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# Performed city

## Scenarios for a celebratory urban life

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*ABSTRACT. The core of the Mediterranean city is still a purposeful laboratory for architects not only for the richness of urban forms that it has bequeathed but also by consideration of city as an urban scene. Citizens are urban users who dispose passive systems as the smart transportation by walking and cycling to interact with the city. However a particular interpretation of homeless life shows a possible life more active and engaged with the city as an own home. The paper aims to introduce a complement to the Lynch's method to read the image and the form of the city with the redefinition of five elements/concepts transformed into metaphors. The application of these metaphors instructs architects in the celebration of the everyday life of the city as a demand of citizens' rights to feel like actors in the great stage of urban life.*

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## 1. Introduction

Urban mobilizations that occurred in Madrid and in other Spanish cities in May 2010 were more than a cry of indignation. The phenomenon known as 15M led the citizens from all walks of life to take the streets and occupy the squares, through a peaceful uprising, demanding democratic values and universal rights.

This spontaneous social movement has made us look differently at the collective and see an active way of forming political organization, in other words, new ways of social living in the city. The occupation of the street has meant a process of action, management and a joint development of relations between citizens who have temporarily occupied public space. The meeting in central spaces, symbols of power, and in squares associated with the most important cultural, political or historical events of the city, apart from having a strong political and economic protest message, has reformulated the possibility of the transitory use of the public spaces of the city. The celebration of assemblies in addition to the creation of workshop spaces, meeting spaces, kindergarten, first aid, dining, networks and games areas, anticipated the creation of a microcity from which the ideal of "true democracy" had to be defended.

The square has always been a meeting and discussion place (agora) and the street has been and still is the place for living par excellence, as the Mediterranean cities show. When the city is celebrating a festival, it becomes a place for the use and enjoyment of citizens. It is not only the square but the place of idle claim. During the party the active participation of citizens teaches us situations that can become design parameters of an alternative urbanism which can establish urban regeneration strategies that allow the (re)making of the city or, at least, define useful tools for reading the city that are able to recognize ordinary urban spaces differently (MUNTAÑOLA, 2010). When the public is occupied by the collective, the city transforms into a complex architecture that houses the spaces of a common culture.

## 2. Mediterranean city

The issue of what is "the public" in the contemporary city is a matter of great study among architects, but we should not forget the suggestive words on the city written by sociologists Park and Burgess in *The City* (1925) because they continue setting the basic framework of all conceptualization about the modern city:

*"The city is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences —streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices —courts, hospitals, schools, police, and civil functionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature and particularly of human nature"* (PARK et al, 1967. 1).

European cities have experimented processes of globalization as Asian and American cities have suffered. But in the last quarter century, they have been an example of a city model that has been characterized by the conservation of historic

centers. Many Mediterranean cities have proceeded to safeguard the identity of the local community associated with the permanence of a frozen image of the city, programming architectural interventions with the aim of preserving their most significant ages, restoring the urban fabric and protecting the built heritage of buildings, squares and streets. They are actions that have found that the city is more than a symbolic repertoire of urban settings and architectural styles. Urban culture is confined in the Mediterranean city to the way of living the city where unpredictability and randomness ensues. Life in the historic centers test what was indicated by Aldo Rossi (1984) that the full life on the street has the capacity to establish spaces of relationship that, in many cases, replace or complement the square and the urban promenade presenting it as an intermediate space of citizen relationships that facilitate the processes of coexistence [1].

The current claim that "city is for people" (GEHL, 2010) is a plea for the common city desired by all of us. This consideration is based on people using the city to satisfy their private and collective life, because it is the essential support on which their daily personal stories are written (KARP et al., 1991). These stories are individual cultures which find in the city, especially in the traditional centers of Mediterranean cities, an architectural framework built that forms a functional scenario. It allows for the development of people only in the simple use of the city, in the living with their inhabitants and in the formation of their perception. The action of practice the city encourages individual and collective identity and reinforces the basic idea that, in the street, citizen is its most significant actor.

### 3. Personal stories

Construction and demonstration of personal and collective stories allow the expression and formalization of popular culture (STOREY, 2002) [2]. Although the difficulty of defining what is high culture and popular culture, since both interfere, there should be referred to the formation of a common culture, even when it is heavily instrumented by the power, it finds at the party the central event of daily life and where is possible to appreciate intensively a dynamic and open urban popular culture. The city during the festival shows the individuals a repertoire of possible ways of appropriation of the street: a use which subordinates their practical and symbolic interests (FISKE, 2002). During the festival, the city metamorphoses their spaces acquiring another register. The festival improvises an alternative and temporary project of city.

The exploration of the city modified through the practices of occupation of the space for its users, need two types of fundamental attitudes: pedestrians and observers (CERTAU, 1984). For urban theory, the concept "walking the city" is significant because it develops the renovating practices of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, it goes through Dadaists events, the Surrealists *deambulations*, the Situationist *drift* and the recent *land art* artist's hikes. A renewed approach of walking provides different esthetic views, reviews and city policies that change the attitude of each individual to the living environment (CARRERI, 2002). This leads to the anonymous man as an idle and disinterested observer of the urban scene that finds delight in getting lost in the crowd and, with his practice, becomes a secret viewer of the spaces and places of the city (JENKS & NEVES, 2000).

#### 4. Reading the city

The common city we live in was studied several decades ago by Kevin Lynch who established the method and the parameters necessary to carry out the *legibility* of its image. Lynch was based on the study of mental images of city held by citizens. The apparent quality or the *legibility* of cityscape in the analysis of three central areas of three American cities: Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles established the key elements to rebuild the city image afterwards. The contents of the city images studied were referred to physical forms and identified five key elements that today are still useful in some case studies. Paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks have been defined by Lynch as the constraints of the physical image of the city (and we could add to the understanding the urban form as well) but none of these elements exist in isolation in the real case. Elements regularly overlap and interfere one and other. All the cities analysed in Lynch's method may be discussed in relation to all this five elements. Therefore the relation between the five elements is truly significant. They are the raw materials of the environmental image of the city. They must be patterned together to provide a satisfying reading of the form of the city.

Lynch's method of reading the image of the city requires an environment which is not only well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. He advises us to go on beyond: "*[the form of a city] must invite its viewers to explore the world*" (LYNCH, 1960. 119). To find the proper scale is essential and Lynch talked about the new scale but it also should take into account the individuals and their complex society. The city is full of strong symbols such as the sense of place that enhances every human activity that occurs there and encourages the deposit of memory trace. Dealing with the reading of the image of the city, learning by observing will be quite important as the reformulation of what "seeing" means.

#### 5. Other readings

The questions we are asking ourselves are how is it possible to make a geography of the city scenarios in which the citizen becomes a public animal, and what are the basic skills to make an adequate register and mapping of the city scenarios. For this task we could take up Kevin Lynch's methodology but redefine the concepts/elements adapting them to the citizen who is now an urban actor.

In order to proceed to the reading of the city as a performed city we proposed four concepts/elements that supplement the Lynch ones. They are aimed at a smaller scale than the Lynch's environmental city: the scale of individual experience of "the urban". *Surfaces, Placed objects, Flows* and *Encounters* are original concepts that identify the city as scenes that people occupy and, in the events of people in them lie the very spectacle of the urban performer: that is the intimate experience of "the urban" from the particular use of every citizen/actor makes of the public spaces and architectural forms of the city too.

Nevertheless attending to the warning of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg about the concept lacks enough intensity to come close to a satisfactory explanation of the present condition. It is desirable to overcome the limitation of language to explain imprecise things, as well as the impossibility to access to reality that is totally unattainable. The philosopher suggests for this inconvenient affair a metaphorology (BLUMENBERG, 2003. 5). The formation of metaphors allows us to rethink the relationship between fantasy and "logos". Making metaphors, fantasy is claimed as rather necessary to create something similar to an explanation to cover the lack of words to sort out our needs of knowledge and the severe logic of the

"Cartesian concept". Blumenberg says that in the absolute metaphor it is seen the irreducibility and the "unconceptuability" of the logics of the language because they leave an open door to dream visions. Invent stories, make metaphors allow us temporarily to give meanings to things around us but, the metaphor, we must assume this is fiction; it is something purely provisional and something consolatory.

The four metaphors described below are an attempt to recover the lost art of reading the city by everyone. The Mediterranean city constantly introduces them to us in the everyday use of it and they come with the desire to regain the rights of people to the city with the yearning for the celebration of the urban, i.e. a recognition that city dweller is an imaginative public animal ready to make a celebratory use of the city while he is living his own life-story.

The following describes most accurately the previous concepts transformed into metaphors that summarize a potential formulation of a personal story that each one could live in the city. The short narrations provided by the metaphors lock in themselves a valid option for the construction of individual life-stories. These are good reasons to believe again in the right of people to the city.

## **6. Urban metaphors**

The city during the festival echoes the popular expression in temporarily transformed urban spaces. During the party, wandering through the historic city center one can observe different urban situations. Each one by itself is a good demonstration of popular culture. The observation and careful analysis shows that these situations are unknown territories which are favourable to be explored and registered in order to formulate the dynamics of change of the city through the expression of the popular. A study held in 2010 in the city of Valencia developed the previous reflections into the following four situations:

- Surfaces of public space "seized" for the festival.
- Ephemeral artifacts placed on the historic city.
- Flows through the historic city.
- Meeting areas.

The following sections summarize the analysis of these situations after a fieldwork made through a detailed participant observation practice.

### **6.1. Surfaces**

Mediterranean cities are a rich catalogue of materials and textures, flooring and paving, walls and fences, roofs and terraces where each surface with a different materials speak about the tectonic character and the history of the place. These surfaces become a challenge for architects who design them and for citizen when using them. The ground of the street often becomes an improvised activity field or the home façades into urban elements of claim and spectacle. Any corner where there is an alteration of the ground can be a good place to rest and pause in our daily comings and goings [Fig. 1]. The varied areas of the Mediterranean city make available to architects a new collection of surfaces in which multiple purposes can be imagined and, especially, to put forward the right to be present in any part of the city.



Fig.1 Surfaces of public space "seized" for the festival.



Fig. 2 Ephemeral artifacts placed on the historic city.



Fig. 3. Flows through the historic city.



Fig. 4. Meeting areas.

## **6.2. Placed objects**

The streets and the squares of Mediterranean cities have a large set of objects which clearly determine the place. The fountains in the market square, the steps in front of churches are just some of the placed objects of the historic city. However, in the contemporary city the above elements live with other conventional and functional items such as traffic lights, street lamps, trash cans, traffic signs and a wide range of temporary and mobile objects displayed everywhere on the streets and in café terraces. They open up a broad range of suggestions to the work of architects who seek to project the kindest experience of what walking around the city means. A singular case of placed objects is during major festive celebrations or traditional holidays such as religious street processions at Semana Santa (Holy Week) where people carry statues of saints -sculptural mobile objects- across the streets of the city centre [Fig. 2]. An urban consideration on this event gives us the idea of a moving object –in this case an unplaced object- that can generate an event around him to attract people and offer them another way to live and build their life-stories. The object provides an opportunity for people to have the right to express their religious beliefs in the city.

## **6.3. Flows**

The detailed observation of everything that happens in the streets of Mediterranean cities makes us envision something unique and different from the idea of the space of flows. There is no invisible and informal movement of information only an enjoyment of seeing people coming and going through the streets in linked activities. Go to work, come home, do shopping are the reasons for these continuous flows of people in the city centre. These flows are further accentuated when they are mixed with other modes of transportation (bicycles, private vehicles and public transport) and when the forms of the city condition them with small narrow streets, steep slopes and sharp corners. There is no doubt that when a major celebration in the city, an event or a festival is held these flows assumed a high relevance. They are able to completely remove any other means of transport to turn the streets into floods of people who move from one place to another [Fig. 3]. This is the consecution of the greatest achievement of people in big cities: back for an instant the commemoration of that the right to the city is being able to walk the streets freely without apparent danger or any prejudice.

## **6.4. Encounters**

Visitors and citizens of the city centres get surprise when a street musician plays a brief performance and around him a small group of onlookers concentrates. This simple action produces a chance of meeting in the city spaces. The ability of cities to generate this type of event is indeed immeasurable. Any citizen is able to take a corner and create there their particular setting. This reveals the idea that the concept of encounters is a powerful issue to be taken into account seriously by architects who are designing architecture that wants to claim for the individual right to the city. Undoubtedly, it is in large gatherings of citizens during the holidays, in the celebrations and specially in sporting events when the encounter occur in a joyful way that strongly express the unseen desire of the citizen. The celebrations after the victory of the sports team demonstrate how the delight of this sporting event is spread throughout the city and it all becomes an appropriate territory to produce happenings with others [Fig. 4]. Streets, squares and every corner



suddenly invaded by colourful flags and shirts, noise and chants and the only thing they are searching for is the encounter with others to celebrate their team victory. The real success is that in this short time celebration the city emerges as the appropriate forum for citizens to develop the capacity to feel themselves part of it. Citizen on the city scenes is free to use them to bring festive gatherings off with people.

## **7. Conclusions**

Daily life in the city allows us to be active participants of the complexity of the activity that happens in it. We should be aware of this ability to implement it in the work of architects. The adaptation of five concepts based on Lynch's method to the Blumenberg's metaphorology gives us the opportunity to make the architect work more complete from the combination of any citizen experience. Both the city dweller and the urban user can contribute to improving the explanation of what the city is. The smart passive modes of mobility by walking or cycling are not adequate to achieve a complete experience. An active presence in the city it is required to make sure the streets of the Mediterranean city remains a place for everyone and for all types of activities.

This argument reveals that any urban public space becomes a stage for urban life. Hence, as architects, before running our specific design work should be good observers, we must participate in the city to be able from our own experience read it, register and map all stages of urban life. Learn about the many possibilities offered by the city scenes is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges the urban planners and architects have to design the next Mediterranean city. The method of the proposed concepts transformed into metaphors should not be applied for each one individually because in their complex combination a successful outcome will work. Let us not forget either that the architect is also a citizen and therefore city users and from their daily or occasional experience of metaphors should notice that, day after day, we are asserting our right to the city by simply being urban actors of the play the city performs in its historic, mysterious and staggering settings.

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## **8. Notes**

[1] In Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of city* we read that life on the street and in the piazzas contributes to the permanence of forms of culture.

[2] The concept of popular culture is hard to define. According to John Storey it is something that is not high culture; it is the culture that is born from the people; it is the culture that appeals to many people; it is the mass culture.

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