
Political activism and the dynamic of the public space

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ABSTRACT. Social studies, geography, political science, visual arts and other related disciplines have undergone, the two last decades, a "spatial turn" which has lead to a blossoming of interests in matters of politics and space. In this discourse, physical public space seems to play a more or less instrumental role, mainly deriving from its characteristic of representing aspects of social phenomena. Thus, various issues like power, democracy, segregation, privatization, political action, symbolism and even collective memory are being analyzed through space. The intent of this article is to follow a reverse outlook mainly by addressing the question of what urban planning might gain from political theory if its aims include the apprehension of a complex and democratic public realm.

KEYWORDS. Public space, politics, activism, democracy, urban studies, void

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Public space is a term very hard to define and as such it is left out of most dictionary entries. In urban studies and architecture it is often used indiscriminately to depict everything that is not private, a fact which leads to great conceptual confusion. In order to disperse this confusion, theoretical discourse tends to focus on an exhaustive exploration of the public/private split. This drift has proven more or less inefficient in offering an accurate meaning of public space despite the fetishism which it has generated in architectural research. And this is because today it is broadly accepted that the private and the public are two interdependent realities encountered through gradients of privacy and publicity, regarding whose limits there can be no general agreement or a commonly accepted and enduring theory.

Equally misleading is the use of the term in the singular form. When we invoke "the" public space we evoke a conceptual illusion that there is a continuous, homogenous area, as hyper-space or meta-space that can ideally represent social public life in the physical world. Of course we know from our experience in physical space that there are many kinds of public spaces differentiated according to their ownership status, their usage, their controlled access, their symbolic association and even their appropriation by different groups. This contradiction between multiple realities and the unambiguous conceptualization of the term in the singular fired up a theoretical struggle, striving to distinguish those qualities or criteria which through design could make public space as accessible, participatory, democratic and equitable as possible. Although this preoccupation has proven fruitful for architecture and urban design, the pursuit of a public space that would resemble the archetype of the ancient Greek agora, in today's crowded and complex societies, has been ineffective.

Yet it would be reckless to disregard "the obvious democratic connotations that the word public places to the word space" (Deutsche 1998:1), this implies collectivity, openness, participation, accessibility and indicates the importance of examining the relations between public space and public sphere. Consequently the question that emerges from these assumptions, is in what way we can investigate this relation (public space and public sphere) so that it would have an effective and enlightening outcome for planning and design theory and praxis. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to answer this question mainly by noting and commenting upon current crucial aspects of epistemic political thought, in the way they relate to matters of physical public space. To amplify my argument I will also use some "scattered" examples of political activism. In Greece for example, global crisis and its political and economic impact the last two years have created a disorderly and polarized social situation, where collective reactions and protests in the public space have been numerous and varied as to their form, intensity or duration. Examples of political activism in the public space and for the public space, some broadly featured and discussed, while others less known or commented.

On February 12, 2012, Athens suffered maybe the biggest catastrophe in time of peace. Riots were triggered by the signing of a second memorandum between Greece and the three-part coalition headed by the WMF and by the new wave of austerity measures that this signing mandated. More than a hundred thousand protesters descended on the streets of Athens that day, but riots ended with fractional groups vandalizing the city, throwing petrol bombs and rocks at riot police who responded with tear gas¹. Youths in hoods and gas masks used sledgehammers to smash marble paving slabs in the capital's main Syntagma square. These extremities led to the burning down of at least 10 buildings, including a historic cinema, a bank and cafeteria and the smashing and looting of dozens of shops.

The protesters' target was of course neither the buildings nor the elements that furnish public space but what these represented: the reproduction of existing power relations; the lives lived amongst these buildings; the lives lived in the public space. This notion not only heightens awareness of the political function of architecture as being mostly the outcome of pre-established demands and expectations. It also reflects what Lefebvre summarized in his urban-centered philosophy of "The right to the city". According to Lefebvre the implications of the laws of capitalism on the western city are internalized in the normative role of urban planning. That means that despite the claims of "humanitarian" architects that everyday life can be ameliorated by better urban form, that careful planning can enhance human interaction, the reality is that such a mission lacks a pragmatic basis (Lefebvre, 2005). Nothing could be truer in the case of modern postwar Greece where the easiest and fastest way to "develop" (to produce capital) was to invest in land-developing and ceaseless building, consequently eliminating public space in most cities.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Prime Ministers' Lucas Papademos response to these events was to denounce the tragic breakdown of order and to state at parliament that "vandalism, violence and destruction have no place in a democratic country and won't be tolerated" ². Yet such violent events seem to occur consistently in recent years, not only in Athens or Cairo but also in cities in Western Europe, like the "civil unrest" in France in 2005 or at several boroughs and districts of cities and towns across England between 6 and 10 August 2011. Moreover as the economic crisis deepens, Athens is becoming a polarized and repressed terrain of diffused violence: right-wing extremists as well as anarchists occupying and guarding public spaces, pogrom-like attacks on immigrants in the downtown area, looting and beating of civilians as well as criminalization of public space by the police. And this is because even though public space has a democratic potential, it can also paradoxically exist as an area where aggression and violence burst up (Springer 2011:528). As strife and antagonism are "the primary reality of life" (Mouffe 2000:113), democracy always runs the risk of being prone to violence. Violence among other things can be materialized via the public display of dissensus. This means that long before we can imagine a public space of free and unbiased interaction with other people, whom we recognize as "alike" or accept as different, we should accept that the main element of human coexistence is competition. What Mouffe (2000) then proposes is the broadly discussed idea of radical democracy providing the possibility for antagonism to be transformed into agonism.

Following the violent riots of the movement of the "Indignants" in May 2011, was the Greek reflex to the corresponding Spanish movement of the "Indignados", where political agonism shifted from ephemeral action in the streets to a relative permanence in the occupied square. Of course the idea of occupation of parts of cities is not new and has been associated with some particularly revolutionary and violent events beginning with the Paris Commune in 1871³. In this new version of less bloody occupation, the activists disputed authority by their sheer immobile presence. The installation of a small dissident territory where even the daily needs of sleeping and eating were reorganized and acquired a new meaning, symbolically expressed the nonnegotiable character of the protestors' requests.

The revolutionary spirit of occupation that spread throughout all metropolitan areas, from Cairo, Madrid, Athens and Zuccotti Park shook the internet society. The reason, though, that it was so broadly discussed was precisely because it took place so concretely and indisputably and was highly visible in space. What this example stresses is what Arendt considers as the public space's crucial substance: being the space of appearance or the area needed for people to be seen. According to Simon Springer, "absent this initial physical dimension, claims may be audible or textual to become discursive within the public sphere, but they still lack a space of appearance" (Springer 2008:538). Lefebvre (1991:416-417) also argues that these ideas, values or representations that fail to make their mark in space "lose all pith and become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions, or mutate into fantasies". All these thoughts lead up to the critical importance of the materiality of public space.



Fig3



Fig.4

Everyday life in the occupied square in Athens was the theme of an episode entitled "Syntagma square" in the documentary film series *Docville: Life in a Time of Crisis*, by director Katerina Patroni, a film screened at the 14th Thessaloniki Documentary Festival 2012. Unexpectedly enough, the filmmaker's cameras focused on people who did not incorporate the pure "agonistic body" of the demonstrators; on a priest who was there in order to teach the word of Christ, on a mother who was there to protest for the death of her child in a public hospital etc. In other words the camera focused on the margins of this political protest. At the press conference that followed, the film producer Mark Gastine had to argue in favor of his film, against the reactions of embarrassment and anger of the cinema spectators. Reactions rising from a painful realization that in this symbolic space of resistance and agonism (Syntagma square) there were still some people who were not entitled to have "expectations of space" (De Certeau, 2010).

In the short time that the square became a symbol of resistance, the claims of those who disagreed with the practices of the "Indignants" (mainly central government agencies and local authorities) advocated the restoration of the square

in to its permanent identity. In their words "the symbol of democracy (meaning the actual central square of Athens that rests in front of the parliament – Syntagma square) had become a source of contamination", "the tents (where the protesters lived) were inconsistent with Greek aesthetics" and it was very important to reset the square "to its normal condition"⁴. What these statements imply by mentioning the appropriate use and the ideal form of the square, is that this public space and by extension all public spaces exist only in order to respond to operational needs that are "natural" or "organic" and in that way common to all users. In other words they imply that there is a compact and objective social reality in which space maintains its neutrality. Deutsche (1998:3) calls this constraint of the public space's prospect as a physical terrain for people to protest and set their demands, the "fading" of politics.



Fig.5

Nevertheless these "appropriate or ideal" conditions that prevailed in the square or other public areas of the city were as equally ephemeral as the protesters' occupation. Whether it was for the reconstruction of the square just before the 2004 Olympic Games, coupled with feelings of prosperity and cosmopolitanism, or the Christmas village with "Europe's highest Christmas tree", they all ended up being temporary conditions. It seems that any fights in the public space and for the public space are endless and any conquests or liberations, whether accomplished from "bottom up" or "top down" are followed by situations unimaginable to the human mind. The impermanence of its incorporations is perhaps precisely what constitutes the public space's permanent identity. On the other hand when the ephemeral nature of a demand over public space mutates to a more permanent spatial expression we have a kind of "hegemony" over space. "Hegemony", which means, the prevalence of a standpoint and the exclusion of another, the inclusion of a group and the exclusion of another.

How can we sum up all these thoughts generated by the transient, more or less ephemeral events of political activism? Public space cannot exist as an inaccurate, vague concept at the service of a general participatory rule. There are many public spaces as there are many public spheres and thus we cannot attribute to it an original, ideal, general or timeless use of the term. In addition the public both as a concept and as a social and spatial entity is not immune to transformation. The prevalence of a single identity, the formation of a "compact" topography, the occupation for a single use or even by the dominance of a form means that we have the representation of a single perspective, and the exclusion of others.

Political scientist Yannis Stavrakakis (2007) in his article «From the representation of politics to a topology of the political» contributes a systematic analysis on how space is conceived in modern political thought. One of the reasons he considers critical in rethinking our perspective of physical public space is that "...even if the emergency of the new requires the dislocation of pre-existing hegemonic structures, it has, in its turn, to acquire a spatial representation:" New social relations require new space - Change your life! Change society! These precepts mean nothing without the production of a suitable space "(Lefebvre 1991:55)» (Stavrakakis 2007:155). Moreover how can we overlook the fact that public space exists as a spectrum of the visible of public sphere and that it is actually the physical setting in which individual identities and the identities of social groups are formed and questioned? (Deutsche 1998:4). What we have to hope and work for then, is in Doreen Massey (2005:55) words "...to contribute to a process of liberating space from its old chain meaning and to associate it with a different one in which it might have, in particular, more political potential".

Through this political potential we can conclude that public space is generated by conflict and not by consent. Maybe it is not a space (among spaces) at all (Marchart 1999:17) but a common good whose problematic should always be a question. What all this means for urban design and architecture is not in the aim of this paper to answer. We could though make a reference to the concept of the void. Public space as a void is described by Kristiaan Borret (1999) as a space "...that does not possess a clear or univocal identity and seems to lack any code whatsoever...that resists all straightforward definition, because its semantic emptiness turns out to have less to do with an absence of codes than with a multiple presence of codes that are superimposed, that clash, or even destroy each other (Borret 1999: 240). We don't know to what extent this idea of public space originates from what Claude Lefort paradigmatically illustrates about democracy:"(in democracy) the locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can cosubstantial with it – and cannot be represented" (Lefort 1988:17). In this regard the thought of Bart Lootsma (Lootsma 2001:17) indicating that the problem with public space is not how architecture will manage an empty space but that it remains totally unclear what will take place in this empty space, can be reversed without causing resentment. Under the optimistic perspective that whatever will take place in the public space remains completely obscure and unknown the problem lies in the architectural management of an empty space.

Notes

¹ For an thorough review about the events on February 12th 2012 see following articles: "Greek lawmakers approve austerity bill as Athens burns" in <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/12/us-greece-idUSTRE8120HI20120212> and "Greece crisis reaches boiling point as Athens asks if it can stay in the euro" in New York Times, Friday 10 February 2012.

² About the prime ministers statements see article entitled "Greek parliament approves debt bill", The Guardian, Monday February 13 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/feedarticle/10090944>

³ For a historical reference about city occupations in the 19th and 20th century see SCHULZKE, Marcus. *The Ephemeral Borders of Revolutionary Spaces*, Geopolitics, Vol 17 No 1, 2012, p. 177-191

⁴ These statements were made by the merchants union of downtown Athens, the deputy minister of tourism G.Nikitiadis and the mayor of Athens G.Kaminis. Information's retrieved from articles «Πρωτοβουλία Καμίνη για την πλατεία Συντάγματος», Kathimerini, 9/7/2011 and «Νικητιάδης: Τα τσαντίρια της Συντάγματος», 10/7/2011, consulted in www.skai.gr.

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Figures

Fig.1 "Streets of Athens turn into battlefield. Photo: Creative Commons/Jesse Garcia

Fig.2 "Protesters pass by a burning cinema in Athens" Photograph: Kostas Tsironis/AP Photo

Fig.3 Syntagma square under occupied by the indignant <http://news.pathfinder.gr/media/greece/news/20881.html>

Fig.4 Scene from the documentary Docville: Syntagma square (Source: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Docville/161029333998322>)

Fig.5 Syntagma square a few days before the Olympic games of 2004 (Source : <http://www.ethnos.gr/entheta.asp?catid=23539&subid=2&pubid=12286947>)

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