
The city, European Identity and the process of urban malaise.

The cognition of the urban system. The case of Madrid.

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ABSTRACT: In the face of the current crisis, a constant and uninterrupted process of renegotiation takes place in the European city. A renegotiation at the level of the definition of who and what constitute the system and who do not. The article focuses on processes of urban cognition that take place in the public space, delving in applying the theory of autopoiesis of living systems by Maturana and Varela (1974).

The city constitutes the landscape where the essence of European identity unfolds. Many European cities present clear symptoms of urban malaise, to which the recent civil protests are an enactive response of the city as a complex ecosystem in the form of a creation of new social space. This relevant and dangerous game can be best observed in the diverse processes of appropriation, exclusion, integration participation and so on, that make use of the communication channels of the public space.

KEYWORDS: urban cognition, public space, autopoiesis, enaction, European identity, indignados,

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The true city offers citizens the love of freedom instead of the hope of rewards or even the security of possessions; for "it is slaves, not free men, who are given rewards for virtue." (Spinoza, Political treatise).

(Spinoza: Practical philosophy, Gilles Deleuze 1988)

1. Introduction.

In the current landscape of the rampant combination of different crises, namely financial, energetic, food crisis, we witness a rapid deconstruction of many ideas that, until very recently, were at the core of the modern European identity. The welfare state is rapidly disappearing in the societies which had a reasonable level of state and community organized provision of prosperity and social support for all citizens. As Tony Judt has accurately portrayed, Europe is evolving into an illfare state.

This deconstruction of a general and dominant idea of society based on certain equality and solidarity gives way for a neo individualism that leaves the citizen as a mere consumer in the marasmus of a ultraliberal capitalist economy alone with no collective governance to control it (Harvey 2012).

This process is having an immense effect on cities at many levels, and its spatial consequences can already been noticed all across Europe. Being Europe a region of cities, European society is primarily an urban society whose identity is an urban one. Cities in southern Europe are especially prone to suffer this effects due to their socioeconomic structure and their urban structure.



Fig.1

This article develops a particular vision on the European City as a complex and extremely dynamic landscape. A constant and uninterrupted process of renegotiation takes place in the European city. A renegotiation at the level of the definition of *who* and *what* constitute the system and *who* do not. This is a relevant and dangerous game and it is precisely in the public space where it can be best observed, as David Harvey has timely pointed out in his *Rebel Cities* (2012).

What can we, architects, urban planners and landscape architects, learn from this process? The nature of architecture within this social tissue of interdependencies is absolutely political and raises the ethical questions on its decisions. All the current events are a call for a relocation of architecture within a political consciousness.

2. On the importance of cities in European identity.

Our environments are cities. Cities are the places-artefacts that facilitated the birth of culture, progress and civilization (Mumford 1961). We could well argue that the city conforms one of the major ethical problematic and the quintessential scene for ethical behaviour. The city constitutes the landscape where the essence of European identity unfolds. Europe is primarily an urban society and as such its identity is quintessentially an urban identity

From ancient Greek cities, the polis has been conceived as the origin and support of political life. And this has been because of the conception of this city as a main communicative space. Greek agora and Roman forum establish the basis for the creation of a singular urban space that defines citizenship. Medieval market places stay as key spaces to make form to the burghs, cities that shaped modern Europe much earlier than national states. We dare to say that Europe is deeply a region of cities, prior to being a region of states.

3. Cities as complex ecosystems.

My hypothesis of departure here is that cities could be considered as autopoietic systems, following the theory of living systems formulated by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1974) which considers living beings as a complex network that is self-referential, self-organised and autopoietic, that is, self-creating. This definition includes a differentiation of a pattern of relationships and physical structures that embody the pattern through a process of actualization. This process is what they define as cognition.

If the city is defined by the abstract pattern of relations, the physical structures that embody those relations and the set of processes that maintain the identity of the system as adaptive, then, the cognition process taking place as the process of actualization also responds to the same structural determinacy. Put in other words, whatever our urban societies are to become, it will be facilitated or circumscribed by our physical space, our built reality.

Out of these structures, the physical realm, public space plays an invaluable role. It frames the quintessential encounter of the sociality of societal agents *in* space. In fact, I argue that what has been traditionally conceived as our public space is not just the physical substrate for encounter, it is both the result of a cultural

conception(and creation) and the phenomenological space (Maturana 1974) that determines the horizon of its possibilities.

We must look at the main features of the communicative processes and how do relate to the process of self-determinacy and self-creation of the city because that is where the identity of the system and its potential for the future reside. Given that the city as an autopoietic system that is structurally determined, that is, determined by the properties and performance of the material unities that compose the system, our quest should clearly understand that the communicative process are, as well, spatially determined.

4. On the protest as a systemic response.

In my view, the current civil movements that have resulted from the protests could even be considered to be a systemic response to the threat of a decaying urban social tissue (a perturbation) The necessary resilience of the system, that is, the city, ensures a certain degree of tolerance, but its adaptive nature also provides for reaction in order to maintain its identity. Given that the city system is an order emergent out of the diverse interaction of autonomous agents, it embodies their conflicts and the result resembles pretty much the overall result of the sum of the negotiation among agents,

The main claim of the thinkers behind the theorization of this new set of knowledge is that some phenomena in nature do not respond to as simple a behaviour as that drawn from deterministic linear rules of classical physics (Capra 1996). Applied to cities this view challenges reductionist views of it as a either an artistic creation, a technical product or the mere historical result of accumulated capital, population and built structures for sedentary lifestyle. This view also challenges the more developed idea of cities as mechanisms. Cities cannot be seen anymore as very complicated machines, for their behaviour is not predictable at all, which is not to say it cannot be anticipated. (J. Ruiz, 2011).

There have been many other attempts of applying autopoiesis to societies to which this hypothesis is indebted. Our view partially builds on that of Niklas Luhmann, for whom social systems are organisms (Luhmann, 1984), and their behaviour much depends of the pattern of organization and interaction between elements. The work of Talcott Parsons also points into this direction. For him the city is an ecosystem for it is composed of different elements or systems that are governed by the behaviour of these objects towards one another and these elements constitute a "state of mutually oriented interdependency" (1951)

These productive relations do establish and define a space where the self-creation of the system takes place. This relational circularity or organisational closure is claimed to be observed in the city as a complex ecosystem. However, this encircled understanding of cities leads to a view of a system that reproduces itself and may not account properly for its dynamism. How can we reconcile this with the observation of the extreme dynamism of cities?

5. Civil movements as enactive responses.

Recently, the paradigm of Enaction, developed by Francisco Varela as an embodied and phenomenologically informed alternative to mainstream cognitive science (Varela et al.1991), is generating a lot of interest in its approach to social interaction (Di Paolo 2009b). This account of sociality begins with an emphasis of biological autonomy and mutually coordinated interaction as opposed to the mainstream computationalist approach. It is recognized that the interaction process itself forms an irreducible domain of dynamics which can be constitutive of individual agency and social cognition (De Jaegher et al. 2010). Moreover, it is possible to trace the influences of such irreducible interactions between autonomous systems all the way from cell to society and back again (Di Paolo 2012). Cities, are no exception to this. This enactive approach may help us elucidate how principles like autonomy, emergence, sense making, embodiment, etc affect and conform the city.

If we are to interpret the city as a complex adaptive system, we start to observe enaction behind the active citizens' collective interaction with built structures in public space. Out of the interactions of diverse individual agents we observe a new realm emerge and as such it accounts for the production of novelty and dynamism of a system like the city.

Mapa conceptual acampadosol v3.0

Este mapa conceptual es dinámico y está permanentemente desarrollándose de vez en cuando a medida que se conectan. Es un mapa vivo, móvil, interconectado, en constante evolución. Te invitamos a seguirlo evolucionando en tiempo real (<http://www.acampadosol.com/Mapa-conceptual-de-la-acampadosol/>)

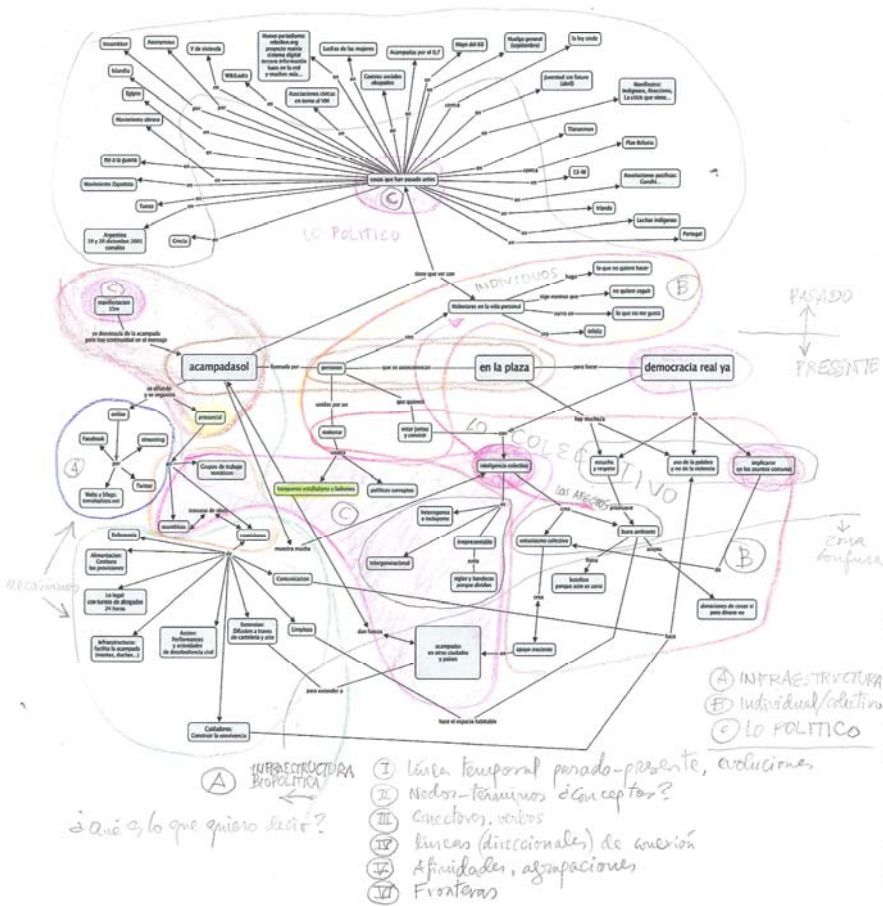


Fig. 2

Under this understanding, we can start to consider that the city develops emergent orders and patterns of behaviour from the clustering and combination of co-regulated actions of small agents, resulting in the forecoming of novelty, such as the unforeseeable evolution of these protests into popular democratic assemblies, and constituting a true production of space that reconfigures its phenomenological realm.

6. Enaction as production of space.

As we have seen, the moment when the movements such as 15M in Spain started to march on the streets they started to configure their own phenomenological realm, adding a new layer of cognoscitive space to the already stacked realities of the city. These additions and over impositions do not all just add to each other and exist in simultaneity, for some are in contact with others and rub in conflict. Thus, urban space recuperates its meaning as a democratic space of disense and renegotiation (Bouchain 2012).

Moreover, when these movements started to camp and to constitute popular assemblies, they started to actively define their milieu. As we have seen from the enactive approach, this proactive assemblage allows to respond to perturbation in both their internal and external dimensions and ,in fact, constitutes and defines its phenomenological space by drawing a horizon of possibilities. This process resembles greatly those described by Henri Lefebvre (1974).

The assemblies were for many citizens, numbered in thousands, the first and only real experience of direct and participatory democracy. The emotional stamp left on those who participated and witnessed it has been of great impact, indeed forging, through the apparently subversive spatial practices of the encounter, a new and refound common, the space of personal expression, participation and decision. It was not only a re-appropriation, but a genuine creation of a new layer of meaningful and inclusive space of citizenship.

7. From frayed flows to articulated places.

Perhaps we are all aware that the contemporary European city has been conceived and managed from a late capitalist idea of globalized cities, in which the significance of local public spaces and cohesioned urban tissue was pervaded in the last decades by a certain idea of the role of financial capital and energetic flows that to the most ingenious has left at its best, a city pierced as a strainer. The contemporary paradigm of mobility at all scales and in all domains (free circulation of capitals, social mobility, transportation mobility) has arguably resulted in many confronted realities of which some are positive. However, the often uncontrolled and merely lucrative gentrification processes, together with the reconfiguration of the centres as mere touristic and anonymous poles of consumption, displacing dwelling and mix-used tissue for endless streets of franchised globality, has resulted in a kidnapping of significative citizen public space.

The right to centrality claimed by Lefebvre as the main idea behind his notion of urbanity in his *Droit à la ville* (1967) has been pushed away by an incontrollable flow that does not have where to stop and regain breath. The centrifugal forces of the flows and speed of the contemporary city has displaced centrality (of access to information, to opportunities, to the others) leaving a vacuum in the shape of privately managed squares in where we can only find the latest Vodafone event. As an answer to this state of the city, to this unease of endless movement in which urban life is losing its pulse and its creative energy, to this scarcity of places of encounter and dialogue, these social movements spontaneously decided to camp. This apparently petty move actually ensured that the claims of the people surpassed the triviality of a demonstration. By camping and refusing to move, the regained a space, the refused to circulate and simply stayed, talked, re-

encountered the others and gave time to place. According to some participants, the need to camp raised spontaneously without a previous plan, as a result of the need to see that their claims were important, that they were not just another march that would disappear in the restless movements of consumerist crowds and commuting flows. They initiated a persistent immobility that gave them real presence and a sense of place.

This speeding up of an artificially sustained urban-centre metabolism of shopping and commuting has left few spaces for a meaningful contact among inhabitants and a restless deprivation of dialogue in the city. It should not be surprising that these dynamics have prospered along a deterioration of democratic quality, starting at the suppression of a lived and plural public sphere of communications (at all levels, by concentrating all published and audio-visual media in few corporate hands and by extinguishing the places and moments of urban citizenship and individual decision making).

Those dynamics, once the current crisis has built its landscape of unemployment, inequality and deprivation, have resulted in an urban malaise that is timely characterized by the raise of urban poverty and accompanied by contagious depressive attitude and to which these civil movements and protests have become an answer and a vindication.

The use of the street and the squares simply went beyond the preconceived idea of them being the given spaces for citizen activity, for those spaces were long gone as public, really. It was the very act of staying, refusing to flow and disappear in the stream of contemporary express oblivion, together with the act of gathering to discuss and decide what refunded their *publicness* beyond an obsolete symbolic figure.



Fig.3

The act of permanence was perceived as act of resistance and the constitution of a parallel order defied authoritarian derive in the governance of the metropolis (Rousseau 2011). It was an act of resistance against the ongoing perfect ransom of public space. Such kidnapping of civic space from the citizens was accompanied, grounded and reinforced by the recent plethora of normative legislation highly restrictive of the use of public space. This simple but clarifying realization poses big questions about the real political nature of our flowing metropolis.

8. Urban emotion reading. Cases

The fact that these social movements have been gathering in urban centres should be no surprise for the centrality of urbanity goes beyond that of central physical location to acquire also centrality in the terrains of memory and therefore, significance.

In the case of Madrid, "Acampada Sol", "Toma la plaza", the names of this diffuse but very dynamic movement are symptomatic of the need for a reconquering of a seemingly lost public space. Many people are now feeling that they are pushed to the outskirts of the social system if not just expelled from it. This feeling is part of an general state of ill-being that could be claimed to be clustering into urban emotion of malaise.



Fig. 4

The protesters did not decide to protest in one of the recent neighbourhoods built as a extensive mono harvests of thousands of now empty dwellings (PAUs), even though the lack of access to a dignified dwelling by the younger generation is arguably one of the main problems of Spanish society, but decided to claim the very centre of the city as their space. This choice also has its urban reading as the urbanization of their problematic.

Puerta del Sol is not only at the centre of the city and is the origin of the mileage of the national road network, but also the centre of one of the most important commercial areas of the city, an important intermodal station and hosts the seat of the regional Government which formerly was a unfortunately renowned police headquarters and detention centre during the dictatorship (1939-1975). Its significance is big, such is Syntagma square's for Athens, which has also been at the centre of the political life of the country for the last decades and hosts the national parliament.

In the case of Porto, it is necessary to point that the greater Porto urban area, the second conurbation of the country by the number of inhabitants, gathers two thirds of the extreme poverty and the vast majority of those who receive the state subsidy for minimum social insertion. A number of plans of urban regeneration have so far failed in bringing the centre back to life beyond the coupled dynamics of touristic gentrification and social exclusion. This dynamics could turn out to be an *avant garde* of what is to come in the near future to many southern European cities and confirms certain tendency to a so called "bananización" (standing for a process of becoming a banana republic). Let us remember that in less developed countries slums are usually door to door with the extreme wealth.

9. A final reflection.

The lessons to be learned may exceed the scope and modest ambition of this article; however, and nevertheless the refreshing vitality of these protests, the role of architects and urban designers in charge of the physical structures of urban public space is still big. May we try to avoid the over-programming of such spaces as is clearly seen in many briefs in competitions and commissions for contemporary urban public spaces? This is something that appears to be closer to a suppression of the real role of public space in a complex city ecosystem.

Similar perspectives on the nature of the design practices, notably architecture and urbanism, were developed in the 60s, an era of social protests against a social system that although different, bears certain parallelisms with today's agitations. Back then, Henri Raymond also argued that our role as designers might not be to answer predefined needs but to interpret possible practices emerging of social interaction. This may mean defining defending spaces for appropriation such as Lefebvre claimed that is not about "localizing in preexisting space a need or a function but, on the contrary, *spatializing* a social activity, tied to a practice as a whole, by producing an appropriated space"

In an era of social activity and protests as "We ask the architects not to create a mode of life but to form spaces in which the models of habitat and the modes of life can manifest themselves" or paraphrasing Bernard Huet, we should "not design houses (cities) that materialize the cultural models, but ones capable of accommodating them" since "The true city offers citizens the love of freedom instead of the hope of rewards or even the security of possessions; for "it is slaves, not free men, who are given rewards for virtue." (Spinoza, Political treatise).

Legends:

Fig. 1: Graffiti near Puerta del Sol, Madrid. June 2011. Author unknown. Fig. 2: Conceptual Map of the composition and precedents of "Acampada Sol" Source: Grupo de Pensamiento de Acampada Sol. Fig. 3: Photograph of a popular assembly in "Acampada Sol" during May-June 2011. Authors: Victor J. Valbuena Fig. 4: Photograph of Puerta del Sol during May 2011. Author: Pablo G. Villaraco

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