

Ethnographies in Times of Corona Virus

Qianer Zhu

Zurich: Daily Life of Quarantine



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Since March 16, the Swiss government declared an “extraordinary situation” and a series of lock-down measures were taken. This story is based on an observation and documentation of a public space in a residential area. It attempts to tell how the pandemic lockdown has affected people’s daily life routine in Zürich.

Since the end of March, the spread of the Covid-19 virus in Europe and the US has reached the pandemic level. As a result, a series of lock-down measures were taken in Switzerland. On March 16, the Swiss government declared an “extraordinary situation”, instituting a *ban on all private and public events* and closing restaurants, bars, leisure facilities, and shops apart from grocery stores and pharmacies. On March 20, the government announced a nationwide *ban on gatherings of more than five people in public spaces*. It urged the public to stay home except to buy food or go to the doctor. Some city parks were shut and the police began enforcing the ban on groups of more than 5 persons (swissinfo, May 7, 2020).

On March 16, ETH Zürich started with online teaching. Since then, I spent most of my daily life at home. During most of the day, the only communication with the outside I had, was through the window near my working table. Through this window, I could have an overview of the inner courtyard of my residence. This is also one of the most important public space for the community. After watching through the window for many days, I found it interesting to see how the neighbors used this public space differently during the quarantine time. Therefore, I decided document this specific space and see whether the lockdown context would change its quality, and how the pandemic has affected people’s daily routine.

“Friday is my holiday now, so I can have time to play with my girl.”
(A young father, May 8th)



April 24th, Friday, 16:07
Photos of Family time © Qianer Zhu

April 24th, Friday, 15:54

May 8th, Friday, 15:30

One young father came here very often in the early afternoon with his baby girl. Through a short interview with him, I got to know that he is only working 80% every week due to the economic shutdown. It is a tool for the Swiss government to get over the economic crisis without having too many people unemployed. As a result, Friday had been a holiday for him, so he had time to come outside and play with his girl at 15:30 which usually should be working time.

“After the kindergarten was closed, families here were organized in groups and took turns to take care of their kids. For safety reasons, only the same group of kids are allowed to play together.”

(Teacher of kindergarten, May 14th)



May 7th, Thursday, 15:43
Photos of Family time © Qianer Zhu

April 22th, Wednesday, 16:23

April 3rd, Friday, 13:19

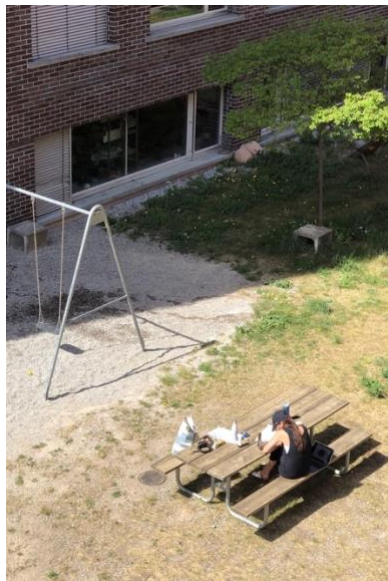
Right next to the playground, there is a kindergarten for the community nearby. Through the interview with one teacher of the kindergarten, I got to know that when the kindergarten was closed, families in the same residential building were organized in groups and took turns to take care of their kids. That is why on the photos there was usually only one adult watching while many kids were playing. For safety reasons, the members of each group remained the same, and only the same group of kids were allowed to play together.

“There was a problem with a girl who was not in any group, so she could not play with the kids in other groups, and she could not find anyone to play with. That was really sad.”
(Teacher of kindergarten, May 14th)

From her point of view, it was quite a challenge for the parents to work and take care of their kids at the same time. She herself still came to the kindergarten every day even after it was closed. She thought it was a good space where she could work and watch her kids play nearby at the same time. Also, it was nice for her to meet with the kids in kindergarten that came to this place to play when the kindergarten was closed.

“In general, there were fewer kids visiting this space after the kindergarten was closed. You see, the grass on the playground has grown back so well. It never happened before!” she said while laughing.

“It was not only an escape from work, but it made a bubble for ourselves where we all break our daily routine for what really matters.”
(Neighbor, May 28th).



April 17th, Friday, 14:22

Photos of personal time © Qianer Zhu



April 23rd, Thursday, 14:50



April 9th, Thursday, 17:10

There were also people who enjoyed the time of quarantine. Through observation, more privatized activities such as reading, writing or working alone took place in the public space during working hours, which hardly happened before. Due to the limitation of five people, the public space in the residence was more likely to be privatized and used privately.

“It is during quarantine when people suddenly realize how nice it is to have a space for our own.” One of my neighbors said (May 28th). “I feel like I am one of those people who feel nostalgic about the quarantine. I enjoyed the way it suddenly took us away from all the capitalism dark side. It was not only an escape from work, but it made a bubble for ourselves where we all break our daily routine for what really matters. For example, when people constantly asked how are you? They actually meant it. Also, people opened up to you and told you their deep feelings. For a short period, humanity took over pure business concerns.”

Although the pandemic lockdown happened suddenly, it seemed that people were gradually getting used to it, and even enjoyed the time and freedom with their family or themselves. After all, every coin has two sides. Through the change of daily life routine, we also better realized the ephemeral dimension of things that we used to take granted before, and learnt how to take advantage of what we have now.

This work was share by Qianer Zhu. It was conducted during a course at ETH, department of architecture, chair of sociology. With supervisor Dr. Sandra Guinand and Prof. Christian Schmid.