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AN INTRODUCTION TO “PUBLIC SPACE: MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES AND MEANINGS”

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Public space is the essence of the city, as its basis and its representation. The tensions of divergent and convergent forces that encircle the city are revealed in the public space through its capacity to represent and appropriate. Public space is one of the greatest attestations of cities that are essentially defined by their diversity of bodies and spaces, since public space plays a decisive role in cementing the right to the city; it is where differences and identities are revealed and tested; it is the space for recognition and representation, and herein lies its great challenge.

There is no one single space; rather, what shapes the daily geographies of human activity is the diversity of public spaces. Despite the homogenising effects of globalisation on public space, features denoting a place, a time, or a society are still to be found.

Just as there is no one public space, neither is it neutral or universal. As men and women, space conditions us in different ways not only because of our differently sexed bodies, but also because of the different ways men and women use space according to the gender roles assigned to us. It is here that public space can enable or inhibit activities, freedoms and movements, depending on how it is formed. Analysis and understanding of public space are not without their ambiguity.

When the meaning and uses of a public space mutate, even though it is still the same physical space, it is demonstrating its flexibility to adapt and allow the reasons, needs and functions of society and its transformations to be permeate through it. And the reverse is true when public space is undermined in the name of security and homogenisation, turning it into more of a commercial centre than a space for everyday life. Neoliberal societies are a threat to open public space, since its capacity to accommodate political actions, othernesses, differences and anything that is not purely in the interests of business has no place in neoliberal doctrine.

Public space is a polysemic concept that depends on the socio-historical context and moment. A vital, although insufficient, precondition of public space is that it be publically owned, with no restrictions on its use, access and enjoyment. Public space is the political space of social representation and precisely because of that, the scene of conflict inherent in urban life and coexistence; public space sometimes means free space, the structuring space of the city and the basis for day-to-day living; it is also the space of memory, which is what takes it into the realm of literary construction.

The construction of public space, whether physical-spatial, social, cultural, literary or political, is rooted in the particularities and singularities of each culture and each geography. Even at the height of globalisation, while superficially appearing the same, each public space has its own peculiarities.

Ordinary public space in Japanese cities is constructed as the negative of private space, creating interstitial spaces, filaments that disappear in the magma of residential micro-segmentation. This is not to say there are no free, unbuilt spaces, but they are spaces of power, of temples, palaces and forts; spaces to be contemplated, not appropriated. This conception of public space and urban design precludes any possibility of public space as a political space, understood as representation, confrontation and demonstration.



Public space as a space for exchange and trading – like Jemaa El Fnaa and other large Mediterranean plazas – are public because of their openness, their constant ebb and flow; they are spaces full of vitality without being political spaces.

So, which public spaces can be political? The succession of Arab and European ‘springs’ on the whole used public spaces with an acknowledged political symbolism; some, however, such as the 15M in Barcelona or the French Nuit Debout, occupied squares with no special attributes, thus giving them a new political meaning. Political and social use reconfigures the meaning of a space.

Although public spaces are generally presented as emblematic, most of the time they are ordinary, everyday places, which is not to say they lack the attributes and qualities we need to go about our everyday lives. This quotidian, familiar public space must be designed to accommodate different socialisations, autonomy and interpersonal relations. In this process it is essential to work with residents to ensure these spaces meet their everyday needs and facilitate their daily activity. The challenge lies in creating a space without gender or patriarchal order, and thus without hierarchies; a space that makes differences visible, and that does not reproduce inequalities; a space where everyone’s views, knowledge and experiences are equally valued. It means re-signifying how our cities are constructed based on the way men and women experience the world, two ways with many varied enunciations of what, on the surface, may seem to be a single reality, but actually is not.

The question of how to evaluate and appraise the qualities and virtues of public spaces is both important and timely. What considerations can be used? How can we construct tools that are transferable and can be applied in different situations, and are not quantifications that are ineffective for analysing the quality of space? These recurrent questions are broached in one of the articles presented here, about Madrid, by María Beltrán. Also relevant to this question is the work presented in the last two publications from the Col·lectiu Punt 6: Espacios para la vida cotidiana. Auditoría de Calidad Urbana con perspectiva de Género de 2014 and Entornos habitables. Auditoria de seguridad urbana con perspectiva de género en la vivienda y el entorno de 2016.

Sara Ortiz explores two interrelated dimensions that have received little attention and remain invisible in urban planning practice, one temporal and the other corporal: the movements of sexed bodies around the nocturnal city. Her review of both the theory and approaches to the question describes, from an intersectional gender perspective, the difference between perceptions of safety, and safety itself.

The articles in this edition take a range of approaches, heightened by the different settings they cover: Madrid, Canelones, Barcelona, Buenos Aires and Tokyo. Two authors explore public space in Tokyo: Akiko Okabe from an insider’s position, and Enric Massip writing from the outside. These two complementary contributions further our understanding of the complexity of spatial meanings in different cultures.

Public space can also be a receptacle for painful memories that people feel must be identified to protect them from oblivion, and to prevent their own mistakes being repeated. Art as a vehicle for the collective memory discourse frames the paper by Nuria Ricart and Noelia Paz. Memory tied to a place and a specific building; or, as in the article about the Plazoleta Lidice by Gustavo Faget and Marcelo Fernández Pavlovich, reflecting on memories of universal horror and the need to construct spaces to contemplate and strengthen human rights.

Public space is not only constructed materially: its meaning and creation may also have literary origins. This idea is explained in Inés Moisset and Ismael Eyras’ article, which draws on the literature of the 1920s to describe a metropolis in the making, how Buenos Aires created its public space through the work of four writers: Roberto Arlt, Alfonsina Storni, Leopoldo Marechal and Jorge Luis Borges. Essays, poetry and novels are used to verify the material construction of the city from a historical perspective.

The fragmented space and time of the metropolis, full of encountered and opposing realities that multiply in parallel layers of virtuality, provide the basis for Jacobo Sucari’s critical vision.

Our aim with this Àgora section of the journal *kult-ur* is, therefore, to reflect impressions and reflections from different areas of knowledge and geographies on what public spaces are, what they do and who makes them.