

THE IMPOSSIBLE PROJECT OF PUBLIC SPACE

A deliberation such as this is confronted with a terminological problem: the semantic debasement of the term “public space”, which is indiscriminately used for any exercise in land-filling, transforming or prettifying vacant land. All too often, the category of “public space” is used without taking into account the requirement of real urban quality that the term entails. This urbanity is the quality of significant places of collective and political content in their very material form. “Material urbanity”, the ability of urban material to express civic, aesthetic, functional and social meanings, is a basic concept when it comes to defining public space and, hence, intrinsic to the aims of this Prize.

Otherwise, a cramming of forms and planimetric geometries, the unease of frustrated architectural projects at zero elevation, or an arbitrary compositional interplay of surfaces can come to occupy public terrains with apparently infinite freedom. Mannerism is conspicuous, while the vocabulary of alignments, lamp posts, pavements, high ground and low ground, pergolas, ramps and green patches burgeons *ad nauseum*.

The pervasive magnitude of such practices, the growing number of projects (whether in squares and streets, parks, service installations and facilities or other places) would seem to make it necessary to re-propose a strict notion of public space as a material condition (locus) of political space.

Civic space is very difficult. Some projects merely reform outmoded spaces which are, on occasion, of great urban significance, to give them innovative or surprising, subjectively affirmative forms. Others confront new spheres of urban growth in order to procure therein some expression of public dignity. Still others understand the site as an available empty area, making the most of the occasion to invent new artifices, installations of a new urban symbology.

Yet, whatever the case and for all these limitations, there appears the indisputable fact of the high average quality attained in different municipalities by the methodological effort and

technological training of the professionals concerned, the growing attention of public authorities and the great degree of satisfaction among the citizens with these projects. This is an extraordinary process of the invention, over twenty years, of a socially and culturally recognised quasi-discipline.

Speaking of public space can be a rhetorical convention that covers up the confusion that stands out over and above the values pertaining to the city as a political place, place of subjective intervention, place of the “polis”. If we accept the hypothesis (advanced since 1992) that it is the *collective* condition that defines urbanity and that, therefore, the collectivisation of spaces and homes, people and institutions, economic movements and activities, is the supreme effect entailed by urbanity, then we would have to think that all the places of the city, public and private, individual or corporative, are partly public spaces since they share the way in which they are appropriate for the citizens. The buildings and streets of a city, the squares and monuments, factories and schools are, in good part, felt as belonging to the residents and, to the extent that they are affected by their functional and aesthetic characteristics, they are the object of citizens’ opinions and claims. In contrast, a rural cultivation or construction is free of this collective dependence: it is an autonomous fact, isolated in its internal logic and does not form part of any formal integrated collective but, rather, belongs to the collective that is simply referred to in neighbourhood relations (or the superstructural notion of “landscape” as an environmental value, without express political content).

Hence, if all urban space is more or less public (and all public space is more or less of or for private interests), what would be the specificity of what we conventionally call “public spaces”? What would a Prize (European or otherwise) for “public space” projects be about? Can we determine which projects count and which ones don’t as such spaces? And once they are singled out, should the projects be evaluated for the intensity in which they are “public” (the more “public” a project, the higher the grade), or according to how good the spaces are (more attractive, more functional, more impressive), or for the degree to which they incorporate certain critical questions that the contemporary city has not yet managed to collectivise (traffic, segregation, largeness of scale, sustainability)?

These are questions that are interesting not only for jury members since they also rebound on the definition itself, questioning the specific nature of public space and maximally so when the deliberation is not so much about real public spaces but about “projects” of would-be real

spaces. Does this, then, belong to the jurisdiction of inventiveness, design or innovation? Is it formal surprise or thematic modernity that has greater value? Is it difficulty overcome or is it effectiveness of transformation?

To go still further, what is it that constitutes public space as real experience? Over and above sociological, political and functional reflections, what has just made public space recognisable is a material fact. A fact where aesthetics is frequently distorted and distorting, yet where expression and communication pass through a particular material configuration.

The great amount of work carried out in recent years on public spaces, the mushrooming of assignments and projects, the tireless energy of architects and engineers, designers and artists, landscapers and botanists – all of them set on enhancing scraps of non-built-up urban land – the ideological discussion and the intellectual strivings towards bestowing a theoretical status and/or disciplinary entity to these matters, have extraordinarily enriched professional practices and heightened the attention of public administrators. Interest in public space seems to be self-justifying. And this, if exaggerated, can lead to unintended results. Not only words can lose their sense but the works themselves can too. The number of interventions, the arbitrariness of the projects, the frequency in space and time, the copying of cliché models and figures, the fashions and squandering of economic resources can pervert the original nature of public space as collective space *par excellence*: space that is not appropriated for any fad, or author or actor, or any currently prominent politician, a place that is available for open interpretation and an intersection of interests.

Public space or show room? The very valuable collection of projects that the CCCB has been putting together over the years, as with the European Archive for Urban Public Space, can simultaneously give rise to contradictory feelings of admiration and misgiving. This is a catalogue of excellence that permits one to discover what terms – old and new – have captured the attention of administrators and project designers, and what examples have been giving rise to prototypes and sequences. It is an incontrovertible demonstration of the enormous surge in attention to matters pertaining to the city's public affairs and the public cost-effectiveness of giving them material form in different corners of the city or in available bits of land. Again, however, the sight of so many, many projects all together also lays bare the repetition of a lot of gratuitous gesturing and a great deal of gymnastics in forms striving for originality and surprise, as if public land were a blank page for the personal pleasure of the

project designer. Undulations, ruptures, continuities and rows, screens and splodges, are combined – always out of the blue – as pieces of a closed and self-referencing composition.

It would appear that the proliferation of these sorts of jobs is tending to bring about a new form of autonomous professional practice which sees the precinct where the work is to be done as a free range in which zero-elevation architecture might be invented, an unconstrained exercise in which – relatively – low-cost forms and images can be explored in freedom that could not exist in construction that is constantly submitted to the much stricter requirements of the programme, costs, functions, structure and client.

In dealing with public space, one finds that it may be the leading issue of urban form or it can be mere anecdote. It depends on the scale (not the measure) in which we look at it. Public space as a combined structure of different streets and squares is the essence, the substance of coexistence, interaction and the redundancy that shared life brings. Designing the structure of spaces for the mobility, leisure and representation that link spaces of activity is what traditional urban planning is all about. In a certain sense, thinking that the quality and form of shared spaces is prior to and more important than pinpointing particular functions is now a methodological option that is rarely taken.

Yet it is not the scale of the urban whole that we usually have in mind when we speak of “public spaces”. To the extent that we keep circumscribing the idea of public space to a precise, delimited place, we are losing our perspective on it as a basic urban structure and giving priority instead to the singularity – morphological or environmental – of each site as an autonomous urban lot, as an occasion for independent formalisation. Hence, the many commissions for designing large or small public spaces viewed as specific objects turn into drawings of a closed lot, self-referencing designs frequently with an arbitrary perimeter. The site is thus converted into a platform of experimentation, a show room in which to play with paving and lamp posts, slopes and corners, with the utmost independence.

Again, the extension of this plethora of project-designing activity covers a considerable range of countries and cities. The interest in breathing modernity into public land is expressed in the demand everywhere and each project, each civic example, can be understood, from a certain standpoint, as part of an extensive process that, over the past twenty years, is bringing about a wide-ranging renovation of the whole urban epidermis of Europe. As in the periodical cellular replacement of human skin, the connective surface of European cities, its interstitial tissue of

roads and paths, of gardens and squares, of what is most common or substantial and also most structural and most necessary of urban space, is being replaced, extended and manifested. What, thanks to its basic condition, was once taken as being obvious – paving, offering stable physical support for the contact of urban things and the mobility of citizens – is now an optional and symbolic matter, a question of design.

The construction of public land, hitherto the immediate result of technical needs and means, is nowadays the object of alternative offers and questionable taste. An aerial view of the map of Europe with coloured lights illuminating the progressive work over the paved surface of Europe would impress us with its extension and variety. And it is difficult to overstate the importance of this vision. This is a historic step in the concept of the city, as space held in common, in the idea of public space as a material place.

Perhaps it will only be after this careful, overall urban planning momentum, this process of expansive culturalisation of the European ground-plan, that the merits of the different projects might be judged, for what they manage to establish as a general idea of urban space and not only as attractive planimetric gestuality.

After all, at bottom, almost all the projects are works of repaving, more or less initiatives of replacing the urban skin, a surface that is in itself a deep structure. Paving, with ground as support and link, has an extensive and not a singular condition and proclaims the central role of interdependence. Public spaces will be just that when they construct the combined system of urban space and not merely a closed work. When they are defining elements of a model of the city without perimeters, rather than zero elevation architecture. When they become the representation of mobility, coexistence and conflict rather than stylised, neatly resolved landscape.

Scrutiny of the projects present in the European Archive for Urban Public Space suggested to me that they should be sorted according to their stance as proposals, their methodological pretensions. It is not easy, I believe, to produce the usual typological, thematic or scale-oriented classifications. The precise intention behind the project, which is not easy to divine either, can help us, however, to advance in critical knowledge of public space practice. Four types may be distinguished here:

1. Tidying-up projects: there are many projects (the greater part) that re-order spaces on top of themselves, making them more useful, more attractive and more novel. They respond to political intentions of visible investment, which are specific to more difficult or more representative spaces. They set out to bring them up to date and spruce them up.

Rarely do these projects convey any content other than a good makeup job.

The evaluation to be made in this case is primarily functional.

2. Projects that expand the previous sphere of public space and that, even while sticking to known typological guidelines, set about designing new areas, different in scale and location, either because of topographical difficulties or thematic complexity. This is basic urban planning activity.

These works have a technical value.

3. Projects that collectivise. These projects, the most incisive, accept the strategic goal of creating public space with private ingredients, on the basis of an understanding of collective space (public+private) as a defining substance of what is urban. Explicitly or otherwise, such projects take the view that urbanising means collectivising, and they may have a lot or a little in terms of form, but they do not shape. Rather, they are actions of mental strategy.

In their intimate sense, they have a political value.

4. Projects that invent. These are the few initiatives that are born of an ill-defined occasion, without any specific programme, without purpose and without clear limits. They propose uncommon images on the basis of inventing a type of public space for which, precisely, there is no type. It is the invention of form and programme at the same time and means accepting the risk – of error, or failure – as a premise of planning.

The value here is artistic.

However, it is also necessary to stipulate that not all public space entails urban quality just because it has been successfully organised. A project can value the characteristics of the place and can express landscaping or utilitarian qualities without managing to give material form to

any notion of urbanity. The rehabilitation of the Gavà beaches, for example, has produced an excellent, sensitive and intelligent public leisure space but it does not express the urban quality that, in contrast, is to be found in the Mar Bella shoreline project, which is perhaps less attractive. The aims and contact with urban complexity are so different in these two cases that, whatever their intrinsic merits, we cannot consider the former as urban space while the latter can come under that heading. We might say much the same if we compare the Plaça Europa and the Plaça Lesseps. The infrastructural density and formalist vocation of the former cannot contribute urban quality to the site because of the devastating effect of the design materials, the measurements, forms and elements while, in contrast, the chaotic solutions in the Plaça Lesseps are surpassed as a whole by the active and heterogeneous centrality of the place and the permissive tolerance of all the lateral manifestations (of facades, movements, angles of vision and uneven surfaces) that have appeared.

Neither can the ring routes, as intrinsically circulatory spaces, be regarded as urban space. The evident absence of any relationship with the adjoining city and the highly homogeneous character of their support materials, reduce any urban quality to mere mechanical channels. This is the case despite the “urbanising” efforts that have so meritoriously been attempted. In fact, this is an act of oversimplifying urban complexity, reducing it to monographic landscape. The Metro, on the other hand, is usually a “hyper-urban” space: the parts we see and understand (entrances and stations) are made up of people, signs, connections and train carriages, all of them different materials that suggest a high degree of urban quality. What we do not see – the tunnels – are black and make of the mechanical part of transport an absent, irrelevant fact.

All public space projects are precisely that in the sense of public conception and administration. But not all of them constitute spaces of urbanity in the civic, political and figurative senses that go with the good city. Some are spaces for the public and others are urban public spaces. Public space combines “urban things”, physical materials that are able to make perceptible an idea of the city. Hegel said that beauty is the perceptible expression of an idea. And this is the grandeur and difficulty of public spaces. Ground and mud, cobblestones and slabs, asphalt and concrete, wood and leaves on the trees shift here from being generic to components for making urban quality a material thing. Walls, land, lamp posts, doorways, ramps, vehicles, corners and crannies establish the sensations of the mind that bring people into relation.

The city, made of conflict and solidarity, stability and dynamism, connection and distance, appears in the material condition of public space. Over and above sociological, political and functional considerations, public space imposes itself as a material fact, a substratum joining matter and idea, trying to ensure that it turns out to be beautiful. Walter Benjamin, Richard Sennett, Paul Virilio and Fredric Jameson have given much thought to all this.

Physical urban quality is in the measure, the proper understanding of the limits of a space. As soon as we define it, we segregate it. Good public space has no limits, or the ones it has are undefined, multiple, oscillating. As a relative place, its references to the urban whole are more important than its own identity and yet this is enhanced thanks to them. Watch those perimeters! They are both main theme and baptism of fire of urban quality.

The urban nature of urban materials also lies in the sense of touch. Even more than in sight, perhaps. In public space, personal experience, the route and comfort are fundamental. Walking on a hard or soft surface, stone or sand, on corrugated or slippery ground brings about very different sorts of contact between body and brain. The idea is transmitted through the different sensations of the material used. And the proximity of the hands to railings, walls and benches makes us experience, more than in any other sense, the character of space. If by means of sight we understand shaping, size and setting, by touch we experience identity, treatment and character.

In the contemporary city, we can no longer see public spaces with reference to a notion of urban, functional or semantic structure, as we did in the years of structuralism but, like the Greeks, we need to read civilised space as a topological, tactical order. We must go beyond landscaping decorativeness and recognise the warp and weft of materials, which is what the proto-modern Gottfried Semper studied and called for.

In the thinking of the 1970s and the following years, little was said about public space except, perhaps, the notion of centrality as the symbolic locus of life in common. Henri Lefebvre, who showed great foresight at the time, criticised the city of the Modern Movement, saying that "*la ville est du trans-fonctionnel durable*", already seeking rupture in the paradigm of structure as the idea of a city. Today, perhaps, leaving aside all the many tricky metaphors used as an excuse for a project, one must seek instead an idea (of public space, of a bit of city, of urban quality, of a political place) in the absence, precisely, of symbolic images, or picturesque

novelty (all, alas, globalised) and a possibility of civic identity in the dissolution of the individual place in the collective milieu, in pure citizenship.

The individual is attenuated when public space is offered as a readied room. Napoleon, when he reached the Piazza San Marco on invading Venice, said that it is “the most beautiful salon in Europe”, seeing in it a space to be used in keeping with norms and customs; the exact opposite of Barcelona residents freely enjoying Mar Bella. Desacralised public space is the condition for the city’s existence and without public space the only things left are the rural setting and castles.

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(Text published in the catalogue “In Favour of Public Space”, Actar, 2010)