Public participation GIS supports planning for healthy and active urban environments

Title of the dissertation: Conceptions of Space in Active Living Research

Contents of the dissertation:
Urban environments are connected to the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in multiple ways. Among these are the ways the built environment supports engagement in active transportation, recreation, and play. Applying this research evidence on the pathways between health and place to support urban planning and spatial decision making remains a key challenge for research on urban health.

This dissertation has explored the use of public participation geographic information systems (GIS) in research on physical-activity-supportive urban environments. These methods enable the collection and analysis of local spatial knowledge produced by non-expert participants. The results show that public participation GIS and related data collection methods can provide valuable insight into mobility and physical activity behavior in urban settings. Public participation GIS methods are also well-suited to address methodological challenges in locating health behaviors, such as physical activity. This dissertation has employed public participation GIS to explore the places where citizens participate in physical activities, how these places are used by different population groups, and how they are connected to restorative experiences. Based on the empiric observations, this dissertation proposes that these research tools can help to bridge the conceptions of space between urban planning and environmental health research.

The results of the dissertation are based on four peer-reviewed studies focusing on adults’ active transport and leisure-time physical activity in the Helsinki metropolitan area and Tampere.

Field of the dissertation: Spatial Planning and Transportation Engineering

Doctoral candidate: Anna Kajosaari, M.Sc., born in 1990 in Helsinki, Finland

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Opponent: Professor Jasper Schipperijn, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

Supervisor: Professor Marketta Kyttä, School of Engineering, Aalto University, Finland

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Doctoral candidate’s contact information: Anna Kajosaari, Aalto University, anna.kajosaari@aalto.fi, phone +358407691100

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