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Mia Jaatsi & Päivi Kymäläinen

To cite this article: Mia Jaatsi & Päivi Kymäläinen (10 Oct 2023): Everyday improvising in public space: The forest pub as a site for suburban being, Journal of Urban Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/07352166.2023.2252535](https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2252535)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2252535>



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Published online: 10 Oct 2023.



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Everyday improvising in public space: The forest pub as a site for suburban being

Mia Jaatsi ^a and Päivi Kymäläinen ^b

^aUniversity of Turku; ^bTampere University

ABSTRACT

This study explores everyday improvising in the context of a forest pub in the suburb of Varissuo, Finland. The forest pub, maintained by the City of Turku, is an outdoor place where groups are encouraged to gather, socialize, and drink in public. Grateful for such an opportunity, the regulars embrace the forest pub, yet recognize its deficiencies in supporting public sociability and encounter. Through improvised action, the regulars respond to the limits and possibilities of their socio-spatial surroundings and find solutions to their everyday needs in the changing suburban landscape. This ethnographic study contributes to the discussions on the complex nature of spaces that exist on one hand as products of planning and control, and everyday practice and meaning on the other. Working between these aspects, urban improvising emerges as a contextualized, experimental, intuitive, and interactive everyday action, being central to the way people “keep life going” in their neighborhood. Everyday acts of improvisation unfold as a reflection of the regulars’ being and belonging in their suburb, suggesting an alternative view to spaces perceived as contested or marginal.

KEYWORDS

Everyday improvising;
suburbs; public space; public
drinking

Introduction

In 2013, a documentary series *Notorious Suburbs (Pahamaineiset lähiöt)* aired on Finnish public television. The series, produced by the Finnish public service media company Yle, included an episode displaying Varissuo, a suburb of Turku, Finland. It presented the everyday life of both the immigrant and original population in their homes, and in the schools, parks and commercial center of the neighborhood. It showed a scene from a local forest pub—an outdoor place where locals used tree trunks as seating, drank publicly, and socialized amid the pine woods. It was explained that the forest pub was constructed by the city to “remove drunks” from the vicinity of the commercial center and to provide them with their own “tranquil location,” which was used because “not much else is available.”

By using the headline “notorious,” however, the documentary portrayed an infamous image of the suburb, compiled from the high rates of immigrant population, unemployment, and incidents of crime in Varissuo in the 1990s. In 2021, as the ethnographic field work for this study was conducted, this documentary still continued to cast a shadow over the neighborhood. Besides having created distrust toward outsiders, many locals expressed their dislike of the way the neighborhood had been portrayed. They asked: Why was Varissuo and the forest pub chosen for it?

Varissuo (approximately 9,000 residents) is the largest suburban neighborhood in the City of Turku in southwestern Finland. It was built between 1975 and 1985 in a forested landscape about 6 kilometers from the city center, similar to many Nordic high-rise suburbs that had been built in the 1960s and 1970s in order to answer to the housing needs of increasing urban population (Aalto &

CONTACT Mia Jaatsi  mia.jaatsi@utu.fi  Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku, Vesilinnantie 5, Turku 20500, Finland.

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Laaksonen, 2021). Like many other Finnish suburbs, Varissuo was heavily influenced by the economic decline in the 1990s and the loss of various traditional manufacturing jobs. Another influential phenomenon was the increase in immigration, as a result of which Varissuo is now one of the most multicultural and international neighborhoods in Finland. In recent decades, Finnish suburban neighborhoods have been more generally linked with socioeconomic decline and segregation, which has led to urban regeneration and development programs (see also Stjernberg, 2022).

We agree with the statement of Schafran and Le Moigne (2022) that “social and economic problem areas” are often investigated too remotely. This has led to the failure to discuss the situation of these areas in detail, and to see their complexity and heterogeneity. Although the Finnish suburban context is rather specific and heavily influenced by welfare state practices and policies, there is a need to acknowledge the linkages between suburbanisms in different parts of the Global North (Schafran & Le Moigne, 2022). Suburban neighborhoods and their ways of life are bound together in many places due to their status “at the . . . bottom of hierarchical system of places,” and because the discourses on problem areas fabricate and simplify suburban realities (Wacquant, 2008, p. 1). There is a need to question these approaches and views and to pay more attention to the everyday life and agency of marginalized suburban residents (Sisson, 2021).

In this study, we aim to answer this need by exploring alternative views to the everyday life in Varissuo as narrated by the regulars of the forest pub. The regulars are significant agents (Tsibiridou, 2017) or public characters who “know everybody,” keep an eye on what happens and keep others “up-to-date on local matters” (Oldenburg, 1996, p. 8; see also Jacobs, 1961). We have “deep listened” (Koch, 2020) to the regulars and thus learned about the mundane life and spatial arrangements in the neighborhood. This has helped us to explore the meanings and actions in public spaces that the regulars use on a daily basis.

There has been little research about drinking landscapes that occupy marginal spaces in the city or are beyond the obvious and commercialized (Holloway et al., 2009). Although drinking as a practice is not the focus of this study, it is key to the existence of the forest pub, a central activity to its users, and in general a controversial practice in public space (Jayne et al., 2006; Kaakinen, 2013; Kopomaa, 1997). As “consumers who are often badly behaved and do not conform to discourses of polite, civilized and cosmopolitan urbanity” (Jayne et al., 2006, p. 461), public drinkers contest the normative landscapes of the city and the rights of some groups to public space, making them targets of social domination and control (see also Mitchell, 2003). The forest pub exemplifies drinking spaces that are products of planning and control, but at the same time, important sites of everyday practice and meaning. Our intention is not to glorify the use of alcohol, but rather to demonstrate the improvisations at play in a spatial context where people’s everyday lives and needs are in constant negotiation with their socio-legal, cultural and material surroundings.

Our analysis draws from the concept of “urban improvisation,” which occupies the spaces between the structured city above and the “real” city below, that is, between planning and life; rigidity and fluidity; and decency and impropriety (Hentschel, 2015; Kumar, 2021; Müller & Trubina, 2020). While improvisation has traditionally been reserved by the arts as an expert practice of the few (Krueger & Salice, 2021), the idea of everyday improvisation (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Ravn et al., 2021) has recently gained ground also in the urban context (e.g., Bird, 2019; Horsanali et al., 2021; Kamalipour, 2020; KloECK, 2017; Low, 2023; Pope, 2020; Pyyry & Tani, 2019). We regard improvisation as a set of practices that occur in relation to time and space between the planned and the lived city, where “rules often only set parameters around improvisation and . . . actors shift between sets of rules, modify and invent them” (Crossley, 2021, p. 83). Improvisation arises as a response to “the ongoing” because improvisation is simply “the way we work” in everyday life (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). Our study asks: how does everyday urban improvising emerge and shape the uses of public space in the context of the suburban forest pub and its surroundings?

This article begins by explaining everyday improvising as the analytical framework for this study. This is followed by the presentation of our research methods, mainly, “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) and “deep listening” (Koch, 2020) as ethnographic practices. After that, we present our findings divided into two sections, which provide insights into the ways the regulars respond to their socio-

legal, cultural, and spatial surroundings, and to their everyday needs and modes of life. First, we explain how the limitations of the forest pub generate alternative ways for expression in other public spaces in the neighborhood. Second, we describe how the regulars reinvent the meanings and uses of the forest pub as a reflection of their personal lives and belonging to the neighborhood. Finally, we present some conclusions about the concept of everyday improvising in the context of suburban marginality, and suggest further research on this topic.

Everyday urban improvising

There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work it out as they go along. In a word, they have to *improvise*. (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 1, emphasis in original)

The arts have been the conventional home of improvisation, and in particular, as a practice of highly skilled performers. In recent years, however, scholars from various fields have begun to expand the concept of improvisation beyond the arts to the sphere of everyday life, resulting in “something of a hot topic” (Ravn et al., 2021, p. 3). In their recently edited book *Philosophy of Improvisation*, Ravn et al. (2021) call for studies exploring what they refer to as “everyday improvisation.” Rather than being an expert practice of the few, they advocate recognizing the fundamentality of improvisation to the way we live and interact with the world, and regarding improvisation as a capacity to navigate complex situations and the structures, rules and habits of everyday social life (see also Crossley, 2021; Krueger & Salice, 2021).

In their “wide approach to improvisation,” Krueger and Salice (2021) argue that everyday improvisation involves constant responsiveness to our social and material surroundings: improvisation is about “continually adapting in real-time to the ongoing—and often unpredictable—flow of forces and feedback we receive from the people, things and spaces around us” (p. 51). Preston (2021), for their part, presents the “iceberg model,” in which the larger but more hidden part below the surface symbolizes improvisation and the smaller but more visible tip represents planning. As human beings, thus, “we are fundamentally improvisers who occasionally plan, not planners who occasionally improvise” (p. 14).

Ingold and Hallam (2007) have defined improvisation through four aspects. First, they see improvisation as *generative* in “the tasks of carrying on” (p. 6), which means that improvisation is not conditional upon judgments on its novelty. People improvise as they go along in life and continually reproduce themselves and their social, cultural and material environments. Second, improvisation is *relational* due to its constant responsiveness to the surrounding world. A person must attune their conduct to that of others, and turn everyday environments into resources for solving problems, “not unlike that required of pedestrians on a busy street (–) what Michel de Certeau (1984, p. xviii-xix) would call tactical manoeuvrings” (p. 7). Third, improvisation is *temporal*, entailing a processual, rhythmic and an onward-looking perspective. Instead of being “collapsed into an instant, or even a series of instants” (p. 1), improvisation occupies time that “is lived and felt in the pulsating rhythms of life itself” (p. 10; Lefebvre, 2004). Lastly, improvisation is simply “the way we work” because life does not exist in a world that is fixed and orderly, or follow a specific script or a static set of rules. Because life is “unscriptable,” improvisation can only “make the most of the multiple possibilities they afford for *keeping life going*” (p. 15, emphasis in original).

Bird (2019) adopts this framework by Ingold and Hallam (2007) when studying urban households in the U.S. Finding improvisation both in narrative and practice, Bird (2019) recognizes improvisation as a key strategy for urban households to return to the “good life” during uncertain periods of instability and change. Similar interests have been sparked by urban scholars in exploring improvisation as the creative capacity of individuals and collectives to manage currently available resources amidst precarious situations (e.g., Horsanali et al., 2021; Kamalipour, 2020; Kumar, 2021; Low, 2023; Silver, 2014; Simone, 2019). In this approach, urban improvisation is regarded as “a practice of making do of the urban poor and marginalised” through which livelihoods and solidarities can be created

(Müller & Trubina, 2020, p. 667). Hentschel (2015, p. 85), on their part, conceptualizes improvisation in the context of Berlin as “urban fabrication” that “needs to work with what is there, that is, a less-than-concrete plan, a half-functioning law, a nasty yet dominant moral code, or an infrastructure that no longer meets people’s needs.”

The perspective on the capacity of agents (individual or collective) to act implies that there is creativity involved in knowing how to cope with various situations. Creative improvisation requires skills, or becoming “literate in the city” (Hentschel, 2015, p. 85), suggesting that incremental learning of urban space and practice is necessary in contrast to knowing only the formal rules. Creative improvisation, however, requires critical assessment of its neoliberal assumption that the individual is capable of managing their own life (Bird, 2019), and for its judgment of creativity “by the innovativeness of its results rather than by the improvisations that went into the processes of producing them” (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 10). This “uniqueness assumption” of improvisation is dismantled by Krueger and Salice (2021) who do not consider improvisation anything distinct from the “normal” (non-improvised) modes of action, because as humans we “improvise more often than we follow a fixed script,” making improvisation “an essential part of our day-to-day activities” (p. 58). Improvisation is, thus, not only exercised in opposition to the conventions of culture and society but is intrinsic to the very processes of everyday cultural and social life (Ingold & Hallam, 2007).

The city between

In the urban context, improvisation can be viewed broadly as “a practice used by various actors in cities around the world to respond to increasing uncertainty, change and crisis” (Pope, 2020, p. 734). From this perspective, improvisation moves beyond being “the way we work” (Ingold & Hallam, 2007) or an act of resistance (e.g., Simone, 2019), and instead can be practiced also by authorities and “co-opted as a tactic of oppression” (Pope, 2020, pp. 712–713). Urban regulators, planners and other experts are incorporated into the concept, which brings complexity but also provides insights to the legal-administrative aspects of improvisation (Hentschel, 2015). The work of experts is neither fully scripted, but instead “involves making up and hijacking the ‘real’ or the ‘planned,’” which “often means learning by feeling their way through the task given to them” (p. 89). This can be witnessed in places like the forest pub that manifests as a solution to situations where experts must improvise to find a balance between the needs of different user groups in public space. Furthermore, the forest pub can be seen as the planners’ effort to advance conditions for the formation of informal “third places” where people “gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably” (Oldenburg, 1996, p. 6).

The complex “geographies of improvisation” (Kumar, 2021) consists of various administrative, political, legal, social and cultural systems that shape the space between the official and the everyday. In this in-betweenness, improvisation occurs in relation to processes where formal and informal are inextricably interwoven (Hentschel, 2015) and challenge the moral order of the city (Kumar, 2021). Everyday improvising is regulated by norm-governed practices and institutions, and should therefore not be considered to “only” result from the mind of an individual—contrary to the “head-bound assumption” traditionally connected to (artistic) improvisation (Krueger & Salice, 2021, p. 62, see also Sutton, 2021).

The geographies of improvisation are prone to creating moral tension because they include acts that are often unforeseen or undesirable for planners but desirable for people to whom improvisation keeps everyday life going (Kamalipour, 2020; Kumar, 2021; Pyry & Tani, 2019). However, Müller and Trubina (2020) specify the reminder that improvisation can work both ways, as it “may lead to desirable outcomes, but often through problematic means, or the other way around” (p. 668; see also Pope, 2020). On the one hand, acts of improvisation by planners can be considered morally more legitimate due to their presumably wider benefit, as opposed to the personal benefits of people who improvise in everyday life (Kumar, 2021). On the other hand, “micro-improvisations” (Krueger & Salice, 2021, p. 59) can serve as mechanisms through which rights to public space are negotiated (cf., Mitchell, 2003; Pyry & Tani, 2019; Rannila, 2019), or they may be beneficial in producing more

inclusive and “loose” urban spaces (Franck & Stevens, 2006; also Ameel & Tani, 2012; Kamalipour, 2020; Tani, 2015). This is particularly relevant for marginalized groups as they work against the predetermined assumptions about how and by whom public spaces should be used.

Materials and methods

The data for this study was collected in Varissuo between the spring and autumn of 2021, with regular visits thereafter until 2022. Mia Jaatsi conducted the ethnographic field work by participating in the local public life both within and outside of the forest pub. The regulars of the forest pub became the main group of informants and significant representatives who helped us to form alternative understandings of the mundane life of the neighborhood (cf., Tsibiridou, 2017).

The field work began with the ethnographic method of “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) which meant that the researcher became immersed in the local environment with an active and informal presence, making observations, having conversations, and sharing practices with locals in public space. “Deep hanging out” is not merely a means to gather data but also a meaningful engagement to build trust between the researcher and people involved in the research. As a flexible research practice, “hanging out” has particular value in settings outside the scope of formal modes of inquiry, being described as both “a method and a sensibility” (Browne & McBride, 2015, p. 35). Moreover, for us “deep hanging out” included aspects of “deep listening” that Koch (2020) characterizes as “a methodological tack and mindset . . . , rooted in intellectual humility” (p. 52). In order to avoid reproducing the narratives that prevail in the media and some scholarly debates, we wanted to “listen closely and in diverse ways” and thus be open to surprises (p. 58).

The informants in this study are regular users of public drinking spaces in Varissuo. These spaces often unfold as places for outdoor hanging out, drinking, and socializing, such as the forest pub (*metsäpubi*), “the storeys” (*kerrokset*), or “the docks” (*laiturit*). An equivalent place indoors is a pub in Varissuo’s commercial center, which the researcher also occasionally visited. Our informants include both men and women, although the spaces for public drinking are generally found to be rather masculine (Holloway et al., 2009; Kaakinen, 2013; Kopomaa, 1997). The study was conducted between April and September when outdoor hanging out has a greater volume in Finland, and mostly during the daytime, when our informants are active in public space. This temporal framework means that our observations are not comprehensive of the uses of these spaces, but they cover the essential time-spaces for the perspective in focus.

The research has been conducted in compliance with the general ethical principles of research in Finland (TENK, 2019), according to which no harm should be caused to the participants nor the researcher. In the field, the researcher was careful not to intervene in situations with notable inebriation. To secure informed consents, the researcher always first presented themselves as a researcher, explained the research objectives, and provided space for the individuals to consent or abstain. Due to the fact that the forest pub community is rather small and the researcher interacted with the same people on several occasions, it was possible to repetitively reassure their consent for participation. The word about the researcher’s presence spread rapidly, and the informants were overall enthusiastic about advancing the research. They thought that the researcher had come “to the right place” and hoped that the research would become “authentic” and “help all of us.” Creating false expectations was, nevertheless, avoided.

Our informants consist of Finns, many of whom are in their 50–70s and “originals” in the neighborhood. They are a minority in today’s multicultural Varissuo, where 51.5% of its residents, and nearly 90% of the local elementary school students speak a language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami as their mother tongue (Bernelius & Huilla, 2021, p. 52; Statistics Finland, 2019). The “original Finns” balance their space in the changing neighborhood, having witnessed Varissuo as “a symbol of the loss of the ‘welfare Finland’” (Huttunen & Juntunen, 2020, p. 4131), while also dealing with the neighborhood’s public image as “the symbol of the new multiculturalism, with both its problems and its promises” (p. 4128). Many live in precarious life situations, such as being unemployed, on invalidity

pensions, or having health problems. We consider the agency of people in vulnerable situations worth researching in the Finnish context (Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023; Kuoppa & Kymäläinen, 2022), as they might otherwise remain invisible in a welfare setting.

The ethnographic fieldwork was documented in field diary notes, voice recordings, and occasional recordings of conversations, when permission was granted. The main group on the field consisted of about 15 individuals, in addition to which we had a considerable number of conversations with other locals. The supplementary data includes six recorded individual and group interviews with city and state officials and the representatives of local NGOs. All participants have been anonymized, and no photographs were taken in order to protect their privacy. Because the research was conducted in the Finnish language, the citations presented in this research have been translated from Finnish by the authors.

The research material has been analyzed using NVivo software that was useful for making sense of the data through coding, grouping, and categorizing. We organized the data according to different public spaces in Varissuo, and the ways they were used by the regulars. We focused on spatial practices and reflected on their usage by employing what is known from literature about improvisation (e.g., Ingold & Hallam, 2007). We identified four features: everyday improvising as (1) contextualized, (2) experimental, (3) intuitive, and (4) interactive.

Ethnographic analysis is rarely a linear course of action but rather “a connected and connective process” inseparable from the field and from writing (Crang & Cook, 2007, pp. 131–133). Therefore, we have returned to different stages of our research throughout the process, while also aiming to be reflective as regards our own status as outsiders (Browne & McBride, 2015). We recognize that ethnography is always a representation of the researcher as an observer, particularly when undertaken in a marginalized context (Small, 2015). Our objective has been to conduct regular visits to the study area after the initial phase of data collection to obtain a higher level of reflexivity concerning the places and people we have analyzed.

Improvising in suburban space

“All this was made for us”

The forest pub, located in the suburb of Varissuo, is a public place situated in a small forest area close to the local commercial center. It is maintained by the City of Turku and consists of three tree trunks as benches, two litter bins, and the surrounding greenery (Figure 1). The users of the forest pub acknowledge the role of the city and express gratitude for having been provided with their own tranquil place where “drinking is legitimate” and “no one gets evicted.” They contrast the legitimacy of the forest pub with other public spaces in the neighborhood, mainly in vicinity of the commercial center, which they identify as “not appointed for drinking.” In these spaces, public drinkers expect complaints about making a nuisance of themselves, and to be removed by security guards or the police. In the forest pub, in contrast, people report feeling safe and confident about their right to be in space.

The case of the forest pub demonstrates how planning can direct a certain type of action to a certain type of place. This produces different kinds of public spaces; not unlike the differences between an ideal, inclusive and open “public space” in rhetoric, and “public spaces” in reality, in which exclusionary practices may take place (Madanipour, 2019). The interviewed city officials of Turku depict the forest pub to be a good investment and a beneficial place for the locals to hang out, socialize, and drink in public, not least due to the proximity of the supermarket. The city officials underline that the forest pub is based on a common agreement with the “bench people” (*penkkiläiset*), with whom they and the local police are on decent terms. According to the city officials, the forest pub has not raised complaints either from its users or other residents, and has instead provided an opportunity for the locals. The arrangement is projected to bring order and safety in the neighborhood: while public drinking is directed away from the public gaze, the more prominent public spaces remain clean, calm and comfortable for other residents. This is not an unusual approach by authorities, as drinking tends



Figure 1. The forest pub in the suburb of Varissuo in Turku, Finland. (Image: Mia Jaatsi, 2021).

to “go hand in hand with negotiating and navigating the risky city,” in which the “risk” consists of different groups and their activities being mixed in public space (Jayne et al., 2006, p. 463).

We found that the given spatial arrangements fabricated preconditions to the way in which people improvise. Public spaces involve rules, structures, and habits that the users constantly reflect on, reevaluate, and respond to when finding solutions to their everyday needs (Crossley, 2021; De Certeau, 1984; Hentschel, 2015; Horsanali et al., 2021; Krueger & Salice, 2021; Montuori, 2003). It appeared as the users began with an understanding of “what is,” and continued to maneuver their way in space, taking into account the specific conditions, circumstances, or any background knowledge that might surround a particular place and action. Therefore, our study identified that everyday urban improvising is always *contextualized*, rooted in current understandings of space, time, everyday needs, and ways of life.

The idea resonates with the “yes, and . . .” strategy known from improvisation, which means “to accept and expand on what’s happening in the moment” (Sutton, 2021, p. 200). This becomes clear in the ways the regulars respond to the *actual* possibilities the forest pub provides: while they accept, value and use the place, they also recognize and act upon its limitations. For instance, the regulars find the forest pub to be a cold and isolated place to sit due to the lack of direct sunlight and limited social connectivity to the neighborhood. They also consider its accessibility poor for those with reduced mobility. Moreover, although the proximity of the supermarket was complimented by the city, the regulars considered the only supermarket in the neighborhood expensive, especially after a more affordable one was replaced by an ethnic food store. Some told that they travel to other parts of the city to purchase groceries, and, due to the absence of the state-owned alcohol retailer, also spirits, unless resorting to underground sellers.

The limits of the forest pub become perhaps most notable in its inability to support everyday public sociality, which is in general found to be a central function of (indoor) pubs (Miller, 2019; Thurnell-Read, 2021). The regulars note that the excluded location of the forest pub decreases opportunities for chance encounters with other residents. Therefore, to engage with other people and to participate in the local public life, the regulars rather choose to spend time in the more central, livelier, and sunnier spaces in the neighborhood, despite their perceived illegitimacy. One such place is “the docks” (*laiturit*), which is a wooden platform with seating areas under the sun. Another popular spot is

“the storeys” (*kerrokset*), which consists of a rocky incline next to an eventful pedestrian street adjacent to the commercial center. It has a “downstairs” (*alakerta*)—an open formation of rocks where people can sit and watch passersby—and an “upstairs” (*yläkerta*)—a plateau where people can play *mölkky* (a Finnish throwing game). The regulars argue that the storeys are better for socializing because they are central, visible, and accessible by bicycle and wheelchair. They find it important that “everybody moves past there.” Or as one woman stated, “here people crawl out like lizards to enjoy the sun and social life.”

The invented names and alternative uses demonstrate the creativity of social life as people improvise new meanings and functions for public spaces that have been pre-scripted differently by planners (e.g., Ameel & Tani, 2012; Franck & Stevens, 2006; Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Kamalipour, 2020; Tani, 2015). The lived practices of improvisation become visible as the regulars recreate the intended social function of the forest pub in unintended places through mundane yet contested actions, such as sitting, drinking, conversing, greeting by-passers, playing games, listening to music, or engaging with surrounding events. Unlike the forest pub, however, these more prominent spaces are not infrastructurally equipped for public use, despite their popularity for hanging out (see Tani, 2015 for “geographies of hanging out”). The “upstairs” and “downstairs” areas have no benches or litter bins installed, leaving people to find seating on the ground or the rocks, and to carry litter away by hand. The latter is important because the regulars have a “tacit agreement” to keep the places clean due to their respect for the environment. It also highlights the importance of informal knowledge when people act “outside the script,” and make their city on the ground (Hentschel, 2015).

These actions of users point to the *experimental* nature of improvisation. The users try to make the most out of the available spaces in the neighborhood, even if it means challenging the predetermined spatial order, taking risks, or questioning the established norms and rules (see also Crossley, 2021). They tend to push the boundaries within a specific context by experimenting with alternative uses of space, creating informal social arrangements, and forming everyday strategies. This becomes visible, for example, by the way the regulars have learned to improvise a strategy against the security guards of the commercial center by sitting right behind the property line, over which the guards have no authority. Or, how the regulars have learned to exchange information by leaving and picking up messages via the counter of a local indoor pub. Both examples demonstrate how experimenting everyday solutions can contribute to how people incrementally develop their skills or “literacy” in the city (Hentschel, 2015).

In the case of “the storeys,” the lack of official infrastructure and the occasional interventions by the police or security guards suggest that hanging out is not supported by the authorities. The users find this as a sign of illegitimacy, of which they express contradictory views. On one hand, the users accept the removals that are resolved by a familiar policeman, who softens the interaction in contested situations. They somewhat agree about being “out of place” outside the forest pub, and share concerns about the problems caused by public drinking if, for example, children are nearby, or if the adjacent church has a service. This highlights the moral tensions present in the local geographies of improvisation (Kumar, 2021; Pyyry & Tani, 2019).

On the other hand, the regulars question the removals because they do not consider their behavior disturbing: they are not loud, do not cause disorder, or do not block the street. The public drinkers wonder whether they are sometimes confused with drug addicts whose behavior can be more unpredictable. A woman explained that she too had been prejudiced against the “groups of drunks” hanging out in public, but after spending time in the group with her husband, she realized that “the group consists of ordinary people who just want to spend time together,” and “are a ‘pack’ who helps each other out.” This aligns with the characterization of “third places” where people meet regularly and provide mutual aid (Oldenburg, 1996, 2001).

These navigations demonstrate the ambiguity of negotiating the rights of different groups in urban public space (e.g., Mitchell, 2003; Rannila, 2019). It highlights the in-betweenness of urban improvisation, in which different actors and actions are interwoven in dynamic processes that can work in many directions, with desirable or undesirable outcomes (Kumar, 2021; Müller &

Trubina, 2020; Pope, 2020). Multiple strategies can be experimented also by planners when negotiating the benefits of different groups (see Kumar, 2021), which makes public spaces important sites for urban improvising.

Many regulars wanted to hold on to their rights to public spaces that are more sociable, sunny, and accessible than the forest pub. They hoped that opportunities for socializing similar to the forest pub would also be built on the more central and active side of the neighborhood, for example, on the “upstairs” plateau. However, when we revisited the site a year later, we discovered that a fenced children’s playground had been constructed in that specific place, limiting the space for other uses. These actions, too, highlight the in-betweenness of urban improvisation and the multiplicity of actors within it (e.g., Pope, 2020), as well as the real-time responsiveness required to adapt to the changing socio-legal and material environments, an act of which is integral to the practice of everyday improvisation (Krueger & Salice, 2021).

“A resting place for adults”

As demonstrated in the previous section, the forest pub seems to fall short of fulfilling its role as an encompassing social environment. However, the forest pub constructs a meaningful place in many other ways. We found that the forest pub provides a space for rather instinctive, or feeling-based, everyday practice particularly in relation to resting. In general, we identified that *intuition*, or the “immediate apprehension by sense; [and] a particular act of such apprehension” (OED Online, 2023), was utilized by our informants as an aspect of improvisation as they moved between the orders of space, time, and everyday human needs. In the narration below, a local man shares his daily maneuverings, through which he also situates the forest pub in relation to other public spaces in the neighborhood:

I sat all day “downstairs” because everyone took their drinks there. I brought six Long Drinks, and we socialized. Then I walked to the local bar, but I couldn’t enter because of COVID-19 restrictions. I moved on and went to the supermarket to buy this beer with my friend. I wanted to come to the forest pub to drink it because it’s a calm place to sit down for a while. I didn’t expect to see any friends or anything. I just arrived here and thought that why not stay for a moment. I have fish soup waiting at home, but just for a while.

The account describes how spontaneous decisions can lead a person to different places but also how the conditions of each place matter to this process. Whether seeking sociability, a place to rest, drink, or eat, the man’s intuitive actions are driven by his shifting feelings, but importantly, they are also informed by his earlier knowledge and habits (see also Crossley, 2021). This complies with the notion that improvisation emerges at a certain level of skill or routine when individuals “have developed the ability to act spontaneously and intuitively” because “they know the rules, but do not have to think about them” (Montuori, 2003, p. 249). Everyday acts of improvisation should not, thus, be thought of as separate from their contextualized setting, prior experience or cognitive reasoning (as improvisation is sometimes characterized), but rather as working together in the improvisatory process (e.g., Krueger & Salice, 2021; Sutton, 2021).

The narration above also demonstrates that the forest pub provides a peaceful place to recuperate after a busy sociable day in the neighborhood. This was a common view among informants who considered it impossible to “be alone and with your own thoughts” in the more central and active public spaces. By referring to the forest pub as a “resting place for adults,” the regulars suggest that it is a place for the more mature locals, many of whom have lived in the neighborhood for years and experienced vulnerable life situations, such as being unemployed, retired (see also Oldenburg, 1996), on invalidity pensions, or having problems with substances. Many share a similar daily rhythm and an understanding of having hardships in life. Their small and tight community is easily maintained in the everyday local life where public hanging out is an important shared activity. Furthermore, being a minority in an increasingly ethnic neighborhood is a uniting factor, as was explained by one original resident:

You know, there are three types of people here in Varissuo. There are the immigrants, who are the majority. Then there are those who left. And then there are the Finns including us, [the drinkers]. The Finns here are a minority.

Our informants were not disturbed by the growing ethnic diversity but rather claimed that the change has contributed to a more tranquil living environment due to the immigrants' lower use of alcohol. This aligns with the findings of Huttunen and Juntunen (2020) in Varissuo, and is one reason why our informants regard the suburb's public image as "notorious" to be outdated. The changes in population have, however, produced feelings that our informants' everyday spaces have shrunk, as, for example, some local bars have closed down due to a lack of customers. The development causes worry over how to maintain the sociability of the community, but is also seen as inevitable: "We know our community is getting smaller and smaller and will eventually disappear."

In this shrinking landscape, the forest pub manifests as an important place for belonging to the neighborhood. To our informants, spending time in the forest pub and being attached to it means that they are "anchored" in Varissuo. Similar findings have been made in the context of indoor-pubs, which support the value of being in public instead of having a drink at home (Thurnell-Read, 2021). Even when alone, our informants consider it safer to be in the forest pub than at home, as challenging life situations become more difficult for others to recognize if a person withdraws to a private space (see also Rannila, 2019). The publicness of the forest pub provides security, or, as was stated by an informant, may well act as "a replacement of a family" that can take care of each other (see also Oldenburg, 1996, 2001).

Choosing to be present in public space is one solution the regulars construct to the vulnerabilities they experience in their everyday lives. The regulars perform (in the everyday sense) in public space in order to be part of their neighborhood and community and to instinctively protect themselves and others so that life can go on amidst personal challenges and changes in the suburb. The familiarity of their daily environments, learned habits, and previous experiences contribute to being able to navigate in the neighborhood, just as was exemplified by the spatial maneuverings above. Whether a person is alone or in company, their physical presence in public space carries symbolic significance as it is somewhat equated with being emblematically part of the neighborhood. While sitting in the forest pub, one regular explained:

I have never thought that I should be part of Varissuo in any other way but by being. I am here and I live and I carry out my duties. I have never thought about anything else. . . . It's self-evident to me that I'm here. . . . I would assume that every person should have this sort of self-evidence. . . . Everything is close. Isn't that what a person wants? Everyone can say hi whoever comes across. Nothing special. Just jovial being. That is how I experience this anyway.

The account conveys the regular's desire for everyone to have a comfortable and naturally fitting place in life, similar to the meaning the forest pub and Varissuo represents for him. This view reflects an attitude of openness and solidarity toward others, aligning with the general sentiment among informants who perceive the forest pub as a socially accessible and inclusive space that should not impose limitations on anyone. One regular characterized this openness as a neutral thing, stating, "whoever comes, comes, and that's their business," and emphasized the importance of granting peace and tranquility to everyone within the forest pub. However, while maintaining openness as an ideal, many forest pub regulars acknowledge that neither the youth nor residents with different cultural or religious backgrounds may find the forest pub accessible, because "we are just old Finns sitting, drinking and smoking here." The image is not far from the line drawn by the youth in Sweden to those who "sit in the woods and drink" (Ander & Wilińska, 2020).

Cultural differences surrounding drinking practices serve as one factor that separates the regulars from other resident groups, a division that has also been noticed in relation to gender (Holloway et al., 2009). The secluded location of the forest pub further emphasizes its social and physical restrictiveness, potentially requiring others to adapt their behavior, or to develop a certain level of confidence to access the forest pub. Notably, migrant workers from Eastern Europe and Russia form an exception to

this division because of their habit of drinking and barbequing in the forest pub in the evenings. The Finnish regulars, who mainly use the forest pub during the day, explained that they rarely encounter these “foreigners,” but when they do, they are mostly astonished by their heavy drinking habits and smoky barbeque fumes. Language differences result in scarce verbal interaction, but sitting in silence is not experienced as a problem by the Finns. Instead, it is the shared activity and shared space that bring the groups together as they “rub along” in everyday life (Watson, 2006, 2009; also Huttunen & Juntunen, 2020). It is important to note, however, that although the Finns welcome immigrants to utilize the forest pub, they demonstrate ownership and authority in “granting” access to others.

These humble social interactions among the forest pub users comply with the findings of Huttunen and Juntunen (2020), who note that different resident groups in “super-diverse” (Vertovec, 2007) Varissuo carry on with their lives without explicit hostility but also without deep engagement. Watson’s (2009) concept “rubbing along” describes such interactions as

a form of limited encounter between social subjects where recognition of different others through a glance or gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or private realm. (p. 1581)

In the context of the forest pub, this highlights the significance of the users’ embodied actions as a mode of being in public space, and more generally, their ability to improvise different modes of interaction, even when lacking a common language.

The social characteristics of the forest pub are important to recognize to avoid perceiving the improvisations that emerge in relation to it as one-way expressions. Instead, these improvisations should be understood as evolving through the interactions among users, their environments, their inner lives, and other social subjects, as the example above demonstrates (see also Crossley, 2021; Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Krueger & Salice, 2021). Therefore, our study has identified that everyday improvising is always *interactive*, as opposed to being performed exclusively without reflexivity to social, cultural, physical, and moral environments. We observed that interactive moments of improvisation manifested in both bodily and verbal actions, which were significant in keeping the everyday life in the forest pub going, and continually regenerating the space and the activities of those who use it (see also Ingold & Hallam, 2007).

One example of this was seen in greeting rituals, which constitute one of the most self-evident and mundane acts of improvisation (R. K. Sawyer, 1999). One regular of the forest pub considered it of crucial importance to greet all incoming individuals. She performs this greeting by pulling out a small lacy table cloth from her purse, placing it on top of a green litter bin, and stating: “Welcome to Varissuo’s forest pub!” She finds the ceremony amusing but also important, because to her the table cloth creates a sense of celebration and symbolizes a homelike place, to which she feels attached and has the right to invite others. Greeting rituals exemplify how everyday creativity can arise from repetitive and routine interactions, rather than relying on uniqueness or novelty for their performance (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Krueger & Salice, 2021).

Improvisational everyday interactions also become visible in the forest pub’s drinking culture that demands the regulars to remain responsive to the current situation at hand. For example, those who drink are quick to provide beer cans to those without, and empty bottles are given to those who need the deposits the most. The users are forced to balance between the ideals of solidarity and the fact that many of them have little money. Excessive scrounging is, thus, disparaged in order for “everyone to feel good” and “no one to feel left out.” Another aspect of balancing norms is observed when forest pub users find themselves in needing to urinate in public. While men often act on the spot, women also find alternative solutions, such as utilizing the commercial center’s public toilets which are, however, subject to a charge. These examples from the micro-level of social life illustrate how acts of everyday improvising are always performed in interaction with others in public space, and relational to various social, cultural, physical and moral constraints, also revealing vulnerabilities to uneven conditions, such as gender structures (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Krueger & Salice, 2021).

Furthermore, other situations that require swift responsiveness occur when the regulars perceive disorder in the forest pub (cf., Kemppainen & Saarsalmi, 2015). They experience the place as being physically violated when there is litter on the ground or spray-paint on tree trunks, and socially dishonored when someone behaves disturbingly or aggressively. One incident involved a person shouting and troubling the being of others, who eventually had to relocate to a more peaceful environment. The regulars explained that exiting the forest pub is the best solution one can improvise amidst a conflict to prevent the situation from escalating. The trouble continued over several days and resulted in complaints by residents in nearby housing units as the noise carried all the way to their balconies. The regulars felt disappointed over the incident because they recognized that such rare events may damage the reputation of the forest pub and risk its existence.

We discovered that harmony and respect are important values that the regulars share and project to the forest pub as a site for everyday being. Tranquility is valued because it provides an opportunity for profound reflections and meaningful conversations. The forest pub can even serve as a sanctuary, or as one user stated, “a place to dig into one’s soul and discuss issues of the mind.” We found that discussions at the forest pub tended to be directed toward deeper and more personal topics, compared to those held in the more hectic public areas. This might be due to the presence of nature, or result from the fact that less people are sitting in the forest pub simultaneously and, thus, conversations are more private. Providing different kinds of spaces for self-reflection and social interaction is, therefore, important because they cater to the diverse needs of users, and because conversations are improvised actions that always emerge in relation to their situational context (K. Sawyer, 2015).

Finally, we share our encounter with a woman, a regular user of the forest pub, who had lost a person some years ago. She described how she mourned them by sitting alone in the forest pub every day throughout the year, even when it was cold or rainy. She followed the course of nature, observed the animals, and contemplated. To her, the forest pub became a “shrine,” and sitting on a log became a daily ritual, which supported her recovery in a time of crisis. She explained that on one occasion, the police came to the forest pub to ask if she was feeling alright. It demonstrated to her the role of the forest pub as a “safe haven” in the eyes of the authorities, in contrast to other spaces from which she might fear eviction. These interactions highlight the fact that improvised uses of space do not always conform to planners’ predetermined scripts, nor arise as their resistance, but emerge from individual or human needs that are unforeseen in moments of planning.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated how urban improvising is practiced in public spaces between the official and the everyday (Hentschel, 2015; Kumar, 2021; Müller & Trubina, 2020). We witnessed improvisation both in planning solutions to manage public drinking, and in the ways public spaces were used by drinkers. In-between, the spaces were performed through contextualized, experimental, intuitive, and interactive actions of people in everyday life and in relation to their suburban surroundings. The regulars of the forest pub were key agents in reshaping these spaces through improvisation, while evaluating their daily needs for sociality and solitude; to being and doing; and to their rights to publicness.

The case of the forest pub illustrates how planners can create boundaries (Kumar, 2021) as they work to improvise solutions to the “riskiness” of drinkers in public space (Jayne et al., 2006). The forest pub appears as marginalizing and alienating, which might seem contradictory to the way different resident groups in Varissuo “rub along” (Watson, 2006; also Huttunen & Juntunen, 2020). At the same time, the forest pub shows how planners can create possibilities for informal gathering places where people can gather regularly, inexpensively and pleasurably (Oldenburg, 1996, 2001). Among the regulars, the forest pub produces feelings of gratitude and belonging, rather than those of exclusion. Instead of wishing to dismantle the forest pub as a marginalizing construct, the regulars suggest that it be replicated in a location that better suits their needs, and that they are already claiming for public sociality. Furthermore, the case demonstrates how public

spaces are generative of urban improvisation, that is, they produce conditions where the limits and opportunities created by planning are responded to in the lived spaces of the city (or the other way around, see e.g., Müller & Trubina, 2020). The improvisational actions of people this study has demonstrated serve as a reminder that the uses of public spaces are ongoing and evolving processes, influenced by the relations between individuals and their socio-legal, cultural, and material surroundings.

In contrast to the ethnography by Bird (2019), the informants of our study did not employ improvisation principally to seek for ontological security to *return* to “the good life,” but rather to “keep life going” (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). They had established routines and social structures that provided a foundation for improvisation, and enabled the regulars to maintain life in relation to their personal vulnerabilities and the spatial arrangements of the neighborhood. Therefore, instead of being improvisers who occasionally plan (Preston, 2021), our informants were actors who rather scripted their daily lives in order to *be* “unscripted.” The familiar environments and shared knowledges of practices allowed the locals to navigate the local public life, and especially, to have a trusted context upon which to improvise. The contextualized, experimental, intuitive, and interactive acts of everyday improvising did not occur as acts that are independent from the processes of thinking, planning, and knowing, but are rather all “meshed with and in” improvisatory practice (Sutton, 2021, p. 206). Therefore, our study highlights that everyday improvising is rooted in earlier experience, routine, and structure, rather than the loss of control or bodily freedom, by which improvisation is sometimes characterized (see also Krueger & Salice, 2021; Montuori, 2003; Sutton, 2021).

The aim in this study has not been to idealize drinking or overlook the problems related to it. However, we should not undermine the role and meaning of the drinking spaces we have explored in this article to the everyday lives of their users. They play a significant role in enabling different modes of being in their suburban neighborhood. This manifests both in the intangible sense of belonging and in the physical presence in these spaces, which are both crucial to the well-being and quality of life of our informants. The socio-spatialities of the drinking spaces provide relief from personal challenges and the stigma of the suburb, and thus, facilitates the regulars’ everyday being that keeps their life going. These findings indicate that the improvisations of our informants emerge as a reflection of their everyday lives, needs, and meaningful spaces, suggesting an alternative view to the image of suburban marginality that was presented at the beginning of this article.

Finally, we regard urban improvising as an understudied concept with a myriad of potential perspectives. We see everyday urban improvising as a continuance of the idea of tactics in public space (De Certeau, 1984), and the idea that tightly planned spaces can be loosened through everyday practice (Ameel & Tani, 2012; Franck & Stevens, 2006; Pyry & Tani, 2019; Tani, 2015). However, we also recognize improvisation as a practice of state and city officials (Hentschel, 2015; Kumar, 2021; Müller & Trubina, 2020) as they operate and draw lines between “a certain set of truths . . . vice and virtue, normality and indecency, urban order and disorder” (Valverde, 2003, p. 2). Nevertheless, there is much work to be done to realize these ideas of improvisation. Paying closer attention to liminal experiences in improvisation through context-dependent vulnerabilities (Sutton, 2021), or through the edges or overlaps of “fourth places” (e.g., Morisson, 2019), would be worthy of further research. The contribution of this paper lies in advancing more discussion on the conceptual and empirical understandings of everyday improvising, and the relationship between these understandings and different urban landscapes where individuals indiscernibly reinvent themselves and their spaces as they go along.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to our informants in Varissuo for participating in this research. We are grateful to professors Jussi Jauhiainen and Don Mitchell for their insightful comments and to the two anonymous reviewers for helping us to improve this article. We also thank our colleague Jenni Kuoppa, other members of the JUSTSPACES Research Network, and the steering group members of the project “Right to Suburban Space” for their valuable support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was part of the research project “The Right to Suburban Space” (2020–2022) and supported by The Finnish Ministry of the Environment and The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA) [The Neighborhood Programme 2020–2022].

About the authors

Mia Jaatsi is a doctoral researcher in human geography at the Department of Geography and Geology at the University of Turku. She is interested in ethnographic research on urban everyday life, public spaces, and questions related to inequalities, rights, and justice in the city. She is part of the JUSTSPACES Research Network in Finland.

Päivi Kymäläinen is an associate professor at the Unit of Social Research at Tampere University where she works within the profiling area of Sustainable Transformation of Urban Environments (STUE). She is also the leader of the JUSTSPACES Research Network. Her research interests include urban inequalities and justice, everyday urban life, the social construction of public spaces, (sub)urban development, alternative communities, and citizen participation.

ORCID

Mia Jaatsi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4525-0583>

Päivi Kymäläinen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7911-2838>

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