

URBAN AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL FUNCTION OF ACTUAL PUBLIC SPACE: A DESIRABLE BALANCE

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Abstract

A city's public space has undergone significant changes during the twentieth century. Those changes have affected both form and social function. Public space has suffered crises and revivals, but despite all its changes, it currently still plays a significant role for citizens. Mediterranean culture remains a valid tradition of public consciousness, which is evident in the urban space itself. The balance between aesthetic dimension —material form— and social dimension —use and meaning— is desirable in order to create an awareness of urban heritage and citizenship feeling. This article analyzes the main recent crises both aesthetic and social in public space in the western city. From this dual analysis, it discusses the main findings about perception of urban public space in current Mediterranean culture. In conclusion, the aesthetic and social dimensions of public space are not independent but interdependent by the confluence of several factors.

Keywords: public space, citizenship, social perception, urban aesthetic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Green area, square, park, boulevard, garden are not the same, but each one is integrated under the common concept of living public space. Current society tends to confuse these concepts. The concept of green area appears with modern urban development, beginning in the nineteenth century and the subsequent modern development of the early twentieth century. This concept is not qualitative, but quantitative. Therefore, this concept combines urban variables amongst themselves: m²/inhabitant, m²/housing unit, m²/m² built or similar, according to the different regulations in each country or region. However, the concept does not take into account the factors related to public perception, it is just a quantitative forecasting of urban planning. As such, it is not possible to speak of an urban plaza, park or garden.

Simultaneously, one of the most frequently discussed themes in many cities is the confusion between urban plaza and garden. Mediterranean cities have been both types, but they exist separate. Current culture tends to unify them under the general concept of urban public space. The plaza originates in the agora in ancient Greece, and in the forum in ancient Rome. An urban plaza is always a public place,

open to the city, hardscaped, almost empty, devoid of vegetation and any permanent civic use (Favole, 1995). Instead, a garden has a biblical origin —Garden of Eden— and even in the emergence of post-industrial bourgeois society of the nineteenth century, it is always private. Gardens are closed, fenced in, and not paved. It is provided with abundant vegetation, decorated with sculptures and designed to give pleasure to the senses (Assunto, 1988). The idea of evocation, mystery and the concept of the Sublime, characteristic features of Romanticism and its way of thinking, are variables that are part of a garden and its aesthetic appreciation. The garden trees have functional criteria as shade, moisture or wind shelter. Furthermore, vegetation improves environmental perceptual quality: landscape, color or acoustic (Bailly, 1977). But trees also have benefits above and beyond their aesthetics, representing collective meaning, such as cultural identity or historical significance: “Trees have a very deep and crucial meaning to human beings. The significance of old trees is archetypal; in our dreams very often they stand for the wholeness of personality” (Alexander et al., 1977).

Public gardens in Mediterranean cities have different origins. Some have been newly created, but most have arisen from changes in land ownership and public openness of some private gardens. This case would be especially common in the post-industrial society and urban transformations of the nineteenth century: demolition of city walls (in all of Europe), planned urban reforms (Nash in London and Haussmann in Paris) and development of new urban models (Vienna’s Ringstrasse and Barcelona’s Ensanche). Other nineteenth-century gardens have their origin in the transformation of old medieval plazas, in order to meet the leisure needs of new urban social classes. All of these urban spaces have evolved throughout history as quality urban spaces and places for citizens to enjoy city life, acquiring civic character identity acknowledged by the citizens (Colesca and Alpopi, 2011). In fact, some contemporary urban interventions on romantic nineteenth-century gardens have transformed the original playful use into civic use. These circumstances have led in many cases to citizens perceiving and interpreting gardens as urban plazas.

2. THE CRISIS OF URBAN DESIGN

New urban designs and current urban interventions rarely have quality. Defects such as nostalgia, horror vacui, cultural misunderstanding of abstract language, lack of dialogue between urban art and public space, or urban fetishism, are common problems that evidence that poor quality.

Nostalgia is a feeling that destroys modern thought in art. This feeling also applies to urban aesthetics. We must consider that the most publicly visible part of the city is made up of the architectural facades and the design of public space. In both cases, the historical and cultural essence of each place has often been neglected in favor of a nostalgic collective imagination as trivial as it is unjustified. Nostalgia

is cause and effect of social desire. It is a part of the influence of the media on popular culture: "Trading strategies based on nostalgia and recovering the past with narrative architecture and revivals tend to cancel the distinction between yesterday's and today's urban scene, between present and past" (Amendola, 1997). In that sense, during the last decades of the twentieth century, urban design has maintained the use of an anachronistic aesthetic easily recognizable in popular culture. This way of thinking has resulted in a banal image of public space that has demonstrated a lack of urban culture and a fake collective memory. As in much of poor architecture, nostalgia and historicist fashion have also affected the design of urban public space. The easy resource of applying historicist criteria based on the recovery of past forms has been prevalent in all European cities, especially those of Mediterranean culture.

Another symptom of aesthetic crisis of contemporary public space is the horror vacui, fear of empty space or "hypertrophy of the dream of inhabiting all the hollow objects in the world" (Bachelard, 1958). The Modern Movement of the early twentieth century exposes the "abandonment of history" in its aesthetic ideals (Montaner, 1993), and simultaneously an abandonment of what is public, which is replaced by what is collective. The early twentieth century urbanism, obsessed with zoning and progress, had forgotten history and, by extension, the classic historical city. Europe's classic historical cities have bequeathed us an important legacy, an urban heritage present in form of public space, revealing the true soul of the city. However, for the Modern Movement, public spaces of urban centers were interpreted as obsolete places. The Modern Movement had no tradition of an urban public space project until mid-twentieth century. Therefore, there is a lack of mastery of working variables. That lack of experience affects the physical variables: pavements, topography or street furniture; but it also affects the phenomenological experience, such as light, sound, sunlight or general comfort. This matter becomes more important because of the boundary between public and private space, a principle based precisely on Roman law and Mediterranean culture. This circumstance has boosted a forced role of public space design, filling it with various objects in order to give substance to the space. However, urban public space is in essence a free space: therefore, it does not need that form of substance. The aesthetic crisis of some public spaces has been overcome by a display of objects and materials, which has only had disruptive effects for the correct user's spatial perception.

In the XXI century, abstract aesthetic remains largely misunderstood for society, even for those with a high cultural level. In urban contexts, the contrast of an abstract public space in front of a figurative environment produces an element of surprise in society, characteristic and common of all artistic avant-gardes. Indeed, the deployment of figurative architectonic language in historical public space and the

use of geometry is an appropriate combination that can produce a surprise from an aesthetic point of view.

Further visual evidence that demonstrates the aesthetic crisis of public space, is the lack of dialogue between pieces of public art —sculptures, monuments and other urban artifacts— and the space itself in which they are established. Art on public space, unlike other art forms, is usually designed for a specific location and not for everyone. This container-contained relationship is attached to the aesthetic value of the artwork. The location cannot be universal when the relationship between art object and public space is conceived at the same time. When that strong relationship between object and space is altered, the whole basis of creation is lost and there are problems of scale and proportion, static or dynamic observation and accessibility to the work of art. All of this does nothing but to alter its rationale, its aesthetic message and its truth. Everything becomes an urban absurdity: “the monument, as the Latin etymology of the word indicates, is an attempt at the tangible expression of permanence or, at the very least, duration” (Augé, 1992). An example of this would be most of the ornamental fountains in actual public places, which have gone from being identifying features of the place to be used as an object to fill the urban space. Fountains are not particularly conceived for each public space, but standard models are chosen without personality, within a catalog indifferent to the environment in which they are located.

Finally, in relation to this matter, the phenomenon of urban fetishism appears in the contemporary city: objects of worship, attraction for a community that can be found in the aesthetics of cities (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). Urban fetish may appear when deleted historical objects are replenished, while whose current function would be obsolete: for example, old music kiosks and unused decorative fountains, reduced to mere objects of worship; this is even worse when the fetish is manufactured nowadays but mimics the original, falsifying completely the aesthetic result. In this case, the sense of authenticity is broken, that is to say, the intrinsic virtue of what has own-nature. Authenticity is what constitutes an entity by itself —autos-hentes— and, among other consequences, its originality is universally recognized. By contrast, when originality is pursued as a mere effect outside of authenticity, everything usually ends in an urban fetish.

During the mid-twentieth century, the main critical theories of modernity trends argued for a strategy of reclaiming public space as a generator of the city. Since then, major revisionist and critical theories of rational urbanism have sought new urban languages. In the case of the urban public plaza the interest for the quest of a language and the design itself have surpassed that of the own function and use of the plaza (Favole, 1995), that which has in turn fueled the social crisis of public space. From this approach, we have considered four fundamental urban cultural trends that have influenced the design of urban

space: Contextualism of the 50s, the Townscape of the 60s, the Italian Tendenza of the 70s and the postmodern fashion of the 80s.

Contextualism in the 50s is formulated and analyzed by Montaner (1993). This theory is, to a certain extent, rooted in the continuity of Modernism, however not following the purist path of its aesthetic ideas but rather framed in local traditions. The critical turn with regard to the positivist radicalism of the Athens Charter and the reaction of the phenomenological critical currents headed by Walter Benjamin (Sæter, 2011) is echoed in the humanization of modern architecture of this urban contextualism derived from the rise of social sciences during the period. Contextualism unfolds itself as an independent current of the urban landscape movement characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture embodied in the Townscape during the sixties of the past century. The urban landscape can be traced in the artistic tradition of the city raised by Camillo Sitte (1965 [1889]) in the late nineteenth century that would be seminal over later authors and movements such as Christopher Alexander, The Situationist International, Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino and other members of Morphologism, Rob Krier or the author of the Townscape treaty itself (Cullen, 1971).

Aldo Rossi (1975) was to become the main theoretician of the Italian Tendenza in the seventies. The reflection on the city and its public spaces within the Tendenza resumes a classic static approach strongly related to surrealist painting of De Chirico's Piazzes. But the early crisis of this movement may be founded in its retrospective look with regard to the so pretended modernity since there was a return to static vision and a desire for monumentality, firmness and permanence characteristic of academic architecture, eluding the more ephemeral and lightweight architecture proposed by Modernism (Montaner, 1993; Hays, 1998).

With respect to Postmodernity, different trends have been developed encompassing those focused in the revivalism of historical epochs and others challenging the modernist canon. It is for this reason that the term should not be addressed without a cultural context. Post-modern architecture is interpreted as that used to designate certain tendencies of architecture that are markedly historicist, hedonistic, eclectic or rich in quotations. This historicist architecture perfectly fits within such a mass reaching and popular postmodern culture. However, not addressing its epistemological side (Jameson, 1984; Lyotard, 1986), nor its anthropological approach (Augé, 1992), nor its sociological facets (Amendola, 1997), nor its political or economic implications (Turner, 2002), but on a strictly architectural plane.

3. THE SOCIAL CRISIS OF PUBLIC SPACE

In the current public perception of urban public space, both the aesthetic and social crisis have influenced it. Postmodern thought of the last decades of the twentieth century has had two important social implications: individualism and the rise of privacy (Jameson, 1984; Lyotard, 1986; Amendola, 1997; Turner, 2002; Sequera and Janoschka, 2012). The main urban consequence has been the proliferation of housing models based on the preference of private ownership instead of public space (Rogers and Gumuchdjan, 1997). These urban models were implanted strongly in American culture and were imported to Europe in the late twentieth century, where they developed rapidly. These models are characterized by isolation of the individual from society, isolated single-family housing against collective typologies, and private property as the habitual norm. Public spaces are just the roads, and its design is intended for preferential or exclusive use of vehicular traffic. Sometimes even these are private. There are no community spaces and any interactions between neighbors are developed privately. Opposing this model, the European —especially Mediterranean— tradition of compact city policy is based on the role of public space and collective life. However, this tradition has been displaced by the new principles and criteria of privacy above all. Thus, urban public space ended up entering into a deep crisis of identity, leading to the emergence of privatized public spaces (Amendola, 1997; Borja and Muxí, 2003; Németh, 2012) in form of shopping malls and entertainment centers.

These places present radical differences with real public spaces: real public space promotes social integration, while privatized public space generates social exclusion. Real generates urbanity, even "public space is the city itself" (Borja and Muxí, 2003), while privatization creates the segregation and disintegration of the city. True public space is intended for citizens, while privatized space is designed for clients. True space has its own identity, while privatized space is neutral: there is no urban personality and its main objective is to attract customers. True space is economic from an urban approach, while privatized space dramatically increases the needs of urban mobility. In real public space is possible to improvise any urban activity, as uncontrolled or surprising it may seem, while in privatized space only planned activities for which it was specifically designed can take place, the surprises are designed only for commercial purposes and everything is permanently under control.

All these matters have led to a deep social crisis of real public space, with which the twentieth century ended. Also, the abandonment of traditional market in the city is a fact. It has reduced the use of public space, breaking the continuity and interaction between heterogeneous urban uses. This results in a parallel abandonment of the aesthetic factor of public space, relegated it to a simple functional purpose, indifferent to all artistic emotion. In some cases, it has reached absurd levels: creation of new public

spaces that are almost unused, while historical spaces are irretrievably degraded. All of this has boosted the aforementioned housing models that restrict collective activities to shopping or entertainment, concentrated in huge closed containers without identity which turn their backs to the formation of the city.

Design errors have also contributed to the social crisis of public space. For example, a common criterion has been the heritage of modern rationalism consisting of zoning space to separate the uses and activities. This is sought to rationalize public space, as if it were organizing functions like a private space. But the complexity of the city, specifically the urban experience, has proved that it is not always according to the functional standards. Urban phenomenon is constituted by a complex and changing variable, which are citizens (Norberg-Schulz, 1971). Public space functions as meeting place par excellence, and also the forum with the highest level of publicity throughout the city. It is the place where occurs most citizen interactions, where it is circulated and where it develops all kinds of urban activities. The initiatives of urban society to improvise alternative uses, independent of those provided by the design of public space, have put in crisis the inherited principles of modern rationalism, to the point that today, the versatility and flexibility of use of public space is accepted as an index of quality in the result of its design.

4. WHAT IS THE CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC SPACE TODAY?

The world around us is not what we see, but as we perceive it. Also, what our senses perceive has an important influence on our personal culture and memory. This set of factors is what creates the sense of place on human perception (Minea, 2012). Perception is not something universal. The cultural background and previous experiences of the individual bring diversity to the perception of things and causes it to become a sensory rational experience on par with personal (Bailly, 1977, 1986).

For example, the perception of the size of urban elements may depend heavily on the position and relationship with the environment in which they are located. Relative size perception at a distance is best at eye level. The size of trees can be perceived as relative according to size of space where they are planted. In small urban environments, the proximity of the built environment enhances this perceptual effect. Medieval churches and cathedrals of any old European downtown maintain their visual impact, although nowadays they are not the tallest buildings in any contemporary city. The narrowness of medieval urban fabric causes this perceptual effect. Sunlight is also important in urban perception: shady plazas have a very different perception than sunny plazas.

Although aesthetic perception of public space may depend on all senses (Chen, Adimo and Bao, 2009), the most direct is the sense of vision. Thus, visual aesthetic perception of urban public space is formed by three variables: city planning, architecture and design of public space itself (García-Doménech, 2014). First, city planning creates or renews urban fabric through urban planning systems. It proposes building typologies that result in a certain urban morphology. Indirectly and subconsciously, it is the first impression that urbanite perceives. This makes it a different urban landscape from the old medieval downtown, postindustrial urban renewal or modern suburbs. It should be clarified that this perception is independent of the aesthetic architectural language and public space design. Second, architecture also is involved in shaping the townscape. The facades of the buildings are the visible part of the architecture from the public space, so it also influences in shaping the townscape. A set of more or less decorous facades are perceived as a stage background. This influence can also be seen at street level, precisely where human flows and interactions between public and private space are greater. For this reason it is different, for example, streetscape of traditional shopping premises, one-floor housing or simple fences, separating public from private properties. Finally and thirdly, there is the aesthetic design of public space itself (Vlad, 2009). This aspect is the more immediately perceived by an urban observer. It is the first impression of the city, both by proximity as palpability of the observer. When we first arrive in an unfamiliar city and step on the street, the pavement is the first thing that we usually see: pavers, asphalt, tile or concrete. At that time, we perceive the presence or absence of trees and street furniture. Then we see other signs like commercial advertising at the street level, and finally we looked up, and see the nearest buildings to us.

But despite all previous perceptual aspects, one of the most important qualities that cause a shift in people's perception of public space is not aesthetic but social: public space needs people's use —the more intense, the better— to be alive as such (Borja and Muxí, 2003; Amati and Yokohari, 2006). Perceptual differences between socially active space and empty space are radical. Empty public spaces increase the perception of size and distance, whilst in those that are crowded and full of objects, size appears reduced and distance appears closed. The relative position of the observer can also alter this perception: the vision of a crowded public space from an elevated position appears greater compared to an empty one. This is not only by vision, but also by the other senses, such as hearing. For example, the noise produced by people and their footsteps contributes to increasing the perceived size of public space. Although the experience of perception is something personal, we must consider that from an anthropological point of view, social and cultural factors transform mere collective spaces into existential spaces (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Haddad, 2010). The perception of human interactions is precisely the experience that allows identify the personality and character of the city.

The center of public space appears as an important issue in urban discussion emerged after the Modern Movement. It is no longer a necessary focus of visual attraction and at the same time, it tends to be empty. Many of these discussions were modeled on Camillo Sitte's urban aesthetic theories (Sitte, 1965 [1889]). By studying historical cities, Sitte advocated removing any object at the center of plazas both for aesthetic and functional reasons. Later interpretations of this urban theory (Cullen, 1971; Rossi, 1975; Alexander et al., 1977; Alcock, 1993; Montaner, 1993; Hays, 1998) have linked aesthetic and social perception: urban activity takes place at the edges of plazas and not in its center. Indeed, the accumulation of elements of interest, activities and centers of attraction at the edges of plazas, generates a deliberate tension between them that determines the level of activity in public space. A plaza with many attractions at the edges and with empty center is an active plaza: interconnections and interrelations between its edges are the reason why the entire central area of public space is a hotbed of urban activity, in which all kinds of heterogeneous activities occur. In that sense, it is more important both as the activities at the edges involves public space, and as public space involves the activities of attraction: edges are transitional spaces between the strictly public —central space of plaza— and the strictly private —buildings around plaza—. This idea of strengthening edges of public space and emptying of objects central space, justifies the proper functioning and social validity of historical arcaded plazas common in all Europe. These plazas are conformed by loggias that produce the transition between public and private space, improving urban activity.

Sound is another factor that links aesthetic and social perception of urban public space. Concern about environmental sound quality of our cities has not stopped increasing in recent times: urban ambient noise is currently identified as one of the problems of contemporary cities. There is an interpretation of noise in cities as clearly negative: it has social, or more specifically, socio-cultural character. But we can also speak about urban sounds in a positive direction. Public spaces have their characteristic sounds, which need not be disruptive and can be enjoyable. Moreover, they can help strengthen the sense of place inherent to a quality public space: for example, the ringing of church bells, the flapping and murmurs of birds in the plazas, the rustling of the leaves of the trees in the wind on the avenues and boulevards, water fountains and water jets, street musicians, and even the simple sound of the walkers' footsteps. All of this helps create certain sensations in public space. The perception of these urban sounds in public space is necessary for a quality urban environment, since in our cities "Both sonically dead spaces as saturated by noise, are not appreciated" (Bailly, 1977).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Neighborhoods are areas of the city characterized by their own identity, clearly perceived both by its inhabitants and visitors. In the constitution of that identity, both aesthetic and social components play an important role. Urbanites seem to have an almost intuitive necessity to identify the area in which they live: "People need an identifiable spatial unit to belong to [...]. They want to be able to identify the part of the city where they live as distinct from all others." (Alexander et al., 1977). Therefore, public space in suburban communities needs to reach its identity and enhance its aesthetic and social perception, greater than that of the public spaces of the city's central core. In central public spaces, that identity is already part of a citizen's heritage. However, the creation of public spaces in new urban tissues, where there are still no signs of historical identity, has resulted in the need to "invent the place" (Augé, 1992). The success of the invention of the place and its materialization is the factor in which lies most of the good perception of urban public space.

Social perception of public space is essential for its aesthetic appreciation. Public space cannot be interpreted from an aesthetic point of view until it has previously been interpreted from a social point of view. Only when society identifies or defines the role of public space, then take ownership of it and begins to worry about its aesthetic quality. But the opposite is also true: the aesthetic quality of public space encourages people to use and live it, therefore improving their social perception. This iterative process works under the condition that there must be a desirable balance between both perceptions. High social but low aesthetic perception of public space can produce restlessness in society, urban claims and unpredictable effects on urban policy. Conversely, low social but high aesthetic perception of public space can produce an effect of museum piece or tourist attraction, but it is ignored by citizens. The purpose of a public space —apart from its urban function— is to be fully identified by their users, achieve its own character, be accepted by citizens, and that they consider it an essential part of the city itself. The success in achieving this objective is the result of a complex set of social, historical, political, economic and cultural variables. If we start with an adequate balance between social and aesthetic perception of public space, we will facilitate to achieve it and to improve the city as a whole.

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