

Introduction: Appropriation of Public Space

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The symposium 'Appropriation of Public Space', held at the Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm) in February 1992, dealt with different aspects of appropriation, and especially with mental and concrete ones. It examined the premises required for reclaiming public space, and it focussed on the question of how public space can become a meaningful territory that awakens concern. Based on my own research on "The City as Living Space" (1991), I maintain that meaningful public space is wanted by the citizens.

Most of the symposium concentrated on work that has dealt with the appropriation of public space. These experiences have been gathered in a variety of ways, including fieldwork. In one case, the architect wanted to use the existing local social structure and local culture as a base for his own work. He therefore put himself and his office right in the very neighbourhood he was working on. Another example illustrates how, by focusing on public space, an architect can contribute to building up a social and cultural structure. As in the first example, the architect thus plays the role of intermediary between the needs of the people and the plans of the local authorities. A third example shows what can be done to transform a no man's land into a place that concerns everyone, or even into a magical place. Even this example makes it clear that closeness to people's needs and wishes can only be achieved if one acknowledges a variety of existential needs in oneself.

The work listed above has been carried out in different European countries – Germany, Austria and France. It is thus connected to cultures that many Swedes spontaneously associate with pronounced urbanism, and that – as they claim – allow an uncomplicated relation to public space. "Europe is sitting in a café", said one of my interviewees from Stockholm when she wanted to point out the difference between the Swedish home-centred culture and European culture in general. To her, Central and Southern European culture often defines public space as a drawing-room, as a space meant for communication and social life. Any Swedish traveller visiting European cities can confirm that public space has such a dimension there and is actually used in this manner. Yet, this is true only where the contemporary city has not intruded into the territory of the old city. In comparison, public space in the contemporary city often has the appearance of a no man's land. This is because public space in the contemporary city, in all its tidiness, is thought of as a secondary space. Secondary space does not invite one to be or to remain there. Secondary space addresses the passer-by and does so by means of its commercial message alone. Secondary space is not meant to be appropriated.

Public space in Sweden is very often looked upon only as secondary space, not to be appropriated or to acquire a personal meaning. Let me give an example. The local board of one of Stockholm's neighbouring municipalities received the following request: A young family wanted to open a little restaurant with musical entertainment

right at the entrance to their brand new suburb. The restaurant was to be a meeting place for the residents and would hopefully add another dimension to suburban life there, the young couple explained. Another point they wanted to make was that the strictly family-oriented design of the public space in their suburb needed to be compensated for. This design meant a courtyard pattern, where each courtyard had play facilities for children and benches for parents, who could also supervise their children from the apartments that opened onto this semi-private public space. The open field-like area at the entrance of the suburb held only the usual display of service institutions, open until 6 p. m., in addition to the subway station. The restaurant could fill its function right there and liven up an otherwise anonymous area, giving it a personal and welcoming touch. The community board, represented by a man in his fifties, was bewildered. Who on earth would want to go there, he wondered, now that so much care had been spent on attractive apartments and a public space designed to suit families? The community board refused the request.

The attitude towards public space described in my example is by no means unusual. On the contrary, it represents an alienation towards public space, experienced and internalized as a model, by this man's generation. Public space became estranged because it was only measured with a rational eye, and because it was approached using aesthetic ideals such as tidiness, simplicity, lucidity. Other dimensions that appealed to the emotions had to live a secret life in private spaces.

We have thus a rather sad record of neglect concerning the manifold meanings of public space, and it is neglect which has been nourished by ignorance and even arrogance towards the fact that people actually have a relationship to public space – when they can. Last summer, during the first Stockholm Water Festival Stockholmers surprised Swedish authorities at many levels. During the course of a couple of days one of Stockholm's most attractive public spaces, close to the Royal Castle, was turned into a stage for urban entertainment. For once, even alcoholic refreshments were served. The authorities had to admit that people of all ages came to this urban spectacle, enjoyed themselves and "behaved", despite the relaxed restrictions on desirable social communication in a public place.

Examples like the ones I have given clearly show that the relation to public space is waiting to be set free. They also show that the process of liberation and emancipation needs to begin right where it is blocked, which is on the value-forming level. This holds true for any culture, be it at the national or local level, at that of society or of the group. The value-forming level of a culture is basic to the kind of liberation I am talking about. When people state that they feel deprived of projecting their desire for socially and aesthetically profound experiences onto public space, and when they deplore the prevailing ignorance (even arrogance) with which the manifold meaning of a public space is treated, then liberation and emancipation are needed. The aim is to release consciousness and sensibility towards the existential meaning of public space.

"It has been painful to watch Stockholm changing character, when its very heart was violated and a contrast between life during the day and desolation at night was forced upon it", said one of my interviewees. This quotation illustrates the feelings of many a Stockholmer towards the desolation of public spaces and life which they have witnessed and experienced during the last three decades. Quotations like the one above expose the deep gap between planning on one hand and human beings on the other. Of course, this is an artificial contradiction and it does not have to exist. Planning and

human beings can meet. Planning can and should be close to the rich world of the human mind and soul. Only then can we achieve an aesthetics of public space that provides the preconditions for appropriation.

Expertise in this matter is within reach. People who have had the city as their living space and who have lived with the city the way one lives with a partner are the experts we can turn to. They gladly talk about the qualities in public space, and every planner should be interested in what they have to say. Typically, these people, besides having a close relation to the city, express a very old interpretation thereof. According to this interpretation, the city is a looking glass that mirrors the world. The symbolic use of the city has survived until our times, and it has been used, amongst others, by Le Corbusier. But Le Corbusier could not perceive the world when he looked into the mirror of the city of his time or, to be more correct, he could not perceive the world he wanted to see. This is why he declared that the looking glass was empty.

In my research the city also appears as a mirror, but now, there are ordinary people looking into the looking glass. And they actually perceive the world, if only a fragmented world. My comment is that this kind of perception is already adjusted to the world that is mirrored. Further, it is a perception that goes along with the individual's ability to handle fragmentation of his inner and outside world. To be more specific: the Stockholmers in my sample commented in general on the changes in the inner city by pointing out a change of atmosphere. An easily appropriated space with a tight urban atmosphere had been turned into an anonymous territory that could no longer be appropriated. The interviewees complained that this was not possible because the space seemed to be "stone dead", as one person put it. In other words, a space meant for appropriation needs to allow for, and even stimulate, projections. The projections are of an existential kind and reflect existential needs such as confirmation and recognition. When public space responds to these needs then it can become a space that concerns everyone. The Swedish expression for 'a space that concerns me' is even more descriptive when the verb "to touch" is used: *rummet som berör mig* – a space that touches me.

However, when the interviewees deplored the loss of such spaces in the urban landscape, they also revealed a sensibility towards those desired qualities whenever they came across them. It seemed that the threat of losing even more of what, to them, was precious space, did enhance their consciousness and sensibility.

Of course not every Stockholmer I spoke to, had this consciousness and sensibility, and not everyone appeared to have a creative relationship towards public space. The difference between them reflects their individual profiles and life stories. Some appeared to be rather advanced in their relationship – I would like to say dialogue – with their environment. Others seemed to be less aware that they had already established a relation with their environment, and still others felt embarrassed to "reveal" that they had such a personal relationship with public space. Based on these findings, I maintain that the relationship man-environment has a potential for development.

Let me point out once more why I consider it important to free the ability to relate to the environment in general and to public space in particular. The individuals who did relate to their space not only seemed to live a fuller life, they had also – as already mentioned – enhanced their sensibility towards the power of public space to respond to existential needs. Due to their consciousness about the ongoing dialogue between man and environment, these people were able to formulate existential needs and point out their corresponding expressions in the outside world. They thus offer

guidelines to everyone who is interested in the quality of public space as a collective space, but also as a space that carries a personal meaning. The qualities of public space were also specified in a personal manner, by using words such as: embracing and healing, stimulating and uplifting, mysterious and surprising, promising and comforting, and these qualities were always attached to public spaces in the city of Stockholm or in other European cities which seemed to offer the dimensions hoped for. It is thus obvious that public space has regained its position as living space in these individuals' way of looking at and experiencing the city.

The lack of sensibility towards the dimension of living space is, of course, not just a Swedish problem. Other European cities also reflect this contemporary spirit. We – European social scientists, planners and architects – have a common frame of reference. But, as I see it, we also have one interest in common: to regain precious territory, that is a humanistic approach towards public space.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WERNER, K. (1991), *The City as Living Space. Stockholmers on the City* (Byggforskningsrådet. T5: 1991, Stockholm).

Programme of the Symposium

Introduction: The Appropriation of Public Space

Karla Werner, lecturer, The Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm)

On the Correspondence between Man & Architecture

Dr. Heide Berndt, professor, Fachhochschule f. Sozialarbeit/Pädag. (Berlin)

The City and the Inner Child

Dr. Kaj Noschis, lecturer, Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale (Lausanne)

The Towers of Wangen

Wolfgang Zaumseil, dipl. ing. arch. (Stuttgart)

Appropriated and Expropriated Public Space in Vienna

Erich Bramhas, dipl. ing. arch. (Vienna)

The Augarten Project

Dieter Schreiber, dipl. ing. arch. (Vienna)

Uschi Reisinger, dipl. ing. arch. (Vienna)

Negotiating Public Space in Méréville

Michal Conan, research director, Centre Scientifique et Technique du Bâtiment (Paris)

The Urban Scene and the Concept of Place

Björner Torsson, lecturer, The Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm)