

## **IN FAVOUR OF PUBLIC SPACE**

The issue of public space is accompanied – or perhaps motivated – by concern over the state of democracy. This is a constant. And it is not surprising because we know that the city, democracy, politics and philosophy appeared together in ancient Greece as fruit of the irruption of the dissociative laws of *logos* and of going beyond the limits of the organism of a pre-urban life in which it was determined that the destiny of each individual was marked by implacable Nature. “Unity is not the object of the city because the city is pluralism”, said Aristotle.

The symbolic meeting point of the city, democracy and politics is public space [...]. And the symbolic power of public space is very considerable. I should like to say that public space is the place for public use of reason, rather than private use of reason, using Kant’s distinction. Public exercise of reason enjoys unlimited freedom to call upon reason itself and to speak in one’s own name. Private use is domestic and frequently submitted to some or other mandate. However this distinction is impregnated with Enlightenment optimism and a faith in reason that is most uncommon in our times.

Nowadays we work with a more prosaic distinction: public spaces, private spaces and collective spaces. The latter are those spaces that have a public meaning, even though they are private property and involve economically discriminating payment. Shopping centres and stadiums are two common examples. In any case, property – in a society that has made of it a basic right – is a fundamental factor in the definition of public space. The wave of privatisation that states have undertaken in recent years has introduced this notion of privately-owned public space, which has been received by some with reckless enthusiasm.

Public space may be defined by its accessibility, its function and its aims. In terms of access, public space would be that space to which everyone has access as equals, irrespective of his or her origins, power or social class. It is the ideal space for democratic politics, a space of equality, which is the principal value of democracy, although it is often overlooked. Public spaces *par excellence* are streets, parks, street corners, where everyone is apparently enjoying the same conditions as everyone else, except for those who get around with bodyguards.

As for function, public space is the place where relations are established, going beyond the private sphere and thereby creating a community. A society dominated by individualism where the private domain has no sense of the public, is on its way to anomie. A society in which the public domain engulfs what is private is a totalitarian society. Democratic vitality appears at the point where individuals work from the private sphere with a sense and awareness of what is held in common so that a social fabric is created on the basis of which public institutions are constructed without ever blurring over the distinction between what is public and what is private.

In terms of aims, a plurality of aims is the basic principle of public space as a guarantee of true plurality in a society. Public space may serve to carry out or to express aims that are shared by a society, as a whole or in part, but it must never be a place from which anyone is excluded. [...]

It is true that, traditionally, for historic reasons, and as a way of understanding collective existence, the question of public space has a certain European specificity. Europe is probably the area of the world that is contemplating with most dismay the standardisation of the world’s urban peripheries and the processes of deterritorialisation – in the sense of a loss of specific cultural indicators – and of a banalised urbanism. [...]

Public space is a space for interrelation. Television brings images from around the world into our homes, but it does not convert the home into a space of relations beyond the domestic sphere. Besides, it removes people from public spaces. Television democracy is a low-intensity one. Virtual space is an effective space of interrelation, but the human beast will have to change a great deal before the absence of presence is not seen as a deficit. [...] Public space delimits the idea of the city. Where it does not exist, one may talk of urbanisation, but it would be difficult to talk of the city. Thus, seeing how people, starting

off with nothing, shape public spaces in the most disarticulated megalopolises is cause for hope if we bear in mind the link between the city and democracy.

**Josep Ramoneda.** Director of the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB)

Abridged version of the introductory text for the debate on public space "Ciutats (In)visibles: espais de risc, espais de ciutadania" ((In)visible Cities: Spaces of Risk, Spaces of Citizenship) on 25 July 2003, when the European Archive of Urban Public Space was first presented to the public. The complete text was published in El País on 29 July, 2003.