
From graffiti to communitarian self regulation

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. The participation of the citizens is essential (it's present in the ONU Habitat resolutions, XXI local agendas, etc...). But more that sharing determined plan, or deciding with the population, the act of allowing the self building, guided maintenance or self management is the track to be followed.

Some examples of this tendency emerge from schools or offices, more or less adventurous, usually around housing and not so much around public space.

The informal adaptability already happens, it's an existent energy from creative groups of citizens, be it the youngster who searches recognition through some piece of craft that he has done in public space, sharing it through his social web network, or the old lady who improvises a bus stop bench with an old fruit box that was around...

The responsibility of who conceives the public spaces, (landscape architects, urban designers...) lies in incorporating this existent energy, even more in times of scarcity.

KEYWORDS: DIY, urban art, street art, graffiti, adaptability, participation

Pedro Soares Neves

Userdesign.org

Rua dos Industriais, n° 25, 3° esq, 1200-685 Lisboa

Email: pedro.neves@netcabo.pt

Telephone: 00351 965787653

1. Context

In order to establish a better understanding of the proposed ideas, it's important to have in mind several theories around cities and places. I suggest we start with the relation between market, place and urbanism. Regarding these aspects it's important to retain the thoughts of Henri Lefebvre. He observes:

The city in Vitruvius is conspicuous by its absence/presence; though he is speaking of nothing else, he never addresses it directly. It is a thought it were merely an aggregation of "public" monuments and "private" house... Only in the sixteen century, after the rise of the medieval town (founded on commerce, and no longer agrarian in character), and after the establishment of "urban systems" in Italy, Flandres, England, Spanish America and elsewhere did the town emerge as a unified entity-and as a subject.¹

This relation of commerce with the city form is accurate until the XIX century when it starts slowly to be affected during the industrial age.² The shift of production from a home or shop based activity to factories, ultimately led to the development of factory towns. Market no longer internalized place, place began to internalize market.³

The modernism expresses a universal experience of movement away from place and aspires to submerge the concept into a larger whole.⁴ Zoning and rigid programmatic demarcation manifests itself mostly at the urban periphery as "decorated sheds"⁵, occasionally emerging as icons of the "supermodern"⁶. This well demarcated peripheral territories leave little room for opportunity of "place", whilst the urban center has been decaying or transformed by constant temporal layering of infrastructural devices, reproducing a standardized quasi-global culture.

In response to the increasing complexity of cities, various conceptual models have been developed. Trying to guide the reader through a line of thought, I will now focus on several theories of particular importance to this paper.

In the early 1920s a research around the idea of urban ecology developed, with direct analogies between the natural and built environment, especially the notion of evolution in Darwinian terms and the intrinsic elements of competition and survival.⁷ This research influenced later thinking (1970s), in particular the thoughts that favored processes of analysis of fluid urban characteristics and patterns over the production of "finished" plans which offered little flexibility or provision for contingency.⁸ The approach to urbanism as a self organized system is widely acknowledged to be rooted in Jane Jacobs synthesis of behavior in urban neighbourhoods. She proposes:

Thinking has its strategies and tactics too, much as other forms of action have. Merely to think about cities and get somewhere, one of the main things to know is what kind of problems cities pose, for all problems cannot be thought about in the same way. Which avenues of thinking are apt to be useful and to help yield the truth depends not how we might prefer to think about a subject, but rather on the inherent nature of the subject itself.⁹

The rupture in thought initiated by Jane Jacobs had many developments in terms of theory and practice. It has become more or less consensual and even subversive (eg. the gentrification process that West Greenwich Village suffers today and the struggle of some residents that who try to maintain some residual qualities under the "More Jane Jacobs, Less Marc Jacobs" motto).

Another (complementary) theory gains today a deeper sense, in particular the ideas that search some feedback as reality changes, looking at cities not only as subjects

of analysis but also a subject from which feedback could be gathered and synthesized to provide a loop system for further design strategies.¹⁰

These ideas gain particular importance when put in relation with 1820's literary exploration of the sensation of the city¹¹, or with tangible modes of artistic expression like Surrealism in the 1930s, the Lettrists in the 1950s and the Situationists through the 1960s.

Somehow, though, the formalization of psychogeography (a Situationist neologism) detracts from its allure and romance as an un-prescribed activity. In architecture, however, it is the material, the prescription, the reading or the cartography that is of paramount concern and it is the tangible products of writing or mapping the city that may be transposed into an architectural discourse. Debord describes Psychogeography as follows:

*The study of the precise effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized, or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.*¹²

It may be argued that these thoughts had a conclusion point in 1984 through the idea of the body as a mediator of persistent space, most notably in Sennett's *Flesh and Stone*.¹³ However it's clear, through the same author's thoughts, the importance, for our current challenges, of the "The Architecture of Cooperation".¹⁴

Regarding the ways how the ideas of cooperation interact with urban design, it's important to mention the paramount significance of the work of the Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman. He turned urban transportation planning upside down with the idea of "Shared Space", proving that the reduction or even absence of rules affected in a significant positive way the performance of determined urban situations.¹⁵

The containment of rules in public space with the thoughts focused on the value and or the ways in which we can integrate informality¹⁶ clear a path for the understanding of the importance of self proposed actions in public space.

At this point it's important to make several aspects clear. This paper focus can be misunderstood if seen "only" as about better civic practices, as usually this discourse empties the responsibility of design.¹⁷ But even when "designers give a damn" it can go wrong if there's no feedback gathering to provide a loop system for further design strategies.¹⁸

Although the broken window theory¹⁹ has been questioned²⁰ it's installed as common sense, giving birth to incomplete or just incorrect approaches to practices that can be integrated in urban design project proposals. There's a possible field of action placed somewhere between the gated communities (articulated with commercial malls) and the extreme actions of vandalism.

2. Graffiti

Graffiti is mentioned in this paper as an example of a broader spectrum of urban space phenomena, as a problematization factor of all the informal, non authorized, self proposed, ephemeral communication occurrences in urban public space. Posters, stencil, stickers, graffiti-tags, are just some example of elements that have high impact in our lives through our daily usage of urban public spaces.

These elements can't be isolated from the context where elements such as, architecture, "legal" advertisement, traffic signs, urban functional objects, people, cars, trees, etc... all have communication connection and influence the overall urban public space experience. Rules that define the theoretical idea of what the urban public space should be (and used for) aren't able to confine the variables of unpredicted inputs.

The predominance of graffiti in this context gains weight as layers of scribbles and other type of additions to the urban surfaces spread during time. This evolution encompassed with a rigid notion of maintenance in accordance with the questionable ideas of broken window theory, reproducing a fast removal approach that can be profitable for some cleaning companies but not healthy for city council budget or even the urban public space environmental results.

For an mindful approach, the first notion to incorporate is the origin of graffiti, its developments and present moment. Although not being the purpose of this paper, at this moment it is important to identify several key aspects of graffiti.

The graffiti as a movement is recognized by common sense to have started somewhere in the USA. In fact it is still not clear if it started in New York or Philadelphia. Anyway, its consensual that the phenomenon expansion started after an article of 1971 in New York Times called "*Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals*".²¹

Jean Baudrillard commented on the movement in 1976, in a chapter called "The insurrection of signs", as follows:

*The urban city is also a neutralized, homogenized space, a space where indifference, the segregation of urban ghettos, and the downgrading of districts, races and certain age groups are on the increase. In short, it is the cut up space for distinctive signs.*²²

"A new type of intervention in the city" as a reaction to the corporate media and the dominant culture of signs, using intervention in order to alter content and landscape. This reaction approach is most often cited as the reason why graffiti exists and the same that perpetuates the negative perception of the practice.

Accessing hidden parts of the city, moving underground and climbing are secondary to the act of making a mark. The pursuit of the act that determines paths and routes thus, unknowingly, invert the practice of the *dérive*. Method and placement are as important as the act of painting and as the result.

As for the position of the viewer adoptions of Baudrillard term, sign, is meant to describe the repetitive motif of the author who inscribes the city. The viewer seen as a participant in an imagined game that concerns the perception of the city.

Consequently, the particular serial effect which characterizes this pictorial genre is turned into a game of hunting down the images in the series. Signs are repeated at different points of town; this repetition, tracing out a circuit, triggers the perception of a network: various series from a narrative network, and each image is at once a fragment and echo of it.²³

These motifs are never the same and the mutation of form, according to context, seeks its own discourse that is as significant as that which considers the whole "narrative network". This is true to both traditional graffiti forms and more recent "post-graffiti"²⁴ expression.

The idea of “races and age groups” mentioned by Baudrillard in 1976 loses meaning facing the present context of the phenomenon. “Post graffiti” is global and not only about painting, although it maintains the “narrative network” and “inverted *dérive*” that characterize graffiti, this phenomenon nowadays its a practice that clearly connects with fringes the academic field of architecture.

These connections can be seen in recently emerged proposals made by architects who try to get some distance from “rules” formality (eg, “performance architecture”), through the art context (and respective market, galleries, museums, curators...), searching subversion (as “rebel sell” marketing strategy)²⁵ or even “playing” with the grey areas between urban laws and building rules²⁶.

Whilst some of these practices can be see as models, seeking the serial effect²⁷, other practices open paths for another kind of practicing architecture, like the 1996 example of Léon Aucoc square, in Bordeaux, by Lacaton & Vassal²⁸. The refusal of dramatic changes in spaces allied with the self proposing informal creative actions, have in contexts of economical scarcity a very fruitful future.

3. Communitarian self regulation

Participation and self building are practices that have very broad theoretical and practical backgrounds, and here I will only focus on determined aspects that are relevant for this paper purposes. Precisely one of the difficulties of mentioning these subjects comes from multiplicity of approaches, that in its majority end up in technical or political preconceptions.

The participation of the populations is essential (it is present in the ONU Habitat resolutions, XXI local agendas, etc...). But more that sharing a determined plan or deciding with the population, the act of allowing the self building, guided maintenance or self management is the matter that I would like to draw the reader's attention to.

As for graffiti, the method and placement are as important as the act of painting, in communitarian self regulation; the informal, spontaneous, and ephemeral actions are as important as the methodologies. At this point and as reference, it is important to mention the SAAL (Serviço Ambulatorio de Apoio Local) program that occurred in Portugal during 2 years after the 1976 democratic revolution. Born of particular international and Portuguese political and architecture practice contexts, this program developed mechanisms for self building processes, technically advised by architects³⁰.

The interpretation of these mechanisms varied from south to north of Portugal, and gave birth to several kinds of results. Whilst at the time the scarcity related to housing, the 91 projects that were developed generated also solutions for collective public space management. But maybe the most international reference in relation with geographical context is the Kenneth Frampton “Critical Regionalism”³¹, where among others, Álvaro Siza (an active SAAL architect) is mentioned.

Portugal has extraordinary conditions for being a test tube for tracing the “steps” that are missing in the development from the graffiti to the communitarian self regulation. There are certain characteristics that give support to this idea, peninsular lyricism³² from a philosophical point of view and, from a more practical point of view, the kind of “urban systems” that the portuguese spread trough the world when founding cities³³ (in contrast with the reference of Henri Lefebvre

"urban systems" in Italy, Flandres, England, Spanish America") or, in more contextual terms, the Porto school of architecture.

4. Final thoughts

Far from being linear, the relations that exist between graffiti and the communitarian self regulation are full of challenges and risks.

The advertisement in general and in particular the automobile or the urban clothing fashion industries are interested in incorporating the graffiti language(s) in marketing strategies. Even beside the visual copy paste some methods are being used to explore new (non regulated) ways of communication consumption products under the designation of guerrilla marketing³⁵. Another strong example is the (revival) adoption of graffiti (street art, urban art...) by the Art System (agents, galleries, collectors, museums...).

These appropriating phenomena had a strong influence in the development of the impact that graffiti has had in the urban environment. Somehow they have given strength and some legitimacy to several kinds of qualified interventions but at the same time increased the quantity of interventions with questionable quality.

There are clear opportunities that have emerged from these developments, broader audiences, and new perspectives over the usefulness of some kinds of graffiti. However, again, and as in many other phenomena, some preconceptions that detached graffiti from "real life" are crystallized, in other words the anonymous citizen and the common street user are out from this "star-system" of entertainment and consumption equation.

In any case the urban environment is being used without the needed awareness and contribution from the most qualified areas of activity to do so (architecture, urbanism, urban design...). This missing link between graffiti and the communitarian self regulation is an opportunity for the big quantity and quality of architecture professionals, an opportunity that gets even clearer in times of scarcity and when associated with the functional and urban environmental needs that arise mostly in the dispersed city.

Pedro Soares Neves biography

1976, Lisbon. Multidisciplinary and post graduate academic training in design and architecture (Barcelona and Rome). Specialized in participatory methodologies and informal and spontaneous pictorial appropriation of public space (eg, Graffiti). PhD (student) in Architecture at Engineering Institute of Lisbon, lecturer and urban designer / consultant at metropolitan (eg: road infrastructure IC19, 17) and municipal scale (eg, project CRONO), co-responsible for adapting to Lisbon's exhibition "The Street Belongs to all of us" (IVM, Françoise Asher) and winner of the first prize for the "No Rules Great Spot" Oporto.

¹ Lefebvre, H., *The production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell) p.271, 1991

-
- ² Zukin S., *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland*, Berkley: University of California Press, p.7, 1991
- ³ *Ibid.* p.9
- ⁴ Burgin, V., *In/Different Spaces*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 154-168, 1996
- ⁵ Venturi, R., Scott-Brown, D. and Izenour, S., *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972
- ⁶ Ibelings, H., *Supermodernism. Architecture in the Age of Globalization*, Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 1998
- ⁷ Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, *The City*, University of Chicago Press, 1925
- ⁸ Hall, P., *Cities of Tomorrow: an Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988
- ⁹ Jacobs, J., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House, p. 428, 1961
- ¹⁰ Banham, R., Barker, P., Hall, P. and Price, C., "Non-Plan: An experiment in Freedom", *New Society*, 20 March, N°.338, pp. 435-443, 1969
- ¹¹ De Quincey, T., *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, New York: Dover Publications Inc. p.42, 1821
- ¹² Debord, G., *Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography*, Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1955
- ¹³ Sennet, R., *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994
- ¹⁴ Sennet, R., *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012
- ¹⁵ Carmona, M., *Public Places - Urban Spaces*, London: Routledge, pp. 108-110, 2010
- ¹⁶ De Soto, Hernando, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*, Basic Books, 2000
- ¹⁷ Sinclair, C., *Design Like You Give A Damn: Architectural Responses To Humanitarian Crises* Metropolis Books, 2006
- ¹⁸ Scott Shall, Director and President of the International Design Clinic, principal at the architecture and design firm sgsa+d llc, and Assistant Professor of Architecture at Temple University, gives his presentation on "why designers should give a damn". - <http://youtu.be/iQe4DvSWIzA?t=4m59s>

-
- ¹⁹ George L. Kelling, Catherine M. Coles, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order And Reducing Crime In Our Communities*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997
- ²⁰ Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing*, Harvard, 2001
- ²¹ Cooper, M., *Tag Town*, Astra, Sweden: Dokument Forlag + Distribution, 2008
- ²² Baudrillard, J., *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976
- ²³ Bailly, J.-C., *Traces, introduction to Paris Graffiti*, photographs by Joerg Huber (New York: Thames and Hudson) pp 8-9, 1986
- ²⁴ Abarca, J., *"el postgraffiti, su escenario y sus raíces: graffiti, punk, skate y contrapublicidad."* Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 2010
- ²⁵ Heath, Joseph, *The Rebel Sell: Why the culture can't be jammed*, Capstone 2006
- ²⁶ Cirugeda, Santiago, *Arquitecturas Colectivas. Camiones, Contenedores y Colectivos*, Edit Vibok, 2011
- ²⁷ Borasi, G., Zardini, M., *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*, Sun Publishers, 2008
- ²⁸ Lacaton, A. e Vassal, J. P. Plaza Léon Aucoc. in Revista 2G n.o 21.
- ³⁰ Bandeirinha, J.A., *O Processo SAAL e a Arquitectura no 25 de Abril de 1974*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2007
- ³¹ Frampton, K. "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance", in "Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture." Seattle: Bay Press, 1983
- ³² Lourenço, Eduardo, *O Labirinto da Saudade Psicanálise Mítica do Destino Português*, Gradiva Publicações, 2001
- ³³ Portas, N., *A Cidade como Arquitectura*, Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2007
- ³⁵ Levinson, J., *Guerrilla Marketing: Easy and Inexpensive Strategies for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business*, London: Houghton Mifflin, 1983