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# Liquid Architecture

## A Critique to a Top-Down Approach to the Urban Order

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*ABSTRACT. In the definition of Public Space seems interesting and appropriate to include the whole non-constructed space, the negative of buildings. The contemporary city can thus be fully expressed with its richness and complexity. The paper looks into the possibility of an approach towards designing public spaces, these intended as palimpsests open to new solutions and at the same time that can suggest some themselves. It is critical to become aware that contemporary projects can no longer be the final finite solution due to today's ever fast changing urban society. Along these lines, it is necessary to adopt participation practices and develop a project life cycle analysis that includes regular checks, even technological ones, realignment processes and, if needed, a simple demolition.*

*KEYWORDS. Liquid Architecture, Public Space, Life Cycle Analysis, Top Down Approach. BIG, Lacaton & Vassal.*

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## 1. Liquid Public Space

If city is the place where meeting takes place, where men gather and discover the world of the others (NORBERG-SCHULZ, 1984); if cities answer to this human primary need, then the role of public space within results fundamental. In particular, understanding how those places evolved and mutated during centuries helps us in the comprehension of the particular civilizations who have inhabited them. Above all, the choice to define and live them as public spaces can be considered as an indicator of the importance attributed to them by the society who inhabits them, along with pattern, modes of use, behavioral rules, freedom of accessibility or its negation. Agora, squares, markets, patios, arcades, las ramblas, churches and mosques and so on are all declensions, all different, of cities' public spaces, meant as the human settlement where it is possible for strangers to gather (SENNETT, 1978). Public space can therefore be intended as a concrete reflection of political (and sometimes architectural) ideologies and rules which define the city and its life within. Actually, the structure of public society is explained through what is not private, hence the architecture of the *res publica* shows how we all live and lived; contextually lacking, negligence related to the public things or a shift of attention toward private spaces instead of public, all represent extreme examples of different and possible social organization. It is assumed that, as mentions Saskia Sassen in the introductory paper of the Biennale di Venezia 2008, cities and in particular public spaces, be them intended as those mentioned, but also the work place, public transport, location for events such as festivals or exhibitions, they all represent the main places for birth, development and globalization of political action and rights. Public space is also where interpersonal relationships are expressed in equality and democracy, freed from the interests and routines that are often dictated by the private space also those of public access such as shopping malls, cinemas, schools, universities and so on. Starting from these premises, public spaces cannot necessarily be just those left by tradition and that project standards and rules consistently identify (the square, the park, the street...). On the contrary, it seems to be more interesting and appropriate to include the whole non-built space in such definition, in other words what could be named as the negative of buildings. The contemporary city can thus be fully expressed with its richness and complexity. The public space is the negative of the building, the free space which can have functions and uses asked by society. Nevertheless the latter has reached such a complexity as to make it ever more difficult not only for experts, but also for users and those directly involved, to understand and define trends and needs in order to formulate answers (OFFE, 1987). This decisional fixedness, the impossibility to analyze through standard categories, the difficulty in offering a definitory solution (or a guideline at least) to the current complex situation have led Bauman to define the current society, its time and its places as *liquid*. These have the main characteristics to continually mutate not only with the passing of years, but also depending on the hours of the day and people protagonists of it. "[...] liquids, differently from solid bodies, do not usually maintain a shape of their own. Fluids, to put it in this way, do not fix space and do not bind time. Where solid bodies have well defined spatial dimensions, though they neutralize the impact — thus reducing the significance — of time (they resist effectively to its flowing thus making it irrelevant), fluids do never maintain their shape for a long time and are always ready (and prone) to change it; so that the flux of time is for them worthier than the space they occupy and which they actually occupy *just for a moment*". The current situation, according to the author, hasn't been generated, as many other dystopian scenarios, from coercion, dictatorship, oppression or constraints on individual freedom. On the contrary, the progressive elimination of all impediments

and obstacles to such freedom result in policies of *free rein*, in deregulation, liberalization, flexibility, total opening of financial, real estate and job markets, lowering of taxation and so on. This has led to a series of negative after-effects analyzed by Bauman in different essays, which can be summed up in the framework of changefulness and rapidity of vested interests and in the difficulty of movement and the growing tendency in excluding the weakest. It follows the uselessness and lack of representativeness of public spaces designed on rigid and monumental categories of the past times, of the *solid* society. Societies where, for example, there were still spaces for stopping, strolling, reading, debating, practicing sport and so on; all definite, recognizable and separable.

## 2. Solid Public Space: two italian case studies

In the *Progetto per una piazza* sculpture of 1931, Giacometti proposes a blank slate where the only figures represented are individuals walking on a plane: some come across other people, some follow their own path, others stop by, but they are the only elements to constitute the public space, to define urban order. This means that the very subject of public space is man, the network of relationships he/she builds within as well as the action therein carried on.

Actually, if architecture is a fixed scene of life (ROSSI, 1966) and people are the actors who live it, today life imposes such and many continuous changes so that the actors ask to move, change aspect, distort (always temporarily) the scenery according to the action they are performing. Therefore public spaces architecture is the first which must liquefy: if a space is recognized as being public (with the meaning attached to it above) then it must lose all features of solidity which it currently possesses.

However, architecture has not always been able to reform its characters in order to deal with the mutated conditions of its contemporaneity and neither seems capable of designing public spaces able to receive or represent the needs of liquid societies. In many cases, often in Italy, design phases have followed consolidated paths, independently from changes happened, perhaps voluntarily or involuntarily ignored. Or, without attributing too much importance to influence which public space design can have on people's lives, the project has given up proposing new solutions and raising doubts to differ from the consolidated tradition. According to this view, public space design has followed the same track, using the standard tools and elements which have always characterized it, also when not considering aesthetics, the designer's *style*, it has kept on generating traditionally solid spaces, rigid spaces of a solid society on its way to extinction.

In fact at times the negative of building is simply not considered and left to privatization, possibly illegal; in most cases the project is very deterministic and based on the formalist display of traditional iconic elements: the bench, the fountain, the tree, the flowerbed...

It looks like the same tools of the built environment are used on the *not-built*, thus imposing *top-down* not only the definition of spaces, but also the definition of their purposes. It often happens that architects, and not them alone, design a space starting by a map, enjoying a composition of elements which satisfies their aesthetical taste and their idea of how that place must be lived in or which activities can take place there. This self-satisfaction is visible in symmetry axes, balance between parts, definition of tracks so rigid as to go far beyond the imagination and irreverence of Jacques Tati's movies. The result of such designing is well visible, but the enjoyment of the zenithal vision is missing in common people who gather in these places.

Two urban re-qualification interventions, which took place in Genoa before 2010, have allowed the citizens to make use of spaces not usable before: the

pedestrianization of a street and green roof of a parking. Both are then new spaces, not tied to any obligation of maintaining a historical memory, so dear to Italian architects. Although concretizing the designers' very different aesthetical sensibilities, the interventions generate the same rigidities of use. Similarly to abstract places, they do not fully fulfill the purpose for which they were meant.

In the former there are alignments which are not justified by the many possibilities offered: starting from the gutters' line — perhaps too expensive to modify, though remained the same as the old one, such as to guess the old street's itinerary— there follow a quasi-identical series of benches, free space, planter, free space, bench, tree, bench, free space, planter, free space (**fig.1**). No precise hierarchy, no reasoning on shading spaces provided with seats for summer months and neither sun-exposed areas protected from winds for winter months. No chance to comfortably seat one in front of the other to chat, but neither to a distance sufficient to guarantee a certain privacy nor to encourage a conversation. No free space to play football, learn how to ride a bike or skate, set up a stage for shows or concerts. Many missing elements which had not necessarily to be inserted, but had to be taken into consideration. The only elements which makes it a public space are the lion footed fake cast iron and wooden benches, the idea of planter and tree, the idea of a paving which does not define space but only separates it from macadam and cars' track ways.

In the latter, under a more contemporary apparent minimalism, there hides the same difficulty in relating the shadow with the pathways, with the lighting, with the seats (amphitheatre-disposed facing the car traffic), which do not offer the possibility neither to look to one another nor to talk because too distant and disposed at different heights (**fig.2**).

These projects lack liquidity of order meant as complex order, of different levels of interpretation (they are not analyzable singularly and univocally, instead they constantly overlap), of balance meant as dynamic and changeful balance continuously modifying according to users and occasional necessities, and so on. The project, as well as its function, are meant as the proposal of one of the possibilities and lack that incompleteness' character which suggests multiple answers.

### **3. Liquid Public Space Strategies: Yes Is More vs. Almost Nothing**

Some recent design experiences show to have understood the complex dimension of metropolitan public space and propose intervention strategies which interact with such a complexity without trying to simplify it.

Within this framework it is possible to identify two very different theoretical trends. On the one hand there is an accumulation of signs and meanings in order to describe, represent and hand over the floor to the cultural and formal chaos of contemporary cities. On the other hand there is a subtraction, by proposing a public space offered to users as a free domain, available to be transformed from time to time, made livable and complete through its use and appropriation.

For each of the two options some paradigmatic projects can be traced, particularly useful with a view to a critical analysis. In both cases the radical aspect of the interventions and of the theoretical assumptions from which they derive do not correspond to an idealistic attitude but, paradoxically, to a strong pragmatism.

The strategy of semantic and aesthetic accumulation is effectively represented by the park Superkilen (2011-2012), elaborated by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) for the architectural part, in partnership with landscape architects Topotek1 and visual artists Superflex (**fig.3**). The Nørrebro borough (Copenhagen) which houses the intervention, shows an extremely varied social composition (57 different country communities); criminal acts are common in the area, therefore the specific request

of the call for proposals was to create a public space to encourage integration between different components of the population. The designers' answer is a combination of signs, shapes and spaces largely suggested by the borough's inhabitants themselves who were asked about it. More than one hundred among urban furniture items, sport and recreational equipment, vegetation, decorative motifs, artworks and advertisements, after being selected by designers for their effectiveness and functionality, constitute a patchwork which intends to recreate the composition of the social net. There occurs a new concept of multi-culturalism, inspired by utilitarian values and no more moral, social and political claims. The parallel used by Bjarke Ingels to illustrate the project's conception is particularly explicit in this sense: "I do not eat Chinese food to be kind to Chinese people, to please them. I go there because their food fulfills my wishes and my needs [...]" (CIUFFI, 2011). The contemporary presence of different social groups is therefore considered as a plus: it is the chance to widen the cultural basis on which the designer builds the project: "It would be ridiculous to think that Danish have invented the best bicycle racks, but also the best benches, the best fountains, the most luminous lampions ...it is far more logical to think that by fishing here and there in the folds of the world there come out the most aimed and successful objects, according to different habits and specializations" (CIUFFI, 2011). The background idea lies on a sort of evolutionistic analogy: "Of all proposed objects there remain in Superkilen or "survive", only the best, the fittest and the success of the final selection also derive from the quantity and variety which characterize their user groups" (CIUFFI, 2011).

Beyond ethical and political objections — the chance for a citizen to have his/her culture approved undergoes a selection process which, far from being "natural" or social as it is suggested, it is instead governed by a limited number of subjects inevitably characterized by a specific cultural and social provenience — it is possible to individuate some architectural and aesthetical critical issues.

The diverse language mix, combined with large painted backgrounds which characterize the park's surface, reach nearly paroxysmal levels. The redundant visual information could be perceived as aesthetic intrusiveness, as insistent constriction to a multi-ethnicity of public space. In attempting not to impose a stranger order one ends up imposing a noisy disorder.

Moreover the conceptual result of the operation, which constitutes a snapshot of the different cultural components constituting the collective imagery of the borough, raises perplexities. By doing that, a dynamic, lively and changeful social fabric is frozen, flattened on a single temporal plane and crystallized in an unchangeable configuration. If, from a geographical point of view, the multicultural representativeness' principle has been respected, from a temporal point of view Superkilen seems condemned to pursue its existence anchored to a precise moment of its past.

Against the risks of excessive space's definition (although centered on complexity, on variety and participation's principles as in the Danish case study) is the theoretical and design trend ideated by the French Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal: "Over the years we have come to understand the importance of the superimposition, whether this involves architecture or urbanism. The wellbeing, but also the dreams, of contemporary society seem to depend on the way in which an existing situation encounters a new situation, two temporalities, two states of mind. Each time we tackle a project we think in terms of an intervention in an existing fabric, the history of which may be real or dependent on a fiction. The goal is to superimpose our new intentions, but without imposing them onto pre-existing systems — we hope to do this with scruples and delicacy so that a third place is born, a product of the two previous ones" (LACATON & VASSAL, 2012).

Sometimes the existent fabric is so effective on its own that is preferable not to intervene with the project's tools. It is the case of Leon Aucoc square in Bordeaux (1996), where with a moral rigor and realism act Lacaton&Vassal gave up their

proposal to transform such public space, suggesting to the awarding authorities to use part of the budget to finance simple maintenance's interventions. As observed by Inaki Abalos (2012) such behavior recalls that of Bartleby, protagonist of one of Herman Melville's writing, who answered to his boss' requests with "I'd prefer not to", with an act of humble but strong resistance to the dominant logics.

The strategy here explained is also applied to some public buildings, considered as built extensions of urban public spaces which can therefore be rightfully part of this analysis. During the restoration of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2002-2012) the 30's building is "left practically naked, available for action instead of being finished and embellished to dispute the protagonist's role of the artist" (ABALOS 2012); This happened, on the one hand for the difficulty to define through traditional categories a space for artistic contemporary creation, on the other hand due to the suggestive impact of the pre-existing structure. A part from the technological adaptations, the transformation's interventions have been minimal and large spaces partitions reduced as much as possible: foundational concepts are freedom in time and space, flexibility, openness to new unexpected rewritings (**fig.4**).

In this sense the analogy proposed by Karine Dana (2012) results particularly interesting. She compares the architecture of the French firm to a screenplay, able to generate and retain a plurality of stories without completely defining them.

In the Nantes' School of Architecture (2009) the approach to the issue of public building, meant as open spaces destined to the free appropriation of its users, becomes even more direct (**fig.5**). The construction of double the surface requested by the call of proposals produces a surplus of available space for uses freely established by the users, such as the floors' load-bearing capacity, superior to that usually adopted, allows students to build models in 1:1 scale or to modify space with adjoined partitions. The large continuous staircase which connects all floors widen the freedom of movement within the building, whilst the ground floor is a space open and available to public activities. All this shows a strong consistency of the project with the principles expressed by the authors themselves: "Our quest for a change is conditioned by the freedom granted to the user by the structure – his freedom to move about, to instigate an activity wherever he happens to be, to be alone somewhere. This suppleness comes from using lightweight building systems with frames, from their independence with respect to the programme, their weak impact, but also through the hugeness of this structure. The bigger or more spacious it is, the greater the number of stories that will be able to unfold there – and the more one will be able to expect of it" (LACATON & VASSAL, 2012).

Nevertheless in the essential layout and the theoretical assumptions there is a feeling of getting a hint of the American skyscraper "Typical Plan" eulogy, inserted by Rem Koolhaas inside "S,M,L,XL" (1995). Though this seems to be the clue for a potential heterogenesis of the aims, which would lead the participative humanism of Lacaton&Vassal to the implacable "pure objectivity" of the zero-degree architecture, architecture stripped of all traces of uniqueness and specificity", exalted by Koolhaas. The space's neutrality actually risks to be not enough a stimulus for appropriation from the users: freedom obtained suffers from excessive abstraction and the extreme flexibility can be perceived as mute indifference of architecture towards those who inhabit it. Finally, there is the question of the public image of the building: while for the Palais de Tokyo it was the historical and architectural value of the pre-existing building to carry on this duty, in the Nante's example the iconic significance is too weak to develop a proper identity in the framework of the urban tissue and the citizens' collective imagery.

#### 4. Conclusion Notes

"Freedom may well hold great potential for many but there must be a spark to get the engine running" (HERTZBERGER, 1991). From this analysis of significant experiences some indications can be drawn. On the one hand it is necessary to acquire the awareness that architectural design must adopt a sort of "programmatic weakness" to deal with complex problems such as that of contemporary public spaces, that is to say effective antibodies to its innate ambitions. For this purpose it is central to employ participative methods and a project's life cycle analysis to require, also from a technological point of view, regular checks, re-adaptations and the provisions for an eventual easy dismissal. On the other hand it is important to confirm the validity of the project as a temporal and spatial palimpsest able to coordinate and integrate shapes, meanings, actions, events, in order to formulate a balance between functionalism, abstract formalism and complete flexibility.

#### 5. Legends

- (Fig.1) Piazza Romagnosi, Genoa.
- (Fig.2) Giardini Giovanni Paolo II, Genoa.
- (Fig.3) Superkilen Park by BIG.
- (Fig.4) Palais de Tokyo by Lacaton & Vassal.
- (Fig.5) Nantes School of Architecture by Lacaton & Vassal.

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## **7. Biography**

Giacomo Cassinelli (1981) is a PhD architect, graduated at Faculty of Architecture of the University of Genoa with a thesis about Guidelines for the design and built a eco-sustainable settlement in Noli (SV, Italy). He continued the this studies with the Doctorate research: Distibued microgeneration systems and energetic saving in buildings. In particular he delves into the relations between aesthetic and technical point of view with different academic research. He published several articles also about the perception of architecture in the movies. From 2009 he's partner and co-founder of Splace, an informal organization that works on public spaces non-conventional use, temporary reuse of abandoned buildings, connections with other arts.

Antonio Lavarello (1981) is an architect, graduated at Faculty of Architecture of the University of Genoa with a thesis about the relationship between contemporary architecture and historical centers. He's a PhD candidate in Architecture at the same University. His works cover contemporary history of architecture, and actually it's focused on the chinese context. From 2009 he's partner and co-founder of Splace, an informal organization that works on public spaces non-conventional use, temporary reuse of abandoned buildings, connections with other arts. He collaborates to *Amorvacui* architecture blog.