



## RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 05/2021

# The city floor – how does it affect the work on creating attractive and inclusive urban spaces?

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The term “city floor” (*bygulv*) is used increasingly often in Norway to describe outdoor public spaces and the ground floors of buildings, and the transitional zones between these. Here we present the results of a study which shows how actors in urban development understand the term “urban floor”, and how this affects the development and use of urban public spaces.

### Purpose of the research

This study is part of a larger project examining the design and use of public spaces and the opportunities to develop socially inclusive spaces in areas of transformation and development. We focus on densification and compact urban development, which is the dominant sustainability strategy in urban planning. This type of urban development is often characterised by conflicts of interest and the need to address multiple different concerns. Creating good public spaces which also are socially inclusive can be challenging. We have therefore chosen to study urban development in areas of transformation, such as the areas Fjordbyen and Hovinbyen in Oslo, Norway. We are also studying the work to create inclusive urban spaces in small or suburban towns, such as Sandvika, Lillestrøm and Jessheim.

The main goals of the project are:

1. To examine existing urban public and semi-public spaces, focusing on how these are designed and managed, how they frame and enable social practices, whether they are socially inclusive, and to what extent they contribute to place identity.
2. To explore the opportunities to create socially inclusive urban spaces, also with regard to the connection between the spaces and their role in building place-based social capital.

### Who participated in the research group?

Per Gunnar Røe at the Department for Sociology and Human Geography (ISS), University of Oslo, leads the project. Ole Smørðal at the Department of Education (IPED), University of Oslo is also involved in the project. Milla Bjerkestrand has been a research assistant, contributing significantly to data collection and preliminary analysis. Four master’s students have been connected to the project: Ida Gulbrandsen (UiO/SUM), Milla Bjerkestrand (UiO/ISS), Marie Skålnes (UiO/ISS) and Maria Pettrém (UiO/ISS). The project is part of the research centre Include and includes a number of user partners:



Bærum Municipality, Lillestrøm Municipality, Viken County, Oslo Municipality, A-lab Architects, Aspelin Ramm and TreFokus/Pådriv.

## What have we found out?

Our interest for the term “city floor” (*bygulv*) stems from its increasingly common use in Norway to describe outdoor public spaces and the ground floor of buildings, as well as transition zones. The design and regulation of these spaces are important for the experience of public spaces for different population groups, as well as for whether urban spaces are socially inclusive, or being experienced as such. In addition, strong economic interests are tied to the city floor, which may be owned by private sector actors, influencing what the city floor is used for and whether it becomes socially inclusive.

A document study of the use of the term city floor or “bygulv” (based on 20-25 articles, planning documents and websites), reveals that this term is not clearly defined, and can include everything from the street and its physical characteristics and design (in some cases also the use of materials, such as granite or cobblestones), to adjacent ground floors and the fronts of buildings. This study also shows that both commercial and non-commercial services are important in developing the city floor. “The city floor plan” for Bispevika in the city of Oslo highlights that the city floor influence how urban life takes place at street level, as well as how the city is perceived by individuals: “The city floor is the stage which with its scenery frames city life, which depending on its form invites experience, observation and participation. The city floor is further used as a common name for all the city’s arenas of urban life; urban spaces and all public-facing functions in the adjacent buildings” (p.6)

Even though the physical design of the city floor is highlighted as important, the document study indicates that the contents of the ground floors are seen as more important. Several articles and the planning document also highlight the social and human aspects. In the city floor plan for Bispevika, terms like openness, accessibility and democratic character is used to describe the purpose of the city floor. Specific measures to ensure inclusive and democratic urban spaces are addressed, for example that some streets should have both inexpensive and expensive restaurant and food options, which would invite a diversity of social groups. It was also pointed out that urban public spaces should be “100% publicly available”, in other words truly public spaces, securing accessibility for all (p.57). The social aspects can therefore be said to be important in the overall planning and visions for the city floor.

In our study of the city floor, we interview actors who frame and set requirements for the creation of urban spaces, and who are involved in the design and management of these spaces. Preliminary results confirm that the social aspects are important both to planning authorities, designers and property developers. At the same time, it is clear that the design and use of the city floor is contested, as it is the subject of intense negotiations and conflicts between different (and often economically powerful) interests. The negotiations concerns both ownership (who should have legal ownership), design (how different groups can be accommodated, and to what extent certain groups are excluded) and management (how are public spaces maintained so that they fulfil the intentions). Much of the city floor consists of semi-private areas and transitional zones where property developers and renters wish to avoid certain activities and social groups. In the further work in this study we will focus on specific urban development projects, and how public spaces are experienced by users and people who live, stay and move around in the city.



## Implications

The growth of the term “city floor” can itself have implications for the public discourse on urban shared and public spaces, for the concrete design of the spaces, and for their use. If strong commercial interests are attached to the city floor, and there are companies that have ownership, design and management of the urban floor as a business model, the implication may be a privatisation where such spaces do not function as truly public spaces. The design of urban space can include certain social groups and exclude others (for example people who cannot or do not wish to pay for the use of a café table), although processes of inclusion and exclusion also may be more subtle and give people a feeling of belonging (“in place”) or not belonging (“out of place”). The study so far shows that it is important to develop detailed empirical knowledge about these processes, informed by international research and conceptual frameworks. Our study also shows how important interdisciplinary collaboration is to address the relationship between architecture and physical design on one hand, and social processes and justice on the other. In future work, we will focus on divisions of responsibility and ownership, when both the semi-public city floor and public urban spaces are planned and developed in practice. Where does the “regulated” city floor end and where does public urban space begin? Which mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion do we find? What effect does ownership, design, planning processes, negotiations and management have for different groups’ practices and presence in these urban spaces? How can we develop, design and regulate the city floor and public spaces in such a way that they include and invite larger segments of the population in areas in high demand such as Bispevika? Which instruments can be used?