
Transilient Spaces

Public space in a state of transition

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ABSTRACT: This analysis is part of a wider range of thoughts on the transformation of the concept of public space in today's social grid. Placing the concept of social interaction as the main substance of public space, we are trying to identify those areas in which spatial conditions could serve as a core social value and open a dialogue, as to how they can be used to promote acceptance of social differences in the city and in the end, promote public collective action. In this research we call these spontaneously created spaces, Transitional Spaces. The collision and friction with different identities, such as different nationalities or genders, do not interrupt the city's order or corrupt its image. Quite the opposite. The dialogue that we initiate here, puts these issues forward as fully legitimate in the production of a healthy public space, and identifies areas where these frictions are found, satisfying the need of the city residents, for free expression and social contact.

KEYWORDS. Diversity, public collective action, reclaiming urban space, friction, transitional areas

Evgenia Tsagkaraki

MArch (A.U.TH.)/ MSc Design- Space- Culture (N.T.U.A)
12 Zinodotou Street, 11634, Athens, Greece
eugenia.tsangaraki@gmail.com
+30 6974144280

1. AN OVERVIEW

During the last few decades, significant changes have been made in what we call urban landscape, mainly due to economic and political reasons. The way in which people perceive the space surrounding them, and more specifically the way they experience and use the urban structures, are the main turnovers on this matter. The relation between the residents and the urban environment has been intensified since the density of information exchanged in between them, has definitely expanded because of the increasing population mobility, globalization and information overflow.

It is a fact that, the cityscape, more than any other, has always shown great levels of heterogeneity. It is a multi-collective field of identities and forms that freely develop their relation and at the same time reveal their inner frictions and conflicts. This transaction between space and individual is becoming today increasingly complex because on the one hand, we have the constant renewal of human presence that creates a dynamic field of alternating identities, and on the other, the expression of this renewal through the way the cityscape is used. In other words the intensified and, at some level facilitated, human mobility, literally and metaphorically, creates an abrupt urban space of successive meanings and contradictive images. The choice of the urban stimulus is what gives space the sentiment of heterogeneity and diversity.

Let's bear in mind of course that the way people inhabit space reveals not only the individual characteristics of a person, but also his collective choices and aspirations. After all this is why we perceive the public realm in direct relation to the private one.

Having the above line of thoughts as a starting to point to rethink the change of the urban public space, we felt the need to retrieve new conceptual tools to help us identify, filter and in the end, produce public space in the contemporary urban network. At the same time we began to map the emergence of new places, where the alteration of the identity and function of the cityscape becomes more apparent and reveals in a less subtle way the social importance of urban space.



Fig.1

2. THE RESEARCH CORE

The overall research, to which this presentation is based, is an attempt to approach these issues by introducing the concept of space in transition (partly as a paraphrase and a redefinition of the "Non-Places" by Auge and an expansion of the «Post-it City» by La Varra). In other words, this research is attempting to recognize

the creative powers and to specify the characteristics of those parts of the city which remain pending of their use, recognizing their potential to become sites of public expression.

For this reason the urban space is approached here more as a social space, rather than built environment in its strict sense. We perceive it as the field where individual and collective identities unfold and leave their traces, altering the image of the city, without nonetheless coating it; stressing out thusly the importance of the physical dimension of the urban environment in the process of social interaction.

For us, the city is emerging as a major area of contact between similarities, and inevitably, diversities. It is emerging as the place where the dwelling is realized and promoted through all forms of conflicts and frictions (social, political, economic, etc.) within the broader public realm. "The relation to the other, is a crucial connection that motivates social experience" because it triggers repetitively conducted comparisons. Therefore, promotes the development and innate human quest for improving the daily life and ensure a favourable future.

The repeated comparisons and frictions in the urban space occur in places with distinct spatial and temporal characteristics. In any case, the space and time are interrelated concepts that cannot be thought of separately, but only as a conceptual entity. As a tool to approach the nature of these places of friction and identify them within the city's urban structure, we are using the theory of networks and flows, as it is defined by Castells, since it appears only normal to spot a larger concentration of conflict in the places of intense mobility, information dissemination, nodes of cross-flow information and people's walking paths. A key feature of these focal points is, the superposition of meanings attributed to them and the expression of those, either intermittently or in a single time unit, offering them the characteristics of a unique event.

The conceptual patterns that we are using in this research are those of the human diversity and friction as they are defined in the perpetual change of the public space concept and the needs expressed through its inhabitation. This way we are able to approach the meaning of the landscape and its unique characteristics.

The aim of this approach has been mainly to express an opposition against the contemporary method of designing and sometimes thinking, that favors the discrimination between nationalities and genders instead of favoring their mixture, in other words their friction.

"Certainly no one lives in memories or dreams. But we are all "inhabited" by memories and dreams that shape who we are. And that absolutely defines the place and the way we live ".

3. DIVERSITY IN CONFLICT

Based on current theories about the creation of individual and collective identity inside the urban landscape it is proven that, identity can no longer be perceived as something personal that grows outside the public realm. On the contrary anthropologists, such as R. Jenkins, show us that the formation of human identity can only be conceived as a social process and is triggered by the friction with the "other".

Even if we accept the inevitable, which means accepting the network society working under the perception of flows and thus the disappearance of any kind of friction between different individuals, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that at

the nodes of these networks sprouts an intense conflict between individual characteristics. These conflicts formulate relations of dominance that are translated in the city space through urban structures and thus create a hierarchy between individuals and the importance, or even legitimacy, of the space they occupy. According to Bourdieu «Urban space is a field of social education and it gives a social sign to any kind of human movement, by imposing to it characteristics such as gender, culture, rank, nationality». However for political reasons, most of the times, these conflicts are not favored and diversity is pushed aside.

Not having a direct conflict with diversity though, is almost impossible because the formation of any kind of identity awareness is created through the process of comparison, meaning that each and every one of us identifies himself through the recognition of what is different; a process that has no end, a constant game of comparison and distinction in the quest of self-definition. Thus, we understand that the "image" of diversity is always under revision, depending on time itself and historical background of each period.

Being able to identify the dipole of same and different, reveals to us a space that is full of discontinuities and fragments; a social field where everyone is able to express their aspirations and rights into urban space. Although this seems to be a condition of freedom, it ends up in creating "institutional" enclavements, which dictate a specific way of acting and being, leading this way to the sterilization of public space. Extreme examples of such enclavements are all kind of gated areas such as gated communities and shopping malls.



Fig.2

4. TRANSITIONAL SPACE

Opposite to the above mentioned tendency to create protected residential and commercial areas, stands the formation of what we are calling here, "transitional spaces".

Using the theories of Augé, de Certeau and Massey, we are able to identify urban areas that change character and usage, depending on time, historical context and the human aspect; areas where the protagonist is the person and not the political purposes, where the use stays in dialogue to the whole and expresses each moment the needs of each collective identity. We call these places transitional.

Although they carry a large historical background and a superimposing identity, they have an extra feature as to what Schulz defines as "place": they become vessels of intense heterogeneous actions and flows, turning this way into crossings. Their "inhabitants" leave clear tracings of their actions which keep repeating themselves in time and place. They do not abolish the regulations that the place innately has. On the contrary, they try to reveal this special feature of space that gives it its transitional character; and they do this with no plan or thinking. Their actions are triggered by space itself and their basic need to express their aspirations.

Inhabiting transitional spaces does not require for the persons to engage into actions that confirm their individual identities. After all inhabiting means exposing oneself to the diverse and opening a dialogue with the "other", in a constant state of change. This is why these spaces embody the true sense of freedom; because in a way they become the stage where multiple acts are taking place and this is how they gain their true identity: through acts of self-management and spontaneity.

As Giovanni La Varra mentions, transitional spaces are the functional device of the contemporary city. They are like the post-it wall of a construction site where all ideas are laid before our eyes, ready to be executed as we please or need. In other words, they are the areas that rewrite temporarily the city space and function, being the driving forces of urban development weaving a fragile network of human and spatial interrelations upon an already cramped information network.

Transitional space hosts actions outside the program of the city, which take place however to fill in the gaps that this program left behind, giving the city a more flexible character.



Fig.3

Playing on the street, spontaneous commercial benches on the side of the roads, wheel canteens and bars in old busses that spread into chairs and plastic tables,

rave parties taking place in old deserted buildings, football fields that turn into flea markets... The catalogue is endless and it includes all sorts of actions that take over the "official" public space and change its meaning.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSITIONAL SPACES

What emerges from these temporary spaces is above all an abundance of codifications with no predominant one. Unlike the simulated public spaces whose mechanisms of "controlled reaction" offer inhabitants very specific chances to meet and exchange, transitional spaces have no predominant codification: they are "vacant lots", residual spaces around communication systems. Their tangential position to the major flows leave them at the fringes of the complex stratification of images produced by architecture and urbanism, at the fringes of the tradition of these disciplines, whose projects are closed, limited in time, precisely shaped according to contingent needs.

The second characteristic is that they are temporary. They unfold in a particular time-span with the presence of temporary participants. During the night for example it is impossible to recognize any sign of the night-time uses of a parking lot. In almost every case, it is a narrow interval of space and time that slips in between a series of hyper codified environments.

The third characteristic of such places is intensification of anonymous, unsuspected spaces and places, which are astonishingly available for collective practices. But also an intensification of the signifiers fixed in the materiality of the space.

In other words although the nature of transitional spaces is political it does not remain stable as to its political sign. For this reason, transitional spaces are closer to the true meaning of public space in its anthropological sense and the free expression as well as cooperation in the urban landscape.

The fourth and final characteristic of the transitional spaces is that they do not pre-exist. They are rather formed out of the inhabitants needs at a specific time point and become the expression of the city's diversity and multicultural character.

6. TO CONCLUDE

The reason why transitional spaces have a special meaning when discussing the shape of today's city, is that they are expression fields of different political actions that are not included in the program of the city. They are the places in the urban landscape that we need to take under consideration when we analyze a district, when we design it, or even when we look into the parameters of living it at a certain time period. In other words, transitional spaces are the most lively nodes of a network and their analysis can give us data for the needs of an area and methods to meet them. They work as spatial traces that simulate a mirror of certain political, social and economic balance expressed in time.

Besides this political side of transitional spaces, the way they are formed, also gives us data to predict and formulate a future image of the city. They reveal an opposition to the enclaved areas and a new / different angle to look at the way diversity is treated and created in the contemporary cityscape.

Also, it becomes obvious that, the characteristics of these spaces can be used during the designing procedure towards a future contemporary way of approaching

urban planning. As it is mentioned in the proceedings of the recent exhibition *Ciudades Ocasionales*, this happens for 3 reasons.

First of all because the materials used to construct the transitional spaces are sustainable: rubbish, leftovers, abandoned objects that are recovered for new uses, spatial inventions that optimize investments in urban structures. The technologies and techniques used, always involve a direct investment in the building by those who will eventually live in it, they are self-build, light products that can be dismantled and reassembled; they are portable, modular and provided with an efficient and strictly functionalist aesthetic. They are materials that tend to be invisible, that blend into our cities which are increasingly filled with useless objects that are a nuisance.

Secondly, the new forms of temporary use of public space teach us to observe the projects and plans for urban transformations from a different point of view in the light of their abilities to adopt temporality in their interior. The invitation is to reverse the stance taken by architects and town planners with regard to the temporary forms of use of urban space. It isn't so much a question of how to intervene without modifying or hindering the dynamics underway, but rather to think about spaces that can adopt forms that are different to the exclusive ones they have been designed for.

Finally, transitional spaces expose relationships in the public domain, forms of habitation, and structures of exchange and commerce that surprise us because they speak to us, in the materiality of space, of a community that invents a language. Each space develops a different jargon, a system of codes that are difficult to decipher. These places contain an implicit experimentation with new forms of sociality, be they open or closed, inclusive or exclusive, which engender a diverse laboratory of sociality that is weak but constantly transformed and expressed according to the occasions and opportunities. This mass of minorities, each with its own code, customs, diverse forms of attributing value and meaning to the space are the social horizon of each growing city.



Fig.4

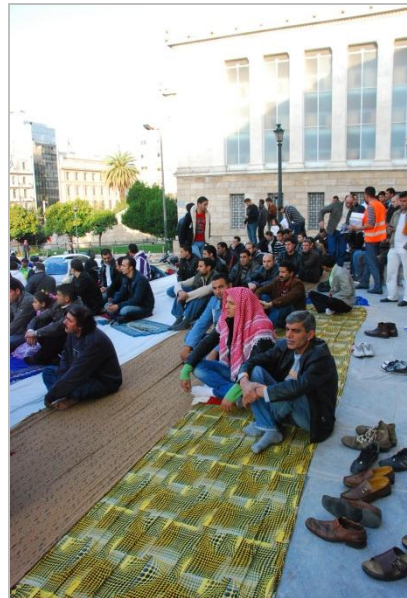


Fig.5

7. INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE – A short reference to the movement of the “Desesperados” in 2011

This article has been a product of personal pondering over the concept of equality and freedom of expression within the city realm and is under constant review. The last few years, living in a country such as Greece, has been quite revealing as to how economy can and does affect our perception of space and “ownership” of public areas. More precisely it became obvious that, as the sense of belonging arouse, the more vibrant became the urban community. People, deprived of their legally gained assets started to reclaim their rights actively, finding an expression field on urban squares, forming groups of identities, sometime homogeneous, others heterogeneous, trying to express their need and aspirations.

The public square became the canvas of all they ever wanted but never had. It became an extension of the house they never owned, the forum they never experienced. An active democracy field, a changing map of identities, a threshold of dreams and a type of battlefield on what they deserved. It was revealed as a transilient place, as a space in transition.

Evgenia Tsagkaraki is an architect, graduated from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2007 and mastered in National Technical University of Athens in Design- Space- Culture in 2010. For the last 5 years she lives in Athens, working as a free-lance architect in large scale projects and at the same time presenting her research in conferences all over the world and Universities. Her passion for re-inhabiting urban space in equal terms has set her steps so far towards a more social approach of architecture and design, thus focusing on urban squatting incidents and reclaiming of urban space. She has worked in different environments and countries thus gaining knowledge of cultural diversity and the need to feeling of belonging. Her research continues up to this day spreading to political actions of reclaiming urban space.

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Legends

- Fig. 1 : Venice Biennale of architecture 2006
- Fig. 2 : Gated community in Brazil (flickr)
- Fig. 3 : Warsaw, Stadion Dziesieciolecia (flickr)
- Fig 4-5 : Athens, Akadimias avenue, University courtyard, Public Muslim Pray on a Sunday morning (2010).