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# Storytelling ground

## The urban dynamic of the contemporary city

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*ABSTRACT. Many times the public space of a city isn't where it is expected. Nowadays cities are the creative main stage, being simultaneously its aliment and its reflex. And this presents the idea of the public space as a "stage" which reveals the importance of street as an urban inductor of mobility and urban agitation. Places are no longer interpreted as permanent but seen as intense happening focal points, mobility fluxes and energetic moments. They have an interstitial character due to their location in the laceration between the traditional city and the public space. This intermediate position seams those two spheres and creates a third one – the domesticity.*

*KEYWORDS: terrain vague – emptiness - public space – domesticity*

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Fig. 1

## 1. In the search for today's urbanity

More and more, city and society confuse each other. What happens with one reflects on the other. After all, city is the main stage of life, considering that more than a half of humanity lives in urban centres. Despite the privatization of the modern society, architecture tends preferably to the public space over the privacy of house. Nowadays the erosion of the public spaces is seen as a threat to the public sphere.

In the 50s and 60s the Team X<sup>1</sup> have debated for a more understanding perception of the social and cultural realities of the city. The objective was to expand the look of the architect by drawing, for example, through the anthropological and sociological observations – a community must be built from a hierarchy of associated elements and it must express those various association levels (the House, the Street, the Block and the City). "The heart of the city" was the theme of the 8th CIAM, where was definitely abandoned the Athens Chart<sup>2</sup> and a "fifth function" emerged: the civic centre and the idea of community. After being treated the problem of housing, it focused on understanding the city as a dynamic community and to work what defines it and its core. The Smithson specified that their new concept took into account the human associations (in spite of the functional organization), the identity (peculiar for each habitat), growing patterns and the increasing mobility necessity.

The urban vitality could run to the encounter of the urban diversity. The contemporary metropolis is confronted to accept the current eclectic spirit of the ephemeral and of the transitory – cities functionally obsessed with flexibility and

formally seduced by the chaos, the desire for stability and the necessity of the instability. Chaos that only exists if we see just its forms and exclude their symbolic content, other way spaces, anti-spaces, places and non-places intertwine, complement and coexist. The image that the contemporary city pretends to create is a complex network of several relationships between the constructed drawing of the city and the spontaneous individual and collective experiences that are going to aggregate with each other and fill the empty spaces of the traditional and rational drawing.

A new drawing of the public space begins to be developed and operates in the failures of the planning or – according to time, wills or disuse – with merely obsolete structures, the ones that Solà-Morales (with a poetic rhetoric) defines as “terrain vague”<sup>3</sup>. These are the territories that carry out the new spaces of the contemporary city, those that fit as residual urban spaces and correspond to a new conception of the public space. Those are the spaces of the 21st century that will build new cities within the explosive and filled voids cities of the 20th century. In the discussion about the urban voids the most important spaces are not the non-built, but the unoccupied ones, without any function and therefore residuals - open to ephemeral interventions and capable of adapting to different pre-existences.



Fig. 2

## 2. The Medium-Large scale

By responding to multiple uses and allow the access to a multiple public, buildings generate new spatial attributes and win an ambivalent space previously unreached. Buildings integrate the public space bringing the features and interaction of the street within it. Inside corridors haven't just circulation and distribution attributes, becoming much more complex. They can manage spaces that respond to flexibility criteria and that create a spatial dynamic where the corridors become streets and the atriums become squares. Elements are recomposed and squares, stairs, and galleries are worked in the scale of the city we recognize and relate to.

It approaches the mutability that the public and semi-public spaces suffered not only in the sense they are planned and designed but, much more important, their performance towards the city. How the public realm is conformed now and in which way has the consolidated city given room to the spaces we have today? The crises of the contemporary public space as a field of sharing and of civic participation finds in the "experiential dirt" of those spaces the value of urban operator. It is the life in the interstitial and ambiguous spaces that recovers for operative value due that architecture is interesting when it is experienced, made to people and not as a value per se.

Aldo van Eyck presents an interesting reflection about this domain that defines a medium-large scale. He says that "There is a kind of spatial appreciation which makes us envy birds in flight; there is also a kind which makes us recall the sheltered enclosure of our origin. Architecture will fail if it neglects either the one or the other."<sup>4</sup> The junction of these antagonistic spatial appreciations refers to the scale of the domesticity. It doesn't perpetuate a crushing and monumental scale. It extends the scale of the urban fabric, allowing miscegenation and hybridization – a functional mix operating at the level of the block.



Fig. 3

### 3. The domesticity

The core of this question resides in the relation between the privacy of the house and its location in a building, which is itself a part of the city and communicates with the public space. The focusing topic can be defined as a social domestic scale. It isn't about drawing a built mass or the abstraction of the full/empty plan, but the architecture that gives place to the urban project, the thinking of the public space and its connections. This leads to the conception of the buildings not as isolated objects but integrated in the operative mode of the block. This conception shows that it is possible to institute continuity between the traditional city and the recent one, the present and the future expansions, without a subjacent rupture. The private, semi-private and public spaces are intimately organized in an intertwined sequence.

The notion of semi-public or semi-private space that establishes the limit between the public and the private realms is considered as less urban but, certainly, holder of a higher experience. It acts as an intermediate space, a "space between" that is not static, but truly dynamic. This intermediate position seems those two spheres and creates a third one – the domesticity. It extends the doorstep beyond its physical level – the exterior doesn't tend or propose to imitate the life of the interior, but to contribute for the city's unit. It won't be a disperse group but particles whose aggregation gives form to a continuous whole. A concept that can be presented as a positive mediation between the public space of the street and the intern space of the hidden block, that operates from the semi-public space to the private one. Thus, there's the reality of the new city that overlaps to the existent one, as well as the new city that reinvents the preexisting one: in this dialogue, there's the constant reinvention of the public space.

Space, public, democracy, heterogeneity and identity are closely related to a concept of city where all this balanced connection is important for the everyday space. It is given by junction points between the quotidian lives; despite its omnipresence it is almost imperceptible and hard to notice. The daily journeys to work, supermarket, pharmacy, coffee or to the laundry are on the basis of these links and generate the whole relational mesh of the individual with the city. In that sense, it is often found ludic, traditional and illicit activities that generate unexpected cohabitation and seize of spaces originally conceived to different functions. The contemporary city doesn't come from architecture but from the continuous, corrosive and versatile use of the architectonic. In this sense it is licit to affirm that the true city comes after the architecture. We can deduce that this apology, increasingly depending on informality, is connected with society real necessities.

There's the place for the unforeseen and then for the unexpected impromptu. The lack of planning is exposed and allows new appropriations and the freedom to work that planning nuances. This unfinished component has a vital essence for the city because it opens the opportunity for new spatial and new senses of spatial approaches. It also emphasizes the missing, the voids and the deletions, the replacements or the harmonious conscience of those distinct realities. We can talk about a "talking void", a storytelling ground. And that can be an important issue to understand the city's dynamic nowadays. The sharing uses side by side, door by door, the intimacy between such different architectonic typologies species.

Actually and according to Solà-Morales, in a situation of continuous construction and destruction, of permanent growth and renovation, mutation and obsolescence, the casual condition of the city converts in its authentic exhibition mode. The current city appropriates this energy but also its social, geological and ambient conflicts, fatalistically accepting to live with them. The contemporary art seems to fight for the preservation of those "other" spaces of the city and sees in

them its philosophical stone. The directors, photographers, the sculptures of the instant performance, search for a shelter on the margins of the city precisely when it offers them an abusive identity, an asphyxiating homogeneity and a freedom under control, as Solà-Morales observes.

The spaces of truly public use dilute all over the city, side by side with the traditional public spaces, generating roots, proliferating, dying and reborn elsewhere. These are the active residual spaces, thus is to say that there aren't new places to create but new dimensions of life and relationships of the society with the place.



Fig. 4

#### 4. The informal city

All over the city, informal sellers appropriate neglected and marginal places, though well localized concerning accessibilities and people flux – street corners, sidewalks, central pedestrian areas, parking lots, empty lots or roadsides. This brings a domesticity character to public space through the apparent place disconnection to certain performances or selling materials. Through the type of goods there are sold, this practice brings domestic qualities to those urban spaces. It simulates a private space where there is none and changes the original meaning of those spaces.

Nowadays other public spaces dot the contemporary urban territory in the sense that they appear with no apparent order, growing in different points with the most several activities. As time goes by certain places or moments in the city own their identity to that appropriation of the space. Those are interventions that add something beyond the static of the buildings and beyond the movement of the

streets and pathways. The same way as the space-between, these spaces bring the third sphere, the domesticity. Changing their value and their meaning, those spaces change the conception that we had of the city and of the public space. Generic spaces become specific and reveal an alternative logic of public space. Woven in the patterns of the everyday life, it becomes even harder to discern those as public space. Trivial and common spaces, empty lots, sidewalks, front courtyards, parks and parking lots are being claimed for new uses and meanings. They physically exist somewhere among the junction of the private, the commercial and the domestic realm and have multiple and mutable meanings, as oppose to the explicitness of their function. In the absence of a distinct identity, those spaces can be molded and redefined by the transitory activities they accommodate.

In the conception of the city by parts, those parts aren't only its different moments, but also the interstice that connects them: the movement, the dynamic and the fluxes. Networks mobility and pathways constitute essential parts of the urban. Places are no longer interpreted as permanent but seen as intense happening focal points, mobility fluxes and energetic moments. The unit of a city is no longer given by the junction between the building and the street, but by significant and continuous ambiances, that can apply for "the openly planned and the genuinely not planned, the prefixed piece and the accident, the public and the private, the State and the individual"<sup>5</sup>.

## **5. New languages and public space**

This is a kind of occupation that can be described as "out of the box", thinking outside the box. It refers to the occupation of free and unoccupied places, expectant areas or just the sidewalks to the "play" role of the city. These "new uses in old spaces" reveal their informal character and the fugacity of the activities they accomplish. They have a permanent new character given by their frailty and by the space they relieve to manage another activity. This practice reveals the essence of the city and its auto-regenerating process. Solà-Morales gives an explanation for this precisely because we attend first to the change, to the transformation and to the processes that time establishes. We can no longer think about enclosure spaces, established by lasting materials but only in fluid and changing forms, capable of incorporate not the stable but the variable. So, the essence of the concept of the city is a legible succession of multiple permanencies. The essence of the metropolitan culture becomes, therefore, the change itself. This is something that Nuno Portas doesn't ignore when underlines that the city reinvents itself from the inside and is organised through the relations between the things and not of things themselves<sup>6</sup>. Both the essence and the survival of the city are linked with the appearance of alternative movements. This relation is also achieved by the practices which will run in parallel to the ones that are currently in use.

The omnipresence of firewalls exposes the mutilations of the urban fabric. The rebuilt voids, the appropriated ones or the voids left in ruin reveal the actual voids and their beauty. The absence of use, activity and the notion of freedom and expectation are focal points to understand the evocative potential of the terrain vague. Void as absence but also as promise and as a place for the possible, as Solà-Morales explains. These are spaces that manage the identification loss of the individual with the city and where people stop to contemplate what no longer remains. At the same time, these spaces gain another dimension because they can be appropriated again, allowing new uses and new experiences and allowing to act



over the existing city. The biggest cities are profusely imbued with this kind of territory which Solà-Morales synthesizes as “industrial abandoned areas, railway stations, ports; abandoned areas as a consequence of violence, the recess of the residential or commercial activity, building deterioration; riverside residual spaces, quarries, landfills; between highways, restricted and inaccessible construction sites”<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the formal city gives rise to informal spaces and these are spaces that today complement and reinvent the city. They question the space and its static and offer responses based on the urban dynamics: the fluxes, ephemeral events and the expectant places. The space-between is the action field on which residual spaces are inserted, giving continuity to the work of the Smithsons and Also van Eyck. This relation is translated in very powerful buildings in terms of city performance. That’s the great measure of architecture quality. In that sense, the city must be conceived as a permanent mutation and elaboration reality, that is to say, the importance of the public space and its conception is as a changing element for the city.

It becomes essential a change of paradigm, where the dense and overbuilt city sometimes denotes incapacity of generate urbanity which can be explained by the rigidity of its spaces and by the forced continuity that it intends to imprint. What is necessary – says Rem Koolhaas - is to imagine ways in which density can be maintained without recourse to substance, intensity without the encumbrance of architecture<sup>8</sup>.



Fig. 5

## 6. Complexities of the street life

The negligence of the Modern Movement for the public space on a less mega-structural level and more integrated in the urban dynamic had produced cities with lack of urbanity. It denies the city one of its vital conditions: congestion. The Modern Movement eliminates congestion with its road and spaces spread and it destroys urbanity. In the Athens Chart, the movement was circumscribed to one of



the four great urban functions. Not a flux, but the juxtaposition of a flux multiplicity is the first evidence that the reality we live in is formed by meshes that accumulate connections in which the idea of a simple conduct or route is insufficient. The Modern Movement had reduced the street to its functional role while rejecting its multi-functionality and neglecting its urban character and its belonging to the urban fabric. Remaining on that question, Rem Koolhaas proclaims on "The Generic City": the street is dead. (...) The Generic City is on its way from horizontality to verticality."<sup>9</sup> In that sense, the Smithsons expose one of the most critical drawings of their career, a drawing that demonstrates that, over the 6th floor all contact with the ground was lost.

In the urban drawing it is important not to think only about the city transport needs but also in the generation of social interaction – the basis for any people conglomerate. The idea of city, independently of its scale, territory and form is an idea of democracy – is the urban territory and the city that are being built by society and not the opposite. It is important to understand the way travelers trajectories imply public space appropriation. On the one hand, to capture its essence, on the other hand, to understand how spaces won their own life. The underlying of the importance of crossings and of an infinitive of possibilities and the multiple areas that are connected and that establish a mute dialogue are essential focal points in the way of getting an architecture that could replace the rigidity for the fluid and the primacy of the space for the primacy of the time.

Now that we cannot have the beauty of multiple buildings of different times, what other qualities can we introduce? These are identity place holders that don't want to hide the past. These are spaces that in contrast can establish analogies to different moments. Bearing the wounds of the past they open themselves to the community and return a sheltered place that responds to housing needs and the traditional neighborhood life, which is to say that they introduce a moment of pause in the rushed urban way of life. This notion of pause brings features that will define the city rhythm and the interchange between the movement areas and the deceleration moments - there is the conception of the city as a living organism. The metaphor of the city has come for good which proceeds, essentially, by the sociability it can carry: the people, the fluid of the streets, of the traffic and of people again; new places, new faces, steps that can be heard and that appropriate the space when they stop or when they go free - when they connect with the ground and give it a new and free use, in a harmonious whole that can be consistent or not really because the city admits the impact and observes it on its fragmentary essence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Team X emerged in the 50s (1953) within the CIAM: the International Congresses of Modern Architecture. The dissolution of these congresses coincides with the affirmation of a new generation of architects. At the time, those architects looked for answers for the social and political challenges of the post-war society. According to Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada, Team X was formed by Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck, Jaap Bakema, Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods and Giancarlo de Carlo. It lasted until 1981.

<sup>2</sup> The Athens Chart is the urban manifest of the 4th CIAM in Athens, 1933.

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<sup>3</sup> Solà-Morales gives a definition for “terrain” as an extension of the very limited ground fit for construction; and “vague” is used as unoccupied, free, indeterminate.

<sup>4</sup> VAN EYCK, Aldo - Works, 1999. p. 47

<sup>5</sup> ROWE, Colin - Collage City, 1993, p. 86

<sup>6</sup> Cf. PORTAS, Nuno – A cidade como arquitectura, 2007. p. 158

<sup>7</sup> SOLÀ-MORALES, Ignasi de – Territorios, 2002. p. 121

<sup>8</sup> Cf. KOOLHAAS, Rem, et al. - S, M, L, XL: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large, 1995. p. 199/203

<sup>9</sup> KOOLHAAS, Rem, et al. - S, M, L, XL: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large, 1995. p. 1253

## Legends

(Fig.1) Kreuzberg, Berlin (by Sebastian Marggraf).

(Fig.2) Dijkstrastraat playground, Aldo van Eyck, 1954.

(Fig.3) Turkish Market, Maybachufer, Berlin, 2012 (by Neilg Hamilton).

(Fig.4) Photogram from “Der Himmel über Berlin”, Wim Wenders, 1987.

(Fig.5) Photogram from “Der Himmel über Berlin”, Wim Wenders, 1987.

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### **Biography**

Diana Pinto. Graduated from the Faculty of Science and Technology, University of Coimbra, and presently concluding a Master degree in Architecture. Her thesis is subjected to the theme "Berlin, how long is now?" – a study of the urban planning of the contemporary city, focusing on the city of Berlin. With an interdisciplinary curricular experience, she has been developing her work in the field of Architecture, Photography, Painting and Graphic Design.