddens' idea of space [1984], that means reaffirming the central role of space in sociological analyzes as a conjunctional category between structure and agency, thereby enabling one to explain social processes on the basis of spatial relations [e.g. Benko and Strohmayer 1997; Gyerin 2000; Roy and Ahmed 2001; Gans 2002; Lobao, Hooks and Tickamyer 2007; Zieleniec 2007; Löw 2008 & 2016; Schroer 2009; Dahms 2009].

What's more, looking at sociological studies about communication and interaction, there are a number of connections between the concepts. Even if research on communication within sociology is mainly focused on symbols and language, here we can find at least a few links to concepts about space.

First, the concept of *public space* is widely discussed. Public space, with its political relevance, is of crucial interest for urban sociology as well as for related disciplines such as surveillance studies. Privatization and control of urban public space are often a topic of sociological inquiry and critique [Low and Smith 2006]. With a different theoretical angle and a historical approach, Habermas [1962] presented his study of public intellectuals in coffeehouses. Here, eighteenth-century bourgeois

created a discursive space for civil society in British and French culture. A sort of "public sphere" emerged in which private individuals came together as a public and engaged in political and economic debates. Thus, public space is a space of communication first of all. Even empirical studies of interaction in public places should be mentioned here. The foremost interaction researcher in this field is Goffman, who described, early on, the micro-interactions [Goffman 1971] by which people manage encounters in public spaces as well as in other social situations. He introduced the spatial metaphors of the theater, such as front and backstage [1956] that are relevant for our management of personal identity.

Looking at empirical studies, we should spend some time on studies of communication. Starting with sociolinguistics, there is an interest in "*in situ*" language, in studying the connection between languages in use and their social distribution. For example, the study of sociology and dialects is always connected to regions and spatial entities. However, there are different layers of space that interact with each other on different scales. Speakers can draw on multiple linguistic resources that operate at different levels, from the most global to the most local, such as neighborhood, town, city, region, nation state, etc. [Blommaert 2010]. That way speakers create belonging to categories that are associated with particular social groups or places. Beyond language, the study of signs, material placement and other forms of discourse can be understood as geosemiotics [Scollon and Scollon 2003]. This opens up communication to other modalities, such as materiality, emplacement and interaction order [e.g. Stroud and Mpendukana 2009]. Meaning cannot only be found within the specifics of language itself but in the complex texture of everyday contexts.

Multimodality [Kress 2010] is a term used in contemporary conversation analysis which also connects language with social interaction taking place in spatial arrangements, and, in some studies, even the production of space comes into focus. This specific aspect was addressed early on by researchers such as Edward T. Hall [1962/1990] in the 1950s. Hall dealt with the role that the utilization of space and spatial behavior play in interaction, and he employs these concepts for intercultural comparative studies of different zones of personal space. Such zones, Hall thought, exist in successive layers around the individual, with intimate distance followed by personal, social, and public distance. In addition, these distances vary among cultures. Even if some of the early findings cannot be generalized to other contexts, proxemics is one backbone of the development into contemporary interaction analysis, developed by researchers such as Mead, Bateson and Birdwhistell. Their developments in kinesics and anthropological studies of communication were inspiration for studies by Goffman, who can be seen as one of the most important sociologists of interaction and communication.

As before, the study of communication (such as conversation analysis) was focused on spoken language that had been recorded on tape. But with the advent of video technology, even the empirical study of interaction and communication of space has changed. Video gave rise to what today is called "workplace studies" [Knoblauch, Heath and Luff 2000]. This body of research studied communication in spatially-expanded technological networks such as airports or the London underground. With the help of multi-sited ethnography and the use of multiple cameras, the coordination of work across and within space could be studied. Other studies focus on walking and navigation in space [Laurier and Brown 2008] or on the role of technology and vision for landscape architects [Buscher 2005], taking up where tradition left off and forming a new field of mobile methods. The development of sociological methods for the study of space is another new field that includes a variety of approaches, ranging from quantitative studies of space based on digitalized maps to qualitative methods such as visual approaches like mental maps or sensory ethnographies [Pink 2006].

As one can see, space, communication and interaction are deeply connected. This is because we usually communicate using our bodies, which means the study of their role, as well as that of the senses, is essential to truly understanding interactions in space. The mediatization and digitialization of communication that is currently going on has (to the contrary of what many expected) not lead to a society where communication becomes spaceless. Even if the flows of information are global [Castells 1996], they are focusing on local centers. Knorr-Cetina [2002] and others even already showed how important locality is even for such enterprises as financial trade, and how "synthetic situations" build new forms of presence in new spaces of interaction [Knorr-Cetina, forth.].

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Space, Interaction and Communication

Sociology in Dialogue with Spatial Studies: An Introduction

Abstract: The goal of the symposium is to explore the conceptual relationship that the category of space maintains with the categories of communication and interaction, by taking into account the several issues through which this relationship has been framed after the "spatial turn". With the reemergence of Lefebvre's work *The Production of Space* [1974] and of Foucault's concept of "*Heterotopias*" [1967/1986] since the mid-1980s, first in the fields of critical human geography, then in cultural anthropology, architecture, and media studies, space is chiefly understood as produced by interactions and communicative flows among social (individual and collective) actors. Spaces (and then urban spaces) are therefore not just containers [Löw 2001] of communicative acts and interactions, but by structuring social (power) relationships they structure together social, cultural and political spaces. Hence the analysis of the link between space, communication and interaction cannot be limited neither to the manifestation of communicative acts in place nor to the influence of (new and mass) media in shaping material places. Rather it allows one at the same time to focus on the interplay between social macro-, meso- and micro processes, to gather pivotal topics in socio-cultural and political economic space analysis, and to compare critically the different (disciplinary but not only) positions assumed on these topics over time.

Keywords: Spatial Thinking; Spatial Interaction; Social Space; Communication.

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