
Public spaces and urban beauty

The pursuit of happiness in the contemporary European city

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. In Europe the historic city is the result of a seamless integration between the physical dimension and the content of identity: the system of public spaces is the fulcrum of the entire urban structure, authentic stage of the meeting community, where beauty is intended to be a significant value, able to fascinate and to seduce, a mean to make people feel part of the urban whole. The suburb is rationally organized for specialized and functional parts, linked and connected by a strong hierarchical system of mobility: while movements of people and things take place in a systematic way, a new desire for public life takes place through episodes and experiences related to everyday existence. Thus, public happiness is no longer the result of the emotional impact of a widespread beauty, but the discover of new meanings and values of the city as a unique urban whole, both historic and suburban, together with not predictable social forms of interaction between people.

KEYWORDS: public space, historic city, suburb, beauty, happiness, everyday life

Luisa Bravo

*Department of Architecture and Territorial Planning,
Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna
c/o Faculty of Engineering
via Risorgimento 2
40136 Bologna – ITALY
Phone +39.051.2093916*

1. Urban beauty: a fascinating and terrifying mirror

In Europe individuals are socially established persons as components of cities. They feel as a part of the built environment, intended as a recognizable experience of a complex morphological structure, and of that intangible heritage of symbols, values and meanings derived from history, which they consider a pure expression of their cultural identity, result of a superimposition over centuries.

Starting from the end of XIX century, following principles of far-seeing essays by Camillo Sitte and Charles Buls, aesthetic codes have been considered significant values in urban composition, besides technical requests. The beautiful city can be considered a real holistic concept: it is not only about architecture, urban spaces and forms, it is a mean for the community life, that take place inside it, to gather individual and collective feelings related to identity and belonging, becoming expression of a social organism endowed with its own will. While in other civilizations the city is essentially a geographical episode, only in the European context it refers mainly to a moral sense of *civitas*, able to express its identity through *collective themes*: churches, walls, buildings, theatres, museums, gardens and public spaces acquire their own autonomy as symbolic language's marks, valid as an instrument aimed to portray the urban beauty of a place, they represent a sort of catalogue to flip through in order to plan a beautiful city, a common list for every European city (BRAVO, 2010. 544). Thus, *collective themes* appear to visitors as a local vision of important buildings and powerful spaces, able not only to evoke a ritual and common behaviour but to show the *civitas* identity (ROMANO, 1993).

The overpowering image of the historic city, with its beautiful squares and public spaces, is what every citizen consider his own city, in a sort of mental representation of affection and belonging to the urban whole. The myth of the old city is strongly attractive, its beauty is able to fascinate and seduce: we cannot imagine a city which we know, indeed not even our own city, without its historical centre, although the inhabited area outside the historical perimeter may be at least ten times as large (SIEVERTS, 2003. 18). We know that, starting from Fifties, European cities have enlarged their structure through new settlements, expanding, growing and sprawling outside the inner-city, with no boundaries, acquiring new spaces and territories far from the centre: suburbs initially designed for housing, in order to accommodate bedroom communities, have gradually become multifunctional environments, often independent of the main *core* (SEGAL et al., 2008. 7), they have become a new kind of city, different in scale and shaped in seemingly random order, without a definable centre, containing a multitude of partial centres, or "edge cities", clusters of malls, office developments and entertainment complexes that rise where major highways cross or converge (FISHMAN, 1990. 27).

According to the UN Habitat 2006 Annual Report, for the first time in history half of the people worldwide are living in town or cities. United States Census Bureau in 2002 reported that 50% of US housing is suburban, 20% of US housing is non-metropolitan. In Europe, cities were more compact and less sprawled in the mid-1950s than they are today. Urban sprawl, initially known as a phenomenon associated with the rapid outward expansion of US cities, is now a common occurrence throughout Europe ("Urban sprawl in Europe", European Environment Agency, n. 10/2006, 5). Attempts to collect data and to measure European urban sprawl started in 2008 with the Urban Audit conference in Brussels, working on a dataset available from Eurostat, the statistical office, in order to compare quality of life in towns and cities within the European Union.

Today these low-density new environments are no longer places which can be considered at a subordinate level or lesser in importance in comparison with the

historic city, as the meaning for sub-urb (derived from Latin) would suggest. It is evident that the classical concept of beauty, related to the inner-city, is not applicable nor useful to understand suburban realities. The loss of beauty is often considered as a substitution in favour of function, with less attention for design and urban composition. That's why suburbs do not look or feel like city centres.

During past years, studies and researches across US and Europe on urban morphology, related to historical patterns, continued to explore the language of the compact and dense urban past, in order to better understand its lexicon and rules, in a sort of obsessive search of useful principles to apply in sprawled environments. New Urbanists propose the reintegration of forms of public spaces and architectural components derived from the tradition in order to recreate the historic way to live and inhabit, in suburban places where principles, such as pedestrian movement and reduced long-distance commuting, are not appropriate for everyday life. Their criticisms, largely accepted by common people, is based on urban morphology and figure-ground diagram studies: the lack of density and the absence of a coherent urban fabric, non-conventional forms and uses of public spaces due to the presence of big box retail stores, the prevalent use of automobile due to a larger scale, a difficult walkability through dispersal functions are considered good reasons to qualify suburbs as ugly places. Also, compared to the beautiful historic city, suburbia is generally intended as placeless, because it often doesn't have physical, public centres, or rather centres shaped *by design*, in the classical and recognizable morphological sense.

It is true that XX century shifted the attention to instruments, rules and plans for the modernization, the expansion and the transformation of existing cities, leaving apart studies on symbols and landmarks, together with aesthetic urban purposes. The emotional impact of a widespread beauty and a social quality of urban spaces was considered an unnecessary goal. But it's increasingly evident that the first definition of suburbs, referred to Eighties, as degraded places, in the physical, social and environmental point of view, a sort of "nightmare" for conceptual and ideal European *civitas*, is no longer convincing for the contemporary city: suburbs are much more varied and complicated than previously imaged, they are the result of a process of development over time, putting one layer upon another, even if often not guided by an homogenous action of development, typology or pattern. Moreover, exurban developments are currently producing phenomena as different as gated communities, residential and business area with a notable cluster of a particular ethnic minority population, known as ethno-burbs, lifestyle centers, through the combination of traditional retail functions of shopping malls with leisure amenities, and restructured rural towns.

Beauty appears to be a meaningful value because the absence of it in the land of suburbia, in comparison with the old city, seems to mean the absence of urban values and public life.

Without promoting any nostalgic and reassuring model that goes back to the past, related in Europe to urbanism of historic dense cities and in US to a cliché of prosperous small towns, friendly to pedestrians, we should investigate layers and qualities of suburban places and landscapes, in relation to their topography, social and economic history (HAYDEN, 2003. 235). This means to consider the city as the whole that really is, instead of what it was or what it should be, trying to find a way to equalize the whole territory, in terms of value, land use and intervention, balancing the inner-city with the outskirts, trying to define a new set of principles, concepts, images and tools in order to understand and to define, through an adequate model of perception and representation, the large part of the city where people live and work. This means to avoid any comparison with the historic heart, any judgement of ugliness and absence of morality, as a consequence of absence of

civitas. We need to consider the contemporary city as a unique urban whole, detecting its «terrifying beauty» (KOOLHAAS, 1995. 204-209), where good and bad taste coexist, starting from the awareness that different conditions are mutually part of the same city. Thus, any intervention on one will affect the other.

2. Public spaces, “publics” and open-minded places

In a morphological sense, we could say that most of suburbs are lack of public realm and that their design appear to be conform to a standardized landscape. They can't compete with the myth of the old city and its network of public spaces, authentic stage for community, a container for collective coexistence, *loisir*, entertainment, consumption and pleasure.

While seduced by the consolidated idea of their beauty, we forget to consider the deep transformation that many historic centres have passed through during past years. The urban heart of many European cities offers no longer opportunities for public and social relationship between their citizens, they have become a sort of *en plein air* museums, a postcard for tourists: pedestrian zones brought more shoppers into the centres and profits attracted national chains of luxury shops, replacing everyday needs with boutiques for clothing, jewellery and gifts, while monuments, museums and palaces serve as cultural anchors (CRAWFORD, 1992. 29). In most countries where there is a lot of tourism, historic sites are conforming to the trend of the simulacrum and turning into theme parks (INGERSOLL, 2006. 40). The need to preserve historical values of designed public spaces, for a large consumption of their beauty, for many years have frozen any possibility to enhance emerging needs and desires to enjoy public life inside the city, even in its consolidated parts: following a static process of self-satisfaction and a progressive expulsion of functions and architectural languages not coherent and appropriated with the existing morphology, the old city progressively disconnected its history from the accelerated, dynamic evolution of the contemporary society, while the social significance of public space as a meeting place for people started an ongoing process of deep decline. Nowadays it is evident that many activities previously taking place in the public space have emigrate to large and comfortable residences and workplaces, to social institutions and specialized ones, such as leisure facilities and department stores. Also, the mutual neighbourhood assistance has been replaced by forms of interactions not related on social contacts and proximity (BRAVO, 2010, 547-548) and not depending or governed by the physical space (SIEVERTS, 2003, 22-23), generating a general loss of urbanity.

In the meantime, suburbs has grown with no limitations, accepting also functions and buildings not allowed in the historical centre, enriching their diversity and heterogeneity. They became creative, able to offer new, unexpected, informal opportunities for community life, using spaces in a non-conventional way, following phenomenon of aggregation, derived not *by design*, through urban form, but *by society*, namely places with specific meanings assigned by urban/suburban daily existence. In the American context, the concept of “everyday space” has become the representation of that connective tissue that binds daily lives together, even in a way sometimes difficult to perceive: referring to everyday activities of urban/suburban residents, such as working, commuting, walking, shopping, buying and eating food, public spaces are no longer conceived as monumental, beautiful and seducing places: they represent a zone of social transition, sometimes ambiguous, where new form of social interaction take place (CRAWFORD, 2008. 6). This means to rethink both the notion of “public” and the concept of “space”: we should start working no longer on “public spaces”, in a morphological sense, but on amorphous so called “publics”, trying to define and map their spaces, in the

historical context as well as in suburbia, acting on rhythms of time and daily itineraries and on appearing, disappearing and reappearing unstable spaces, such as commonplace, vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards, parks, parking lots, able to serve as public space, for private, commercial and domestic purposes.

The wish to live the city, to walk around as a *flaneur*, to feel its urbanity, is no longer possible if the city is not explored, designed and planned for needs, desires and pleasures expressed by people living in it. Urbanity is not a result of a well-designed space, it is shaped by urban uses and daily existence.

A renewed urbanity across the city as a whole starts from open-minded spaces (WALZER, 1986. 470), recognizable not only in the historically structured city but also in other spatial contexts, designed for a variety of uses, including unforeseen and unforeseeable uses, openly accessible, with room and atmosphere for encounters and loiter, continually shaped and redefined by the transitory activities they accommodate (WHYTE, 1980): apparently empty of meaning, they acquire constantly changing meanings – social, aesthetic, political, economic – as different users and different cultures reorganize and reinterpret them (CRAWFORD, 2008. 29). Thus, the definition of the Danish urban designer Jan Gehl about public space, namely life between buildings (1987), doesn't capture anymore the real essence of existing form of social interaction and established relations between private and public human-mixed-use connections in the urban realm.

3. The pursuit of happiness and the urban living condition

The pursuit of happiness can be considered an universal concept, which possess a cultural and intellectual history, with ancient roots referred to Greek philosophy. In the modern age, starting from the Enlightenment, happiness is considered a condition that all human beings could aspire and achieve during their life on earth. But it is only in the second half of XVIII century that happiness is intended as a condition that people should reach as a fulfillment of the daily existence, as it is written in the 1776 American Declaration of Independence.

If referred to single individuals, happiness is a concept strongly related to "life satisfaction" and to the achievement of a "good life" (CHEKOLA, 2006). But if intended as a collective feeling, it cannot be based on personal misfortunes or incapacities. If we assume that cities are the pure expression of societies, public happiness is the result of appropriate or adequate urban living conditions. During the last century, architecture and urban planning played a prominent role in concepts aiming to achieve happiness by means of changing living conditions (BARTETZKY et al., 2009): models, visions and images of the city of tomorrow embodied promises for a better and brighter future, pointing towards ideal, or idealized, ways for people to live in a community or, rather, in the public domain of a society. These well-known icons, designed by avan-garde architects such as Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Hans Scharoun, together with the European planning and political action of reconstruction of a complete new world after the Second World War, acted as a vehicle able to connect people innermost emotions, needs, wishes and dreams to their outward manifestation in the urban environment. City symbolized the pursuit of public happiness (WAGENAAR, 2004. 15-16): although the results of these projects were not completely successful, yet the spirit animating the modernist functionalism was aimed to achieve the dwellers' happiness.

The contemporary concept of happiness is declined through different forms and expressions: "well-being", "quality of life" and "sustainability" are the most common and reflect a widespread demand of satisfaction in the urban context,

more urgent and sophisticated than it was in the past. That's why architects have to face a challenging task: in order to create qualifying places for community life, they need to promote a new approach able to combine urban design issues with ordinary human behaviours inside the city.

Starting from the awareness that the city is a unique urban whole, the historic city, in a morphological way, can act as a hierarchical and scalar principle, as a centrifugal force to which all peripheral appendages converge. The aim is to connect all public spaces into one network, through the definition of a system of *sequences* from the urban centre to outdoor districts, to activate regeneration and rehabilitation processes of degraded areas and to connect and bind different part of the city, in order to generate a spatial oneness of public spaces into an evolved narrative plot, with mutual exchange of significance and contents.

At the same time meanings and values of this new urban structure must be updated and adapted to present forms of social life: this means investigating, discovering and mapping spatial coexistence of different activities and social geography of the city, related to specific functions and to unpredictable performances of the space, learning from people paths and connections between entertainment, leisure, working and residential places, practices of sharing, appropriation and participation mixed up with private aspects.

Eliminating the distance between specialized knowledge and daily existence, architects, engineers, urban designers and planners should act as a part of contemporary society, rather than superior and outside it. Thus, the pursuit of happiness becomes a common ground of debate and growth, able to collect experiences from the small scale and to reflect them in a broader vision of the city and its everyday life.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of reflections and studies developed during a research period as a Visiting Scholar at the University of California Berkeley, Institute of Urban and Regional Development. I would like to thank my advisor prof. Margaret Crawford from the Faculty of Architecture for the discussions, in her studio at the campus, on public spaces and contemporary suburbanites, together with precious references on cutting-edge researches in the urbanism field.

Bibliography

BARTETZKY, Arnold; SCHALENBERG Marc. *Urban planning and the pursuit of happiness. European variations on a universal theme (18th – 21th centuries)*, Jovis diskurs, 2009.

BRAVO, Luisa. *Genius loci and genius saeculi: a sustainable way to understand contemporary urban dynamics*, 14th International Planning History Society (IPHS) conference proceedings, "Urban Transformation: controversies, contrasts and challenges". Istanbul, ITU Urban and Environmental Planning and Research Centre, Vol. II, pp. 543-554, 2010.

CHEKOLA, Mark. *Happiness, rationality, autonomy and the good life*, in Journal of Happiness studies, n. 8/2007, Springer, 2006, pp. 51-78.

CRAWFORD, Margaret. *The world in a shopping mall*, in SORKIN M. (edited by) *Variations on a theme park. The new American city and the end of public space*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1992.

CRAWFORD, Margaret. *Everyday urbanism*. New York, Monacelli Press, 2008.

FISHMAN, Robert. *Megalopolis unbound*, in «Wilson Quarterly», vol. 14, n. 1/1990, pp. 24-45.

GEHL, Jan. *Life Between Buildings, Using Public Space*. Arkitektens Forlag, 1987.

HAYDEN, Dolores. *Building suburbia. Green Fields and Urban Growth*. New York, Vintage Books, 2003.

INGERSOLL, Richard. *Sprawltown. Looking for the city on its edge*. New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2006.

KOOLHAAS Rem. *The terrifying beauty of the 20th century*, in *S,M,L,XL. Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large*. New York, Monacelli Press, 1995.

ROMANO, M. *L'estetica della città europea. Forme e immagini*. Torino, Einaudi, 1993.

SEGAL, Rafi; VERBAKEL, Els. *Urbanism without density*. in «Architectural Design», vol. 78, n. 1, 2008.

SIEVERTS, Thomas. *Cities without cities*. London and New York, Spon Press, 2003.

WAGENAAR, Cor. (edited by) *Happy. Cities and Public Happiness in postwar Europe*. Rotterdam, Nai Publishers, 2004.

WALZER, Michael. *Pleasures and Costs of Urbanity*. in «Dissent», n. 33, 1986 pp. 470-475.

WHYTE, William H. *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington D.C., The Conservation Foundation, 1980.

Biography

Luisa Bravo is an Architectural Engineer. She holds a Doctoral Degree in Building and Territorial Engineering. During past years she developed researches and studies in Italy for the Institute of Cultural Heritage of Emilia-Romagna Region and for MIBAC – Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Environmental Conservation. At the beginning of 2012 she was a Visiting Scholar at the University of California Berkeley, Institute of Urban and Regional Development. At present she is a senior postdoctoral research associate at the Department of Architecture, University of Bologna. She is Journal Manager and Co-Editor of "DISEGNARECON" and "IN_BO. Ricerche e progetti per il territorio, la città e l'architettura", both e-journals edited by Alma Digital Libraries of University of Bologna. Her present research is about theories and projects on urban and suburban public spaces, from North America to Europe. She is carrying out a public survey on urban happiness http://www.bravodesign.it/urban_survey.html