



Public Life and Urban Space

IS THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC SPACE VANISHING?

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Does the gradual disappearance of public space have an impact on our concept of the city? Public space is a complex notion. New York and London, in their voluntary endeavours to revitalise former derelict spaces, have progressively defined which users they envision will use future embellished spaces that look public but in fact are under control; either from private security guards (i.e. waterfronts, commercial malls), or from publicly hired security employees (semi-public parks), or by regular police officers. The problem does not arise from the transgression of laws, which would lead to sanctions, but from the very identity of people considered undesirable categories and which may generate a stop and search, or even a ban of spatial use. Such a process can be observed in Shanghai, where obvious public spaces like the Bund along the river, or the public gardens, are inviting many kinds of *flâneurs* to stroll, among a pleasant diversity and density of people. However, maybe less apparent, control is nevertheless present, emanating from two sources: from undercover policemen in charge of order who mix with the crowds, and from society's internal social control system, which emerges when those who do not 'belong' are spotted by other citizens. Freedom yes, but under surveillance.

What about the two other large megapolises of the South that are part of the Urban Age selection? In Mexico City, more than one million residents gave each one peso to bring reality to one of those numerous utopian visions of parks, meant to coalesce a great variety of visitors at the same time and in the same space. The park designers aimed for a social cohesion, transcending class divisions and they relied on universal needs for peace, entertainment and recreation within cities. Micro control systems are however at work; guards make sure that smooth processes, organising movements, will be respected. They act invisibly; they interpret situations, they make sense of them, and they suggest alternatives to CCTVs and other high-tech surveillance methods. The most problematic case is probably Johannesburg, where so little public space is allocated to density and diversity, unlike Rio (Copacabana) or São Paulo (Avenida Paulista). It is

indeed strange that, despite the efforts deployed by the city council, so many public roads should still be barred from public access and that so many private guards (four to one public policeman – the second-highest number in the world) should turn neighbourhoods into fortresses, without any real public debate on the issue. We are aware that many reforms are on their way and that the country is still young, only twelve years. But, it seems that insufficient support and resources allocated to reforms slow the process of change.

That urban violence is used as an excuse to refuse to live together and that enclosures reinforce segregation cannot be ignored. Such attitudes are lethal to cities. An anti-urban discourse linking cities, fear and violence should be resisted. The answer to urban fear is not to exit the city, buy a gun and get shelter in a gated community. In Venice, Norman Foster courageously suggested that those who choose to get away from the rest of the world and contribute to the sprawl phenomenon should pay very high taxes. When the happy few require roads and power stations in order to live on the edge, they indeed detour resources and energies that should be allocated to the improvement of collective services and spaces for the common good. More inclusive cities are the solution.

Solutions are complex and tailor-made for each city (sometimes the negotiations over 'turf' ownership are strenuous and costly), but they do exist. Teams of innovative architects, planners, scholars, mayors and community representatives expressing various residents' aspirations have learned how to weave back the social fabric and interplay into space and agency. It takes time, patience, imagination, skills, and resources to bring failing neighbourhoods back to recovery. Success exists and examples that should be publicly brought forward and shared – Urban Age's purpose – abound. Sometimes, high-tech firms settle in an unlikely place, and subsequently public transportation improves and critical masses of affordable homes for the middle classes

transform the identity of space. Sometimes an art institution in Mexico City, a university and research centre providing top-quality expertise or a new Court of Justice, including social services, in a poorer neighbourhood in New York have a similar effect. Each of these 'solutions' reveals a mixture of various imaginations, voices, expertises, trust and political will linking space and agency. Public space is in those cases (almost) synonymous with tranquillity. Invisible or more visible alchemists have acted to give each (resident, user, commuter, investor) the sense of his or her belonging into a shared urban space. To summarise: cities have good news to tell, relative to ongoing mutations and to the ways they can thrive, working differently.

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