

# Rhythms of being together: public space in Urban Tajikistan through the lens of rhythmanalysis

Rhythms  
of being  
together

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify, describe and critically assess public space in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, recurring to Henri Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – The empirical findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork on a courtyard in a housing estate in Khujand in northern Tajikistan.

**Findings** – The paper argues that an analytic dichotomy between the private and the public realm conceals more than it reveals, for the Central Asian case at least. The rhythmanalysis framework is presented as a possible solution to the deficiencies of dichotomic categories.

**Originality/value** – Even if we find a series of scholarly works dealing with (post-)Soviet and/or Central Asian public spaces, they very scarcely provide a critical assessment of the roots and the usefulness of this concept for the regional setting they work in. The paper strives to close this gap and to present Henri Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis framework as a possible solution for overcoming dichotomic categories.

**Keywords** Cities, Post-socialism, Rhythmanalysis, Central Asia, Social values, Henri Lefebvre

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The present paper employs Henri Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis in an attempt to identify, describe and critically assess public space in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan. I believe that the rhythmanalysis framework can provide a useful remedy for the widely discussed shortcomings of the public space concept – particularly with regard to the local and regional specifics of the term. This is all the more salient since public space in Central Asia defies clear-cut dichotomies between public and private. Being influenced by both Soviet and “Islamic-Oriental” conceptualisations of publicness and privacy, Central Asian public space is primarily characterised by rhythmical blurrings, hybridities and multiple uses.

Indeed, the “unconsidered and untheorized” (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010, p. 575) use of the notion of public space has drawn criticism from a wide array of authors, such as, for instance, with regard to the condition of postmodernity leading to the death of the public sphere through the rise of neo-liberalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002); automobility (Putnam, 2000); digitalisation (Sassen, 2002; Graham and Wood, 2003); privatisation; and commercialisation/corporatisation (Zukin, 2000; Schmidt and Németh, 2010). Another body of critique particularly refers to the “simplistic black-and-white dichotomies of public/private” (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010, p. 575) and a number of proposals intended to overcome this issue have been put forward.

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Sheller and Urry (2003) argue that “public space” presupposes some kind of “private space” as its counterpart and therefore assumes an observable distinction between the public and the private realm. We have to be very precise about what we mean by “public” since “these notions [...] rest on a separate basis and presuppose a particular contrasting ‘private’” (p. 107) – or, in other terms, that where “there are in fact multiple publics [...] there might also be multiple ‘privates’” (p. 108). The authors furthermore criticise the static and often “regional” connotation of “public space”, which does not account for blurrings, grey zones and fluidities (p. 108).

A “static” understanding of public space risks thinking in dichotomic terms, which means building hierarchies which have dichotomies at their foundation – be it public vs private; male vs female; rationality vs irrationality; culture vs nature, etc. In this vein, dichotomies reproduce rigid hierarchising categories, to the detriment of procedural and multi-scalar approaches which would lend themselves as inclusive analytical categories for an assessment of socio-spatial processes in the region and beyond (Nagar *et al.*, 2002). Radical approaches go as far as to negate the existence of a boundary between the “public” and the “private”. One possible stance is to say that “surveillance and power [...] infiltrate the most ‘private’ realms of the family, the body and sexuality”, indicating that the boundary is but an “illusion [...] so that state power can be exercised over bodies” (Sheller and Urry, 2003, p. 112). This most famously relates to feminist concerns, which are salient beyond the European context and take a particular shape in the Islamic context of Central Asian cities.

Many attempts have been made to introduce a third category, beginning with the work of scholars such as Hannah Arendt (1958), who proposed a “social sphere” located between the public and the private, and Habermas (1990), who locates the “public” between the state and private interests. In this vein, Abu-Lughod (1987, p. 168) speaks of a “semi-private space, a third category between private and public which is found infrequently in sex-integrated societies but is often found in sex-segregated societies”. Alizadeh (2007, p. 411) presents “intermediary spaces at levels between two basic realms of public and private domains [...] [comprising] semi-public and semi-private spaces [...] mainly those associated with the women’s social realm”. Oswald and Voronkov (2004, p. 107) introduce the “public-private sphere, which [...] can be understood as a space between the official and the purely private realms. Sheller and Urry (2003, p. 122) respond in a rather polemical way, saying that: “Despite the heroic efforts of 20th century normative theorists to rescue the divide and diagnose the causes of its erosion, the patient has died on the operating table”.

Sheller and Urry’s statement is surely a call to conceptualise public space in ways which do not rely on a juxtaposition between the private and the public, but instead account for multiple, context-sensitive hybridities – what Simpson (2008, p. 809f) has termed an “ecological” approach, attentive to both “evental” and “contextual sets of relations”. Smith and Low (2006, p. 4) have pointed out the “very different meanings [of public space] in different societies, places and times”. In this vein, focusing on the built environment, Varna and Tiesdell (2010) have proposed a scalar model for assessing the “publicness” of a particular place based on criteria such as ownership (p. 580), control (p. 580), civility (p. 582) and physical configuration (p. 583). I would like to suggest that Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis approach could also be seen as a response to Sheller and Urry’s call, as an inclusive and non-dichotomising model for understanding public space, its qualities and its actors.

In the following section, I review conceptualisations of public space in pre-Soviet and Soviet times, and work out the blurrings and hybridities thus brought about.

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The institution of private property, established after the demise of the Soviet Union, remains weak with regard to these institutional and cultural legacies – all the more so when it comes to questions of space. Searching for a non-dichotomising approach to public space, this paper strives to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon through a rhythm-analytical approach. Doing so allows spaces to reveal their fluid character with regard to privacy and publicness, with oscillating morphology, users and purposes. However, this oscillation is neither chaotic nor accidental, but occurs with an hourly, daily, weekly, yearly, etc., rhythmicity. This rhythmicity is a product of societal negotiation, and therefore is subject to power relations. A series of illustrations of these phenomena is provided later in this paper, based on data gathered in fieldwork carried out in 2009, 2010 and 2014, consisting of open interviews and participant observation in a courtyard in a housing estate in the Tajik city of Khujand.

### Conceptualisations of public space in Central Asia

While there exists a series of scholarly works dealing with (post-)Soviet and/or Central Asian public spaces (Ioan, 2006; Alexander *et al.*, 2007; Rütters, 2007; Darieva *et al.*, 2011; Kaschuba *et al.*, 2012 among others), they very rarely provide a critical assessment of the roots and the usefulness of this concept for the regional setting in which they work (see, for instance, Rittersporn, 2003; Oswald and Voronkov, 2004). In the following, I will first look at “traditional” or “Islamic-Oriental” notions of the private and public realms which still shape categorisations of public space in the region to some extent. Second, I will discuss Soviet categorisations of privacy and publicness and how they have been rearranged since independence. It still remains to clarify the distinction between public space and the public sphere. Referring to Smith and Low (2006, p. 3), “public space” refers to “social locations” and “geographies of daily movements”; while the “public sphere” refers to “social relations” which produce “publics or public opinions” (p. 5). These two concepts are necessary for each other’s existence (Schmidt and Németh, 2010, p. 454), as they are bound in a dialectic relationship. In the following I will refer to both places and relations, since they cannot be disentangled, and their relationships might appear in new and different constellations.

#### *The Islamic-oriental public space*

In the following lines, I will turn to a brief description of blurrings and hybridities of public space in the context of Islamic-Oriental cities[1]. To be precise, the spatial arrangements in Islamic-Oriental societies are above all based on the concept of *mahram* (Alizadeh, 2007, p. 411), which generally includes closely related persons (by descent, growing up together or marriage) and sets strict rules for separating *mahram* women from the gaze of non-*mahram* men. Wealthy families would apply these rules through an almost total spatial segregation – that is by confining women to a series of rooms or a wing within the household. Servants would fulfil those duties which required interaction with non-*mahram* folk, such as shopping (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 168; Alizadeh, 2007, p. 411). The poor could not afford to enforce the rules in this way, and therefore relied on signs, codes and timing (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 168) – that is rhythmicity. Alizadeh (2007, p. 415), for instance, speaks of the paths which women would take to water wells. Although generally accessible to everyone, they would, by tacit agreement, not meet men *en route* in the course of the day, except during one short period in the afternoon, which would allow for socially accepted, surveilled

bride-seeking and courting. The characteristic street layout characterised by crooked pathways and numerous dead-ends also created particular spatial arrangements which allowed for enforcement of the necessary rules:

When densities are high and houses too small to contain the manifold activities women are supposed to do in them, the spillover space becomes appropriated as semi-private space and co-residents who might inadvertently have visual access are appropriated into a fictive kinship relationship to neutralize danger. Dress is an important part of the semiotics of space. (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 168).

The veiling of women can therefore be understood as an extension of *mahram* space to spaces outside of those uniquely accessible to people *mahram* to each other, such as the house or its immediate doorstep. The doorstep, and by extension the immediate neighbourhood, becomes the prime venue for female socialisation, their public space – generally in the course of the morning, when the household duties are done and most males have left the neighbourhood for work. Such arrangements are also found in contemporary Tajikistan, albeit in a modified form, in the old city as well as in Soviet-era housing estates.

The immediate neighbourhood – known as the *mahalla* in Central Asia and elsewhere – came to signify the essence of community, both male and female, the site of deliberation, community action and the reproduction of norms and values. Still, this smaller scale, local “public sphere” did not necessarily undergo a process of agglomeration up to the state level, as presupposed by its Habermasian ideal type. Rather, it contrasted the power of local social bodies with a weaker state (Sahadeo, 2007, p. 15), and led to the emergence of self-defence communities. Conversely, the “laissez-faire attitude of the state” (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 162) strengthened the neighbourhood by endowing it with infrastructural responsibilities, such as water management and street maintenance (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 163; Geiss, 2001, p. 101).

The most characteristic “Islamic-Oriental” spatial arrangement where public sphere functions come to fruition is the central mosque (*masjid-i jum'a*) and its forecourt, where Friday prayers are held and believers rhythmically gather in order to socialise and re-enact their bonds as members of one social body. Friday prayers, however, serve as a public sphere only for Muslims, thus excluding other religious groups from being part of the public in a predominantly Islamic city. On a more local scale, the same is true for the neighbourhood mosque, the so-called *masjid-i panjvaqtī*, whose name – “Five-times mosque” – refers to the five daily prayers, differentiating it from the central mosque where believers are expected to gather on Fridays[2]. This already hints at the importance of rhythms: places are being charged with public space qualities, rather than having them vested in them *ab initio*.

Further complicating the picture, mosques are almost exclusively male spaces, which points to a wide array of particular gendered spatio-temporal arrangements and the existence of distinct male and female publics. These gendered spatio-temporal arrangements apply, in various shapes, to other spatial features of “Islamic-Oriental” cities, including those in Central Asia, which therefore makes it very difficult to draw a clear line between the public and private realms. The following lines will take a closer look at these arrangements by considering the tea-house and the public bath.

The tea-house (*chaikhona*) is deemed an essential feature of the traditional neighbourhood and is a prime venue for male socialising, often located close to the neighbourhood mosque. Speaking of the public sphere in terms of deliberation, decision making and bonding, the *chaikhona* is “the place to be” (Dadabaev, 2013, p. 184). Still, this

is an exclusively male space, and in fact is largely a place for old men. This certainly reflects the role of elderly males as deciders and multipliers, then as today, but neglects the contribution of others – including both women and younger men.

The public bath (*hammom*) draws its importance from the necessary ablution prior to daily prayers – in addition to customary hygiene practice. The bath shows a gender separation based on rhythmicity (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 168) such as designating two days a week as reserved for women. This same rhythmicity also holds true for contemporary baths, both recent and those of the Soviet era. An interruption of this rhythmicity would be a severe infringement of established male-female interaction patterns[3].

### *Soviet categories of privacy and publicness*

With the establishment of Soviet rule in Central Asia, new ideas about the role of publicness and privacy came into force. First of all, the legal definition of what actually constitutes “the private” changed considerably. As Marcuse (1996, pp. 123-124) argues, the “socialist period began with the goal of the ‘abolition of private property’, but precisely what that was to mean was unclear. [...] [As] time went on, practice began to dictate theory rather than the reverse”. The legal system, which developed over the decades, distinguished “socialist ownership” – which concerned all land and means of production – from “personal ownership” – property, from which no profit was permitted to be derived (Marcuse, 1996, p. 129).

In this regard, the Soviet system was clearly based on a different set of values to the capitalist one: “Societal property, no less than private property under a capitalist system, was deemed ‘sacred and inviolable’, requiring the state’s protection” (Kotkin, 1995, p. 254). This reversal in the set of values had clear everyday life implications, as witnessed in a large-scale re-education programme using spatial means. One of the most visible examples of this was housing, which was reoriented “away from the family and towards the collective [...] so as to encourage an economy of resources and an ethic and practice of cooperation, making possible a new mode of existence” (Kotkin, 1995, p. 158). The *kommunalkas* are the best-known and best-researched aspect of this practice (see Messina, 1995; Utechin, 2004; Gdaniec, 2005; Evans, 2011 among others). The abolition of private space in terms of housing went along with the abolition of private space in terms of communication – by means of denunciation and the enforcement of homogeneous lifestyles.

Still, the boundary between the public and private realms was not clearly set. As Kotkin (1995, p. 159) argues, using the example of the gigantic Magnitogorsk plant in the Ural mountains, “although private ownership of buildings [...] was not universally abrogated, ‘expropriations’ [...] rendered the official status of dwelling ownership ambiguous”. However, in spite of the curtailment of formal property rights and strict procedures for allocating tenants to households, “owners” still had some say, something which was also true for Central Asia. In his novel *Peaceful Times*, set during the establishment of Soviet rule in Tajikistan in the early 1920s, Habur (1962, p. 75) recalls the “heroic” housing conditions of the time:

In the courtyards where the patriarchal Tajik families lived, gas stoves roared, and Russian women scolded light-haired suntanned children. Tenants lived in each and every courtyard. On the quick, they built wooden topchans (here: basic bed frames), they bought quilted cotton blankets and colourfully painted teapots. Twisting Russian and Tajik words, they somehow agreed with the owners, and built their family nests. [...] The people of the new city lived in cramped mud-walled huts, and sometimes even in tents, but they went to work in bright houses built of stone, with shiny floors and large windows (author’s translation).

One of my informants confirms this point, sharing the story of her grandparents coming to Khujand in the 1930s: “For twenty years they vagabonded from one private house to another. They arranged everything, painted the walls. Then the owners came and told them: ‘well, our son is getting married, you’ve got to go’”. It was only in the late 1950s that her family was able to obtain an apartment in a newly built block in the city centre.

The “thaw” in the mid-1950s coincided with the mass construction of housing blocks, and promised a spatial arrangement which allowed for much greater privacy, which in its turn also created a distinct space for communication – the famous night talks in the “kitchens of the intelligentsia” (Oswald and Voronkov, 2004, p. 106). At the same time, the mass housing programme brought the reintroduction of “Islamic-Oriental” spatial arrangements through the back door. Indeed, mass housing apartments were designed to support the emergence of nuclear families. After marriage, young couples were meant to move out to their own apartment, where they would be safe from their families’ influence (Stephan, 2010, p. 60). Nevertheless, there were a number of means of reproducing a gender-segregated spatial arrangement of the courtyard-house type. Apartment extensions were one possible solution (Sgibnev, forthcoming), with the kitchen and a “women’s room” located in the extended loggia. It was also common to observe an extended family occupying several flats in one staircase, which thus became a transitional, privatised space. Kotkin (1995, p. 242) describes these Soviet-era arrangements, saying: “the vast majority of people are simply forced to operate with only de facto property”. Humphrey and Verdery (2004, p. 189) confirms this view, stating that in a (post-)socialist setting we can observe a “relative absence of rules and regularised practices” with regard to property regimes. This supports the call for a non-dichotomising framework for public space analysis which takes blurrings and incongruities into account – and, most prominently, pays attention to informal and bottom-up modes of property regulation.

The defining role of private property within the capitalist mode of production must be acknowledged when conceptualising public space following the demise of the Soviet Union. The expansion of market relations to the global south in the course of the early 1990s, and in our case to the Soviet Union’s successor states, also meant exporting one particular understanding of private property by means of the transfer of legislation and norms. In any case, this transfer happened in an uncritical and locally insensitive way, and had a series of unintended effects (Brusis, 2010). This export also brought about a particular hegemonic and normative understanding of the public sphere, aimed at democratisation and nation-building; and of public space, hinting at a particular spatial arrangement such as squares, parks, public halls, libraries or museums, which are deemed “vital to advancing social justice” (Schmidt and Németh, 2010). These topologies, however, pick upon the ideal type of a western, European city, which is an export article in the same way as the laws and norms of the capitalist mode of production. This is witnessed by the wide array of democracy support initiatives, NGOs and programmes active in Central Asia, which, praiseworthy as they are, uncritically transplant western notions of public space to the region[4].

### **Rhythmanalysis as an entry point to post-Soviet spatial phenomena**

In the later part of Lefebvre’s career, he developed a preoccupation with the analysis of rhythms. His last major work, *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre, 2004), attempted to propose a general theory which would encompass his previous research on the critique of everyday life and the production of space. In this regard, we should see the rhythmanalysis

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framework as embedded in his general account of urbanisation processes and everyday life practices. An analysis of rhythms, he argued, would propose a framework for analysing the interlocking of spatial and temporal phenomena – “the relationships between different forms of movement and spatial arrangement, between durations and moments” (Highmore, 2005, p. 9). The outcome would be “a (Marxian) meta-theory of the Urban process”, as Harvey (1989, pp. 2-3) called it.

After presenting the city as the “projection of society on the terrain”, Lefebvre criticises and specifies his own definition: society, which “projects itself”, is thought of as “a social globality, a mode of production, a general code”, but this definition lacks a temporal dimension, rhythms. The “projection of society” would thus neglect historical differences between cities, such as differences in the division of labour (Lefebvre, 1972, pp. 64ff). Analysing rhythms is therefore necessary to grasp the “genetic code” of the urbanisation process, without narrowing one’s analysis uniquely to the topographical features of urbanisation.

Apart from the spatial dimension, rhythmanalysis serves as an entry point to a critique of everyday life. Lefebvre understands everyday life as a site of struggles and conflicts, and also the site of everyday alienation. Striving for rationality, capitalism “colonises” the everyday and subdues it to its needs, which is the key to its survival (Aronowitz, 2007, p. 135). The rhythms of everyday life have been subjugated by capitalism – for instance through the transformation of “cyclical” time into “linear” time measured by clocks, which have become instruments of domination (Aronowitz, 2007, p. 142). Following Lefebvre (2005, p. 11), we thus can distinguish between cyclical rhythms, associated with nature, and linear rhythms, as the former’s negatively connoted counterpart, associated with the socially imposed, disciplining, repetitive and exhausting rhythms of modernity. The superimposition of cyclical and linear rhythms of varying frequencies and amplitudes would form, following Simpson (2008, p. 816), a “polyrhythmia”. He continues by saying: “if these rhythms are in harmonious relation [...] this produces a ‘eurhythmia’ (a working ecology), but if these rhythms are out of sync [...] a fatal ‘arrhythmia’ is produced”. This is how we can, for instance, think about the breakdown of the Soviet Union: its rhythms faded after the shock of the 1990s and new ones are slowly emerging. In this regard, rhythms tell us both about the eventual and contextual sets of relations, and we have to look for instances of eurhythmia and polyrhythmia in order to understand moments of conflict and rupture.

Following Lefebvre’s engagement with the everyday, it is also on this level that rhythms are to be observed. To Lefebvre, “the everyday is the humble and the solid [...] which has no date. It is (apparently) insignificant; it engages and it troubles and yet it does not have to be said” (Lefebvre, 1968, pp. 51-52). Unconscious action therefore has astonishing potential as a source of knowledge about society and the individual. This echoes Bourdieu’s argument that “it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (quoted in Harvey, 1989, p. 241). In this vein, it is crucial to draw attention to the seemingly insignificant everyday life – to those “sociological trivialities with wide-ranging implications” (Schmid, 2010, p. 127) which Lefebvre saw neglected by his scholarly colleagues. Here he is echoed by Hann, who argues that for the study of post-socialist transformations, “it is essential to integrate the analysis of practices, what people actually do, and to explore how this is shaped by the beliefs they hold and the social relationships they maintain” (Hann, 2002, p. 29).

Even though they do not refer explicitly to rhythmanalysis, scholars of post-socialist cities pay close attention to rhythms bound in time and space. In this vein, Smith and

Timar advance the concept that cities in their region of interest display a greater degree of complexity than other cities where research could be conducted. They present an “incredible mélange of practices, rhythms and identities that flow through particular places; past and present landscapes seem literally to tumble over each other” (Smith and Timar, 2010, p. 122). Sykora has framed this “incredible mélange” as “asynchrony” on several levels: between institutional, social and urban transformations; between different city areas; and within the country – that is in regard to centre-periphery relations (Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012, pp. 44-49).

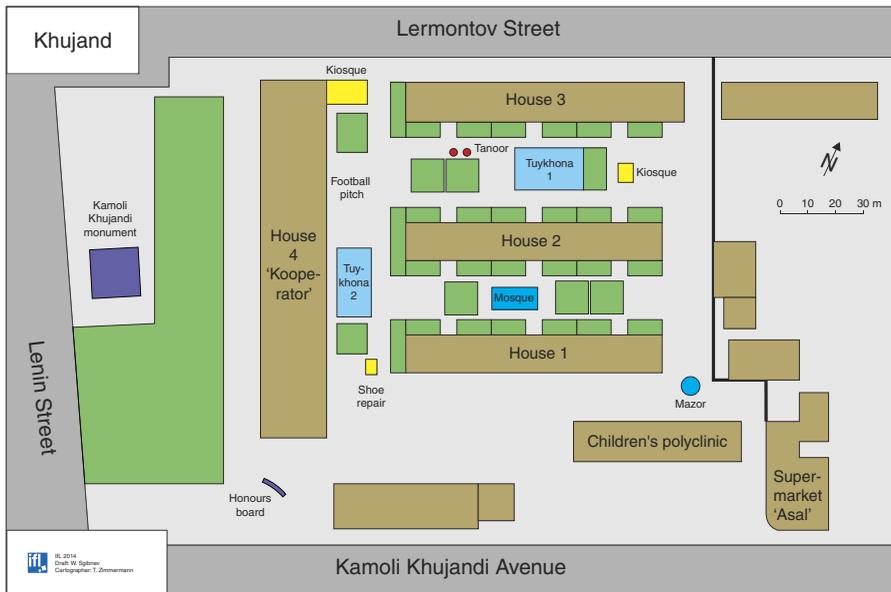
There are relatively few current scholarly works which refer to Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis framework as a tool for analysing (post-Soviet) urban processes. Yet the need for such an analytical framework was salient even prior to Lefebvre’s work. Scholars have repeatedly referred to Hågerstrand’s (1982, 1984) concept of time-geography, which is best known for its three-dimensional visualisations, while Edensor (2010, p. 2) argues that “(r)hythmanalysis can develop a fuller, richer, analysis of [...] synchronic practices in space”. In his edited volume (Edensor, 2010), he presents a series of practical applications for rhythmanalysis in social science. While rhythmanalysis is frequently linked to issues of corporeal mobility (e.g. with regard to commuting patterns), it can also be applied to studies of housing (Sgibnev, forthcoming) or soundscapes (LaBelle, 2010) and performances (Simpson, 2008).

### **Rhythmanalysis in action: discerning public and private spaces**

In the following, I would like to present how the rhythmanalysis approach can be used to discern the hybridities of public space and the public sphere, using the example of the Tajik city of Khujand. My interest in rhythmanalysis was fostered by a wish to embrace a procedural understanding of the city, to research urbanisation rather than conduct a piecemeal search for attributes of urbanity – thence my attention to rhythms bound in time and in space: the succession of morphological textures, of encounters between people, of seasons and festivities. Acknowledging the idea that “(m)eanings are in people, not in objects or things” (Basten, 2009, p. 7), collecting narratives about these meanings effectively provides insight into the social production of space (Sliwa, 2009, p. 661). I will provide examples of daily, mid-term and life-cycle rhythms and discuss instances of “eurhythmia” and “arrhythmia” which come to the fore.

Khujand is Tajikistan’s second-largest city, located in the Ferghana valley. It boasts an old town which spreads out on the left bank of the Syr-Darya River and a series of housing estates on the right bank. Lenin Street, running north to south, roughly bisects the city and connects these two major parts (for details see Sgibnev, 2011). The case presented here is a courtyard in the city centre, that is on the left bank, located between several four-storey blocks of Soviet-era housing (Figure 1).

A glance at Figure 1 suggests a neat distinction between public and private spaces – here are private homes with gardens attached; there is a playground; some shops in between; each entity with a defined purpose and character. I would argue, however, that this view is far too simplistic. First, the public-private boundary is blurred if not non-existent, as we have seen in previous examples from its Islamic-Oriental and Soviet conceptualisations. Moreover, assessing the public space of a courtyard in a Soviet era housing estate involves taking account of a series of particularities. It is publicly accessible and many passers-by use it for short-cuts, for example, as a route from the Panjshanbe bazaar to the headquarters of the city administration. However, some strict social monitoring takes place – albeit not as strict as in the dead-end streets of the old



**Figure 1.**  
Sketch of the  
analysed courtyard  
as of autumn 2010

town *mahallas*. Second, the purpose and character of the courtyard's public space change over time, and with particular rhythms, patterns and amplitudes – and this is where rhythmanalysis enters the picture.

### *Arrhythmia through formalisation*

I will now provide three examples of rhythms in the course of the day. The first is the football pitch in the north-west corner of the courtyard. At the time of my 2010 fieldwork, this was a bare asphalted area with two iron goals at each end. However, it was only used for its most evident purpose, that of a football pitch, roughly from 3 to 5 p.m., when school boys spent their free time there. Girls would usually spend their afternoons at home or on the doorstep of their staircase. Those boys who attended the afternoon session of school rarely used the football pitch in the morning hours – although they had free time to spend there. The main reason for this was the presence of elderly men who put out their chairs on part of the football pitch and sat, drank tea, chatted and carried out repair work. I see this as an example of a socially negotiated rhythmic arrangement: the cyclic rhythms of children playing and old men chatting confront the linear rhythms of school timetables. Interviewees remember this arrangement as having existed ever since the housing estate was built. Although not “socially equitable” – to the detriment of the afternoon school shift – I would still label this as an instance of eurhythmia, reflecting long-established social relations. This arrangement reflects both the “Islamic-Oriental” heritage of space qualities changing over time and the Soviet conception of property, which emphasises “the identity of the owners and their social relations” rather than formal ownership (Humphrey and Verdery, 2004, p. 191).

By the time I visited Khujand again in autumn 2014, the football pitch had become “formalised”. A concrete slab around 50 cm in height had been cast as the foundation for the football pitch, with a wire-mesh fence set up around the perimeter.

New goalposts had been installed, along with a pair of basketball hoops. Nevertheless, the formalisation and “beautification” of the location had not expanded the rhythmicity of its use to the benefit of the school boys. The elderly men had just moved two metres away, while the fencing prevented larger peer groups from gathering on the side lines in order to cheer, thus decreasing the attractiveness of the site. This formalisation and immobilisation of spatio-temporal arrangements is very much in line with Aronowitz’s (2007, p. 135) “colonisation” of the everyday by the “state”, and adds an additional burden of linearity to the site’s rhythmicity. Moreover, formalisation in spatio-temporal terms certainly hints at the formalisation of political and business structures: public authorities had virtually extorted money from nearby businesses for the beautification of the playground. This process can be framed as exemplary for the socio-economic transition which has occurred since independence. As Humphrey and Verdery (2004, pp. 195-196) notes: “while socialist modes of property were characterised by ‘weak or blurred boundaries [...] hardening and clarifying the boundaries is part of the process of creating stakeholders [...] but the result can also be [...] intermediate forms of ‘fuzzy’ or recombinant property”. Instances of state-imposed formalisation, however, appear as moments of “arrhythmia”, which bring the established spatio-temporal arrangements out of tune.

*Public spheres, rhythmically moving within the courtyard*

A second example of daily rhythmicity is the (elderly male) public sphere arrangement in the course of the day, which oscillates between the shoemaker’s shop in the south-east corner of the courtyard and the vegetable kiosk on the courtyard’s eastern side. The shoemaker’s shop is a tiny wooden hut, open from approximately 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and is run by a 60-year old man who commutes to Khujand from neighbouring Qayroqqum. Elderly men, most of them aged over 60, generally gather here from 11 a.m. to noon, just before lunch. They drink tea and chat with each other on narrow wooden benches, while the shoemaker carries out his business. Those who work drop by on their way to or from their jobs and stop off for a few minutes more in the late afternoon. In Soviet times the regulars worked in public service, for the security services or had their own small businesses. As the shoemaker’s shop is very regularly frequented during its opening hours by male and female customers of all ages, which always implies information exchange which goes beyond pure business transactions, it functions as a hotspot of the courtyard’s public sphere.

The vegetable kiosk is run by a man in his mid-60s. His family lives in an apartment opposite, yet he barely ever leaves his kiosk for home – first of all since his small business’s very generous opening hours are necessary for its survival. His uninterrupted presence at the kiosk is also the prerequisite for his second job as an unofficial guardian of the cars parked in the courtyard and of the (privately owned) plants and fruit trees planted around his kiosk, a service for which he regularly receives tips from his neighbours. At the same time he feels responsible for social control, such as calling children to order when they behave improperly and keeping an eye on passers-by – very much comparable to the function of gatekeepers in old town *mahallas* (see Abu-Lughod, 1987). Relatively calm throughout the day, the vegetable kiosk becomes the centre of (male) sociability in the evenings. Before and after the evening meal, men, many of them members of the local elite, and thus the most influential and best-connected among the neighbours, gather on the wooden platform, play chess and cards, occasionally drinking alcohol. Neighbours stop by on their way to the nearby supermarket and have a chat. The regular presence of community leaders gives this

rather informal setting an important community-building role – in the same vein as the *chaikhona* in the old town quarters. The kiosk meetings in the evening are thus central for local conflict resolution and decision making.

Female socialisation takes place alongside these male spaces, mostly in mid-morning, mid-afternoon and late evening in summertime, in between household duties. Visits to apartments predominate, yet the immediate doorstep – that is benches on both sides of the house entrance – also serve as venues for female socialisation, particularly when small children have to be taken care of. Women barely leave home after dark both because of considerations of decency and due to frequent electricity blackouts. However, men also rarely enter the courtyard during night time hours – except for a few young middle class men on their way to the internet café: the next generation of the public sphere also in Khujand. Keeping the above-mentioned examples of (mainly elderly male) sociability in mind, it needs to be stated that the public sphere moves from one location to another in the course of the day: men might spend early morning at the football pitch, late morning at the shoemaker's shop and evening at the kiosk. The clientèle of these meetings overlaps to some extent, thus ensuing continuity in the information process. At the same time, we have to conclude that formally private spaces such as shops and kiosks serve as sites where the public sphere comes to fruition.

#### *Public spheres without predefined spatialities*

One central institution of Khujandi's public sphere defies static spatial boundaries between private and public realms – the gap. Literally meaning “speech” or “talk” in Tajik, the gap can be described as an institutionalised communication format. Almost every (male and female) adult citizen takes part in one or several gap circles, each encompassing from a handful to several dozen members (almost all of them gender-segregated). Members might be neighbours or former classmates, they might share common interests, a common workplace or a common place of sociability, such as the men who sit by the shoemaker's shop or the kiosk described above. Members meet regularly for an hour or two, with rhythms generally varying from weekly to monthly, and take turns cooking[5] and/or inviting other members, thus creating strong bonds of mutual indebtedness[6]. Apart from eating and socialising, communication constitutes the central feature of these meetings:

In a friendly way (people) provide you with information which you will need at some point. This is why we become part of this flow (my *vливаemsâ v èto*) and we make an effort. When you meet someone, you have to tell him something which he might need. It's not about spreading gossip, there's an information transfer going on.

In this regard, the gap features as the central institution of the public sphere. It has its own rhythmicity, but lacks a defined spatiality. Members might meet in private homes, in courtyards, in restaurants or cafés, in the workplace or in the countryside (Kandiyoti, 1998; Dadabaev, 2013) – the content and relevance remain the same. While the (partly spatially defined) urban *mahalla* has lost most of its relevance as a site of information exchange and societal control, the gap – being an institutionalised site of information exchange – has taken its place. Because of its flexibility, the gap has withstood the rise of apartment housing and Soviet and post-Soviet tendencies to individualisation. In this regard, the gap appears as a rhythmic and flexible instance of the public sphere which does not presuppose or create a particular public place in order to come to the fore.

*Rhythms of life-cycles*

Life-cycle rituals in Central Asia have received wide scholarly attention, both inside and outside the region (Iřankulov, 1972; McBrien, 2006; Roche and Hohmann, 2011 among others). While Tajik scholars have focused on detailed descriptions of ceremonies and emphasised national particularities, Western scholars have increasingly analysed life-cycle rituals under the premise of a re-negotiation of modernity, torn between the Soviet heritage, western modernity and Islam. Life-cycle rituals (commonly referred to as *tuys*) refer to circumcisions, weddings and mourning rituals[7]. These *tuys* are essential for understanding rhythmicities, and thus also for understanding space production processes.

Apartment extensions, as mentioned above, are part and parcel of these rhythmic spatial arrangements (see Sgibnev, forthcoming). Yet, in the following example I refer to the phenomenon of party halls (*tuykhona*). In several courtyards in Khujand, large roofed steel carcasses can be found standing between the houses. These constructions are generally ten metres wide and 20 metres long and reach to the second or third floor of neighbouring houses. After prefabricated high-rises replaced the courtyard house as the main type of dwelling, life-cycle ceremonies could no longer take place in the traditional setting. In the “European” custom, weddings and the like took place in restaurants, yet for many Tajik families in the city, restaurants were too expensive and moreover did not provide the opportunity for subdividing the space into male and female parts. Weddings, therefore, continued to be celebrated in courtyards –now in the courtyards of housing estates. Tables were set up in a row and carpets on ropes divided the parties. The disadvantage of this arrangement was that it needed to be assembled and disassembled for every celebration, which was a cumbersome task. Due to these concerns, in the mid-1980s neighbourhoods began to set up permanent structures in courtyards, known as *tuykhonas*, which neighbours were able to use for a nominal fee. A particular advantage of *tuykhonas* was the fact that they had a small storage space attached to them, where tables, chairs, kitchenware, dishes and carpets were kept.

*Tuykhonas* were built using the *hashar* “collective work practice” (Marteau d’Autry, 2011, p. 279). In this line of thought, the life-cycle-related construction of *tuykhonas* is a collective, bottom-up initiative by neighbours. It not only emerges from the local community, it rhythmically perpetuates the community through common access to the celebration hall and common management of the space where the equipment is kept. However, the *hashar* practice did not take place at this neighbourhood level. First of all, help with preparations for a *tuy* are often assimilated to a *hashar* activity (Marteau d’Autry, 2011, p. 298). Also, mobilisation is not necessarily linked to a spatial community, such as a *mahalla*, but rather to kinship. Furthermore, construction was a singular event and there were no follow-up constructions which could perpetuate the *hashar* practice on the courtyard scale. Ultimately, the *tuykhona* structures themselves fell out of use very quickly. No wedding or circumcision *tuys* have been celebrated in the courtyards since roughly 1997. Instead, they have been moved to the professional *tuykhonas* which began to spread across the town, offering all-round packages with catering, music and decoration.

The abandoned *tuykhona* structures function as garages – they have a roof and can be locked, which makes them perfect for this purpose. The one occasion when they serve their initial, ceremonial purpose is that of death rituals, when they remain open to the family for three days in order to receive mourners and perform the necessary rites. Since it is imperative that these ceremonies take place at the home of the deceased, it is impossible to rent commercially run premises outside the courtyard for this purpose.

Life-cycle rituals can be understood here as “rhythms of deeply inscribed rites” (Simpson, 2008, p. 825), intrinsically cyclical rhythms directly linked to the human body, and concerning the occasion itself, such as circumcision, marriage or death. This was also true for participants, beyond their bodily presence at the rites, through participation in the construction of tents and *tuykhonas* for the male public, and in equally time-consuming and labour-intensive cooking activities for the female public. In recent years, this bodily involvement has been outsourced with the advent of commercially run *tuykhonas* and the linear rhythms of planning and scheduling which they bring about. The decline in bodily involvement came along with a decline in life-cycle rituals with regard to their public sphere function – although the rhythms themselves remained the same.

### Conclusion

With these examples I hope to have demonstrated how a rhythm-analytical approach can provide an analysis of public space production practices and overcome the analytical dichotomy between the public and private realms. The rhythm-analysis framework also offers an opportunity for a culture-sensitive analysis, since it does not resort to normative and hierarchising notions. Rhythm-analysis has allowed for an “ecological” approach, since we have seen rhythms reflecting both events and contexts.

The interrelation between rhythm and space is complex and multi-layered. Rhythms reflect social negotiations and power relations, and thus illustrate mechanisms of space production. With the football pitch, we have seen how state involvement has introduced arrhythmia into long-established spatio-temporal public space arrangements. The purpose of space management through customary law is, by implication, not to allow arrhythmia to occur. With regard to the public sphere of the courtyard’s elderly male population, we have seen how it shifts spatially over the course of the day, following a stable, eurhythmic pattern, which will surely shift in the years to come following the death or retirement of the shoemaker or the kiosk owner. We have also seen how the gap presents a particularly flexible rhythmic arrangement of the public sphere. It is not necessarily bound to a particular public space; public space rhythmically constitutes itself through the presence of its members and the purpose of their coming together. The cyclic rhythms of the gap have thus been not affected by the linear rhythms of Soviet and post-Soviet industrialisation and modernisation. The final example of *tuykhonas* has shown the reverse development: the linear rhythms of commercially run celebration halls have almost entirely degraded the cyclical rhythms of life-cycle rituals, which thus have lost their community-building public sphere character.

The rhythm-analysis framework has shown how categories of privacy and publicness are hybrid, blurred and not imperatively space-bound. Property is a cultural system, within which, as Humphrey and Verdery (2004, pp. 195-196) noted, “questions about ‘use rights’ are more important than about ‘ownership’”. Every attempt to introduce single-use and linearity to the courtyard’s public space constituted a loss to its public character.

### Notes

1. The term “Islamic-Oriental city” is surely a gross simplification which fails to acknowledge the large variety of urban realities found across predominantly Muslim societies. The term also implies that religion is the major single factor shaping cities in the region. The causal connections, however, are definitely not so straightforward (Abu-Lughod 1987, p. 162). Still, a series of particular spatial arrangements and spatial practices can be found, all of which relate to culturally embedded notions of privacy and publicness.

2. *Jum'a*, meaning reunion or congregation, and by extension – Friday.
3. This happened, for instance, when the Taliban occupied Kabul in late 1996. One of their first edicts banned women from attending public baths, in spite of a lack of running water in residential districts (Moghadam, 2002, p. 26). In this line of thought, societal modernisation can have adverse effects. The harsh measures taken by the Taliban thus have to be seen in the light of measures taken by the previous Communist government in favour of female “publicness”. In a time of crisis, the Taliban attempted to “put women ‘in their place’ partly to reinforce their control over women’s sexuality and partly to reinforce male ownership over the means of production” (Moghadam, 2002, p. 28).
4. For instance, the Dushanbe-based “Spaces on the Run” project, jointly funded by the Prins Claus Fund and the Goethe Institute Tashkent. For details, see: [www.soros.tj/en/announcement/662-spaces-on-the-run](http://www.soros.tj/en/announcement/662-spaces-on-the-run) (accessed 20 October 2014).
5. For male gap circles, the cooking obligation invariably consists of *osh-i palov*, the region’s traditional rice dish with mutton meat.
6. In rural areas, small-scale collection of money to be distributed to members in need is also common (Kandiyoti, 1998, pp. 570-571). Because of financial and time obligations, most people try to avoid becoming a member of too many gap circles.
7. These celebrations are major economic factors: requiring large amounts of money, they rely significantly on remittances from migrants working abroad. Citing the dangers of excessive conspicuous consumption, the government recently enacted a law which regulates marriage expenses in detail (for a discussion see Roche and Hohmann, 2011, p. 123).

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