Planned To Be Reclaimed: Public Design Strategies for Spontaneous Practices of Spatial Appropriation

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Abstract

Several contemporary studies on public space focus on its loss, in relation to an increase in people's disengagement from these types of spaces. Since the 1960s, a considerable part of urban culture has attempted to develop strategies for people to re-appropriate public space and to 'inhabit the city again.' This has defined a line of research that, although now consolidated, is still little known in its complexity. In the effort to create a unified framework for the different attempts through which architecture has historically responded to the rise of spontaneous forms of urban creativity, this paper outlines a short history of design strategies aimed at enabling and encouraging different forms of spatial appropriation. It also highlights a gradual shift from prescriptive and repeatable rules to site-specific approaches, prompting a new disciplinary convergence between urban planning and design, interior architecture, industrial design and public art.

Keywords: Urban design, Interior architecture, Spatial appropriation, Public spaces

1. Introduction

According to what emerges from a series of books published by Henri Lefebvre from 1963 to 1974 as part of his twenty-year study about everyday life, the sense of mutual belonging that develops between subjects and the spaces they inhabit would be essentially determined by their own process of production, or by the direct possibility that subjects have to control them, both socially and individually. From this point of view, the nature of urban space would be simply defined by the variable relationship between its use value and its exchange value, or between it being a collective artwork and it being a market product. An artwork is unique and irreplaceable, created through a process that, while implying some kind of work, is not limited to it. Contrariwise, a product is the result of repeatable and serialized gestures, thus it is repeatable and reproducible too (Lefebvre, 2007: 70). Therefore, a city becomes a product when its inhabitants, voluntarily or not, do not take part in the production of its space; whereas, a city as an artwork represents a domain in which space does not respond to the logic of profit, in favor of a symbolic value able to generate a sense of common civic belonging (Lefebvre, 2007: 75). In this sense, the rupture between people and the production of their urban space would emerge for the first time with the beginning of the industrialization process, whose mechanism tends to repress their inalienable 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968). According to Lefebvre, the city has to be reclaimed through a non-violent urban revolution capable of liberating subjectivities in public space, with a symbolic act of collective re-appropriation that, although intellectually fascinating, still struggles to find a concrete spatial definition.

This process of re-signification begins to appear intelligible only after the publication of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), which quickly became an essential reading both for sociologists and architects. According to de Certeau, the production of urban space is not only determined by the institutional 'strategies' of planning, design and management, but it is also made of countless 'tactics' – both individual and collective – that take the shape of everyday practices aimed at reclaiming public spaces through techniques of socio-cultural production. Thus, with the inclusion of people's personal spheres, cities explode in a multiplicity of uses, which gradually draws the attention of planners and designers on people's informal actions.

However, de Certeaus' acknowledgement of the importance of such spontaneous practices proves crucial to an understanding of the need for personalization, which public space should satisfy. Nonetheless, according to a growing number of scholars, this argument is also very often put forward to support the thesis of the futility of architectural design as a tool for improving urban quality, in favor of other practices, which are developed in between public art and participatory process. In most contemporary studies on public space, informality seems to be a quality both of the social process and the spatial construction of such places, and a precondition of spontaneity in the definition of hospitable spaces (Sola Morales, 1995; Doron, 2000; Papastergiadis, 2002). Although fascinating, this perspective implies a serious risk of underestimating the common opinion according to which it is acceptable to let these spaces go, taking a step back from the temptation to interfere in their destiny (Lang, 2008: 223). In this case, the proposed solution would only further fuel the problem, as a lack of interest and a state of neglect represent the first reasons in the actual crisis of public spaces (Madanipour, 2010: 239).

Following this belief, a significant part of urban design has aimed at identifying some concrete design tools that enable and encourage different forms of spatial appropriation, thus defining a line of research that, although now consolidated, is still little known in its complexity. Therefore, this paper aims at creating a unified framework for the different attempts through which architecture has historically responded to the rise of spontaneous forms of urban creativity. It describes how public space design redefined its strategies, and approaches the idea of 'making places' for the community, increasing the possibilities of intervention for users. It also focuses on the gradual shift of urban planning and design towards other scales, instruments, and objectives, in a sudden disciplinary convergence with interior architecture and industrial design. Nowadays, in an effort to enhance the individual's ability to recognize, define and transform the space they inhabit, public design increasingly takes the shape of a projective process, reversing the traditional formal definition of urban architectures.

2. An urban design counter-theory

In a widely read article published in 1980 by *Town Planning Review*, Bob Jarvis effectively describes the increasing awareness of the centrality of users' experience within the disciplines related to urban design. According to the author, since the first half of the 1960s it is possible to recognize a new tradition that rejects the association of urban facts with artistic phenomena, and emphasizes their fundamental social character. This would result, for the first time, in Kevin Lynch's (1960) demonstration of an existing gap between the physical structure of the city and its actual use, as well as between the intentions of designers and the perceptions of users. This could represent the base for the development of a counter-hegemonic theory concerning urban design taking shape – albeit in embryo – from Jane Jacobs' (1961) work.

As the journalist and anthropologist writes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, it is indeed not possible to conform the contradictions of reality to the general model that has erased any chance to live the city since the mid-nineteenth century (1961: 3). Her attack on the orthodox modernism of the Charter of Athens (1933), however, is not only an unprecedented change of perspective about urban design, but is also a seminal collection of concrete proposals to give people the opportunity to 'live the city again.' Assuming that the destruction of urban livability is attributable to the disappearance of variety – which is the general principle of urban operation – the author offers some operational tools, such as the mix of primary uses and buildings of different ages, small blocks, and the increase of population density. Although these instruments found only sporadic practical applications, thanks to Jacobs, concepts such as street life, diversity and livability gradually started to replace the previous criteria of separation and specialization, in a total redefinition of the urban lexicon that in few years – thanks to the 'translation' of architects and planners such as Jan Gehl and William Whyte – was completely endorsed by the culture of design.

Since 1971, for example, thanks to Gehl the concept of 'human scale' ceases to refer only to a symbolic dimension that projects must meet and begins to identify an area of effective intervention. In fact, with the term 'scale' Gehl means the measure of man that public space architecture must be able to accommodate in order to allow people to appropriate it, define some portions of personal territories, and dwell in them in a transitory way. For this reason his research – both theoretical and by design – articulates in a truly revolutionary

way the process of urban planning and design around some issues that actually affect the conformation and the equipment of open spaces, such as the quality and the position of seating, the articulation and the permeability of borders, or the potential of visual openings.

Since 1975, a similar approach has also been implemented by New York's Project for Public Spaces, which, through observations, surveys, interviews, and urban workshops, tries to transform public spaces around the world in 'places for the community' (Whyte, 1980: 3). It is from this experience that, thanks to William Whyte's direct contribution, the New York school of urban design has developed. Whyte's conceptual horizon focuses, as does Jacobs', on the concepts of density, street life, road alignment, integration and functional mix. However, his operational tools deal with the small scale able to shape welcoming open spaces. Once again, the need for urban planning to gain some design tools belonging to different disciplinary traditions is emphasized. This would allow the transformation of abstract spaces in places in which to live, and encourage people to 'regain' their urban spaces, both as part of a universal right to the city and as an effective institutional strategy of urban management.

3. Towards responsive public spaces

As noted by Matthew Carmona (2003: 7), what until twenty years earlier appeared to be little more than a kind of urban counter-theory, in the mid-eighties constituted the shared base of all activities concerning urban planning and design. If the 1960s were, indeed, characterized by the slow and partial transition from planning activity based on artistic criteria to a perspective focused on the social use of space, in this period a new idea of 'placemaking' – which is the attempt to build deeper connections between spaces' form, use and meaning – seems to take shape, reconciling the two previous positions and characterizing the uncoordinated efforts of a great part of design practices. In fact, from the strict prescriptions of Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard's Manifesto (1987) to Francis Tibbalds' neo-traditionalist revival (2000), all of the attempts attributable to this strategy show a common feature that seems to recall Kevin Lynch's latest theories.

In 1981, twenty-one years after his (1960) *The Image of the City*, Lynch published a theory on urban form and proposed an operative framework capable of marking the future of urban design. In an attempt to identify the dimensions involved in the construction of places, Lynch once again wished for users' direct involvement, not only in the analytical phase, but also in the design and management stages. Through a series of empirical analyses, he demonstrated that the best way to improve the performance of an environment is to leave its control in the hands of its users, who have the interest and the knowledge to make it work better (1981: 164-165). This would allow the birth of real 'responsive environments,' as defined by a team of researchers from Oxford a few years later (Bentley et al., 1985), stressing the need for richer and more democratic spaces in order to maximize the opportunities of their users and considering the possibility of spatial personalization as part of the design process. In this sense, this does not only imply the opportunity to physically change the spatial configuration of an environment, but also its adaptability to different uses (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998: 8), the clarity through which its structure allows different activities, and its capacity to communicate or be misunderstood.

According to a successful term recently introduced by Henry Shaftoe's studies (2008), urban spaces must simply be 'convivial,' that is, to be able to offer functionally and symbolically appropriate spaces for the urban life of every single person. From this point of view, they would also represent a theoretical model capable of shaping a strongly inclusive urban environment, lowering the social and economic costs of the exclusive model of urban management described by Sharon Zukin (1995: 28).

In fact, the 'Designing out Crime' approach, which uses an expensive form of separation and specialization as a device for urban safety is gradually replaced by a substantially opposite strategy – 'Crowd out Crime' – which supports the highest vitality of space as a means to a costless urban regeneration. However, even though this approach could be extremely advantageous – both from social and economic points of view – it involves a commitment that is rarely systematically addressed by planning and urban design, as they both suffer from a congenital lack of appropriate tools for the task. Despite Jan Gehl's struggle to focus on a human scale, the idea of placemaking clashes with the need to define the repeatable and shared rules that are implicit in the approach of planning and urban design. Therefore, such concepts as

the appropriation of space, inhabiting the city, or placemaking can be part of the urban design technical vocabulary only through a disciplinary convergence aimed at taking into account the 'fine grain' of convivial places which Shaftoe refers to (2008: 7).

4. Urban interiors

Interestingly, as pointed out by Gianni Ottolini (2013), in the same period in which urban planning and design focused on the tools and strategies for letting people inhabit the city, interior architecture – whose main interest has always been the act of inhabiting – crossed its traditional domestic domain to face the public spaces of metropolitan life, with a specific approach that seems to be determined by the task of making urban architectures inhabitable. The first theoretical contributions about the blend of the 'urban' and 'interior' dimensions – from Hermann Sorgel (1918: 51) to Rudolf Arnheim (1977); and from Renato De Fusco (1978: 77) to Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979: 58) – still seem to focus on the necessity of enclosure. Nevertheless, during the 1960s, interior architecture finally abandoned the topological definition based on its opposition to an 'exterior,' and focused on the centrality of the human 'gesture,' which can transform an abstract space to a 'place-to-be' (Basso Peressut and Postiglione, 2005: 129).

Prompted by the independent studies of Aldo van Eyck (2008: 51) and Carlo De Carli (1967: 3), during the last thirty years this theoretical redirection has led interior designers and historians to the first formulation of binomial 'urban interiors,' according to which urban open places are not considered as voids but as architectural spaces to build and shape (Ottolini, 1987: 39). The investigation in this area develops around some key issues concerning the shape and the equipment of open spaces, such as the quality of their solid margins, or the attention to urban furniture as a link between architecture and design. Generally, the focus is always on the living dimension that projects should create, even in spatial contexts that are traditionally subject to a different functional and symbolic regime and that only in this way can qualify as 'urban interiors.' Therefore, research and practice on urban interiors concerns both the actual 'interiorization' of metropolitan collective spaces (Branzi, 2010, 178) and a new way to approach urban design, involving a greater attention to the human scale, not only as a metrical parameter,

but primarily as the dimension of inhabiting by 'taking care' of a place (Norberg-Schulz, 1984).

A possible history of this approach emerged after the eighth *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (1951), with designers' first attempts to increase the responsivity of public spaces, focusing on the human dimension of architecture. Even though seven years earlier Josep Lluis Sert had published an essay entitled 'The Human Scale in City Planning' (1944), it was only after the substantial failure of this conference that a growing part of the disciplinary culture started to focus on the identification of the relationship between physical space and people's socio-psychological needs, thus allowing architecture to reflect the different social and cultural patterns in a more accurate way (Smithson, 1957). Since the mid-fifties, as an alternative to contemporary cultural and design criteria, urban, architectural and industrial designers have started to look for intermediate spatial solutions – between public and private, collective and personal – capable of reaffirming an architecture that does not impose precise models, but is able to learn from any situation (van Eyck, 1962).

Suddenly, in some of the most relevant projects of this period – from Le Corbusier's roof terrace of Marseille's Unite d'Habitation (1947-52) to Aldo van Eyck's Bertelmanplein (1947) – public spaces ceased to be a uniform and undifferentiated field and became an uninterrupted series of intermediate places shaped on the measure of their personal use, capable of reflecting the real measure of human scale. The polyvalent articulation of their margins, which functionally and symbolically accommodated both individuals and crowds in an organic and adaptable shape ended up affecting a consistent part of the international debate – from Louis Kahn's Salk Institute Plaza (1959-65) to Paul Rudolph's Boston Government Center (1963-71); and from Gio Ponti's De Bijenkorf Plaza (1969) to Richard Meier's Twin Parks Plaza (1969-74).

From this premise, the 1960s became the time of a definitive spread of the concept of responsivity within urban space. On the one hand, thanks to the contributions of Robert Sommer (1959) and Edward T. Hall (1966), environmental psychology approached urban geography and reached a more conscious public space design, capable of overcoming those 'urban pathologies' that, by overcrowding and isolation, may

result in interpersonal violence. On the other hand, urban geography addressed the psychological and perceptual outcomes of the physical form of urban space (Lynch, 1960). Therefore, it is not surprising that, in these years, design investigations about urban open spaces were broadening and shifting from the mere articulation of their boundary surfaces to the definition of flexible or adaptable equipment, which started to challenge its degree of integration with the space in which it had been inserted.

A first conscious attempt in this direction was made in 1967 by the landscape architectural firm Zion & Breen in Paley Park's design, a public pocket park, privately owned and located in a Midtown Manhattan infill lot. The place, a tiny paved plaza surrounded by ivy walls and covered by a canopy of honey locust trees, was equipped with movable wire mesh chairs and tables, whose configuration was continuously varied by users looking for more shadow, calm or social interaction. It was this precarious arrangement that allowed its users not only to exert a control over that space but also to feel a kind of responsibility for its delicate equilibrium (Whyte 1980: 60-65). Therefore, the Paley Park experiment pushed a whole generation of designers, who were looking for new strategies involving greater engagement, to take into account the users' ability to control some specific terminals of urban equipment.

In the following decade, through the study of this equipment, architectural research seems to specialize, focusing its attention on the real public consistence of personal space. Starting from the study of the spatial claims implicit in the simplest daily practices, Herman Hertzberger (1973) and the Dutch structuralist school led the discussion on open space design beyond the criterion of representativeness that squares have always had to meet. They focused instead on a series of elements traditionally considered completely negligible, in order to increase architecture's potentialities of accommodation (Hertzberger, 1973).

During the 1980s, this search for interpretable architectural shapes aimed at encouraging a personal engagement with space generated a different strategic approach to public spaces that, in less than ten years, came to define a real design movement. With some interventions of contemporary public art, artists such as Richard Serra, Daniel Buren and

Vito Acconci showed how both the physical and symbolic conscious subversion of people's urban experience could bring them to question the very nature of their everyday environment, interpreting it in a personal way. This involved a clear articulation of polyvalent elements as well as the definition of a new architectural language that – from Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette (1983) to West8's Schouwburgplein (1991); and from Pipilotti Rist's City Lounge (2005) to BIG's Superkilen Urban Park (2013) – has been predominant for the following thirty years. Mobile and interactive terminals, sinuous surfaces, bright colors and, more generally, a formal repertoire deeply influenced by the visual arts, design, and digital graphics reflect the character of a sort of 'playful modernism' (Mosco, 2010:180), through which any participatory possibility is resolved in the form of an uncommitted game. In other words, they highlight an approach based on a spectacular form of personal involvement with public space, meant to arouse curiosity, surprise, and also uneasiness, which in a few years will concern a whole series of minimum projects designed to reinterpret the city – from Michael Rakowitz to Damien Gires; and from Florian Riviere to Oliver Bishop-Young (Klanten and Hubner, 2010).

In the second decade of the new millennium the house, along with the playground, will make its appearance as a typological and spatial reference. It will progressively identify the public sphere not as separate from the private dimension, but rather as an extension of the process of inhabiting that does not seem to meet any differentiation. As in their own homes people are free to create their own spaces by modeling a kind of interior 'shell' made of objects, the same possibility is offered to them outside thanks to the definition of a concave and hospitable place that uses a formal and functional repertoire recalling the architecture of a domestic space. Thus, in a series of public projects – such as Raumlabor's Open House (2010), SABA's Children Corner or Collectif Etc.'s Place au changement (2011) – the house becomes the ultimate symbol of an interpretative flexibility that, today, seems to be required by the whole urban space (Klanten et al., 2012: 216-249).

In fact, during the last twenty years, a gradual anthropological transformation has started pushing the act of inhabiting beyond the boundaries of privacy, and the planned, organized and symbolically characterized space of the city, with

the inclusion of citizens' domestic spheres, has exploded into a plurality of uses and meanings. Today, urban spaces reproduce, on a larger scale, forms and mechanisms of domestic interiors, in an 'interiorized', 'personal' and variable dimension, that drives design disciplines towards a gradual overlapping of distant traditions (Leveratto, 2014: 91). Thus, while interior architecture is trying to overcome its traditional spatial domain to face the public or semi-public spaces of metropolitan life, urban planning attempts to interpret and map the 'swarm' of spatial practices that seems to structure the city through a continuous process of personal re-signification (Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Leach, 2009; Ratti, 2014).

5. Changes of paradigms

This sort of disciplinary integration involves both a significant change in scale and a new way of looking at the morphogenetic mechanisms of urban projects, from a series of sequential operations – from a larger to a smaller scale – to a simultaneous process in which various decisional agents interact to generate a complex spatial system. Each strategy attempted by architects, designers, and artists in order to enhance the responsive dimension of urban space has moved the conceptual center of design from its margins to its 'interior,' in a substantially projective process of formal definition. Albeit the existence and recognisability of a circumscribed space is always relevant in this process, its formal quality seems to lie not so much in the geometric construction of its perimeter, but in its articulation in fields and objects that can be recognized, employed, and personally modified – in a word, 'inhabited' in a direct and non-mediated way. Therefore, more than the urban morphological matrix, central to such projects is the degree of integration or mobility of that articulation, its exclusivity or its openness, its strictly symbolic connotation or its interpretative flexibility – in other words, everything that can reflect the different possibilities of use offered to its inhabitants.

The possibility of enhancing the creative features of human behavior does not involve a reversal of the design process that goes from the definition of a single element to that of a whole space. It rather entails a gradual shift of interest from the shape of space to the forms of its 'use' – to the many opportunities for personal appropriation that the architectural construction allows and encourages, both functionally and symbolically. In drawings as well as in stone, movements, paths, and the personal actions of those who use the space become part of a project that shows in its own structure their traces and their ability to shape a place that they own and to which they belong at the same time. In these cases, urban space develops, as any other interior, around the 'gesture' of the subjects who inhabit it, in a dimension in which the possibility to exert a real control on their environment is explicit, even though only symbolically. This is a control through a gradual process of bodily projection, which represents the 'range' of the innate ability to live in the world by 'taking care of it.'

Acknowledgements

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