BACK TO *AGORA*

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Abstract

One of the most important things that influence people's happiness is the strength of their relationship with others: feeling close to and valued by others is a fundamental human need and the strength of our communities also depends on the connections and relations that people have within them.

Appearing and evolving along with human communities, public spaces were the scene of many manifestations of the community, a place of conviviality, of spirituality – in all its forms – a religious, administrative and legal landmark.

Urban public spaces are those where all the processes related to peoples existence take place and, especially, peoples' cohabitation. These places are a reflection of the social structure, of the level of development and computer technology, not a flat, clean and shiny surface.

The changing face of cities starts as well from the public space.

Keywords: public spaces, communities, planners, communication, urbanism.

1. In times entirely dedicated to neologisms, my proposal to 'review' or, more precisely, to return to the classical urban vocabulary (even archaic) may occur as strange. At a more careful analysis, the approach appears not just in terms of curiosity, but, as I truly hope, it should at least be understood.

I do not think that I am the only one (or one of the few nostalgics who believes that a return to the past, to its experiences and the lessons it taught us, would be a very appropriate way to solve a series of new challenges that our society has to face nowadays.

The dynamics of change, that influenced all areas of our existence – has generated deep changes in each and every one of us. On the other hand, research and results in every area of human life and activity, due mostly to archaeologists and anthropologists, have brought to our knowledge the proof that many current performances (in the field of technology, medicine, astronomy, construction etc.) that we are proud of, have been known and used for hundreds and even thousands of years ago. Therefore, same old, same old!

Moreover, even the genesis of humanity is in question, since the existent theories are complemented or annulled by the new emerging ones. In this context, more and more people are reconsidering their opinions and show a natural tendency to pay more attention to the past's experience, in order to avoid the same mistakes and mostly in order to define 'our common future' respecting the principle of sustainable development.

2. We have to accept and admit, objectively and responsibly, the fact that not everything that belongs to the past is 'old', outdated and unnecessary. Everything related to the development of a process (historically speaking) can not be canceled and maybe the fact that some things and phenomena do not just happen again, but they come back to people's attention in a different shape, it is not all 'cyclic', but it might as well have yet unrevealed significance.

Urbanism, the target area of the analysis, is certainly not a new field (excepting probably its definition) of preoccupation – moreover, in terms of art, science and technology, the proof is that it has always been there. The evidence is more than enough, it is abundant! Obviously, the problem it needs to solve is increasingly challenging, but just as in mathematics, we must admit that sometimes the most difficult problems have the most... trivial solutions. We can only hope that the key to success for many actions that we undertake is to be sought in simple matters, even common sense sometimes.

This is the bet upon which a future research should start, respectively with aiming at how certain urban components could undertake the training part regarding people's attitude and behavior, providing the fact that we must be aware that the global economic crisis associated to the environmental crisis, have as a main trigger the human crisis. Obviously, selfishness, malice, envy, jealousy, these are not new behaviors on Earth, but their exacerbation generated, fostered and maintained by the abnormally fast rate of change, the social dynamics worldwide, they are likely to worry everyone.

3. The alteration of human relationships, the development and increased rate of all human activities, the time crisis (explained by the theories of contraction), eagerness, material wealth etc. are already emblematic of the times we live in. As there are sufficient grounds to justify the current state of humanity, we must also find reasons to restore balance in society, by finding solutions for an individual rebalance, by restoring at its rightful place all the good and beautiful properties that characterize the human race; restoring individual balance should be the number one priority. Re-modeling our behavior, rebuilding it on grounds of inner beauty, good faith, altruism, cohesion and solidarity would certainly provide a different perspective on the future of humanity, and solutions to current problems could more easily be found.

A decisive role model has always been education – in all terms and across all institutions: the more the community has invested in education, the more the prosperity came faster and the benefits have been earlier recorded. Along science and culture, which it interferes with, education means social development.

De facto, education can not be reduced to any of its components – information, storage, training, learning practice, behavior, attitude etc. which, unfortunately, have lost importance and significance.

The return 'to the whole' is an imperative must, but the means to do it are extremely difficult since the resistance is strong. In these circumstances, the training role should be divided between authority and competence factors that must benefit from trust and transparency and the action must be conducted in a responsible framework. This framework should not be closed, on the contrary, it should be opened to the community members, it must be desirable, pleasant and comfortable, to provide certainty and novelty as long as it is safe, easy to find and always available to the applicant/recipient. The public space – with all its history, with the Greek Agora brand or as well the Roman Forum – we think would entirely fulfill this mission.

4. Appearing and evolving along with human communities, public spaces[1] were the scene of many manifestations of the community, a place of conviviality, of spirituality – in all its forms – a religious, administrative and legal landmark. Initially, the political space, as an archaic form, was devoted to the public space – the Agora – it was meant as a place for circulating and spinning ideas and manifestations of public opinion in the debate. The role and the further significances contributed to their load of various activities (exchange of goods, trade, celebrations and ceremonies) and urban art monuments (cemeteries of the wealthy, statues, fountains, street furniture), aspects that led to the acquisition of complex uses.

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1 In a broad sense, public spaces consist of streets, parks, playgrounds, parking etc. The attribute 'public' means opening, accesibility. This trait of belonging *to all* is, in fact, extremely complex, because 'all' use the place, but 'all' must also assume the responsablity for the way of doing that.

What is worth to be kept in mind is the direct communication which could easily be achieved, the social cohesion that ensured the participation of all the community members in general interest actions and expressions and the easy access to the time's public information. Thus, the public space perpetuated its sensibility and permeability to all social, political even mentality changes of inhabitants, as well as to technical, cultural and any other progress that appeared in their society.

The public space's valences were initially about their definition as built spaces, with outstanding architectural and urban value and, and on the other hand, their estimation as a reflection of social and political structure of society, a third valence following, namely the field of administrative and legal sphere, involving separate and different issues.

5. The reason we raised the public spaces issue and pointed out their importance in the urban context is determined by the fact that the full responsibility of its management belongs to the local public authorities: it is them that make the decisions regarding the architectural, aesthetic, landscaping model, as well its functioning and maintenance. The administration has the power in the territory, being situated close the citizens, to the community. It is a known fact that 'we can govern by distance, but we can only manage by close' (introductory words to a French decree of 1852). The public space is an actual area, a constructed planned place, natural or artificial, that challenges different categories of professionals, such as architects, planners, geographers, historians, engineers, landscapers, which are regulated in their activities by special legal urbanism rules. The framework of urban planning law seeks to harmonize the permanent conflict between the rules governing the public and the private property, to ensure the proper conduct of negotiations between the public and the private sectors. Usually, the surrounding buildings of public space belong to the private sector, which have been awarded a prior authorization from the public authorities – the building permit (which is a final administrative document certifying the compliance of the building with the urban planning provisions, which, in turn, express the tendency of the city development).

Moreover, the facades of these buildings define the whole landscape, the public decoration, the specificity of the framework. The administration must consider and decide how to make the transition from the public space to private real estate (buildings or land). Nowadays, the public spaces are facing a delicate moment in their existence and their mission: belonging to everybody, they tend to no longer belong to anyone else; they are simple passages, eyewitnesses of a hurried transit, no longer focal point or meeting place for joint activities. The lack of funds, the focus of interest on commercial areas, moving the pole of attraction to these areas, targeting places to spend free time inside, the extinction of stores in the central areas led to their oblivion, to the considerable decrease of interest. However, no one can deny the fact that the image, the cities' individuality is mainly defined by these public spaces, and the (aggregates) indicator of life quality is also closely linked to these issues.

6. All over the world, central places of great cities are full of important – from historical and administrative perspective – buildings, fountains, statues, columns, arches and other monuments[2]. In so called 'mental maps', public spaces have a significant place: so 'this is not surprising that a person's mental map is a product of social interaction. The way we perceive space and the environment is socially learned and is based on experience. The imagery of the city can be seen as a result of how people perceive it. Urban imagery also has consequences in the shaping of city itself. Urban images have a symbolic function. Images help provide strong associations with a place that help facilitate interaction between people who share a common environment' (Hutter, 2012, p. 137).

In this respect, Kewin Lynch has pointed this out:

'The landscape pays a social role as well. The named environment, familiar to all, furnishes material for common memories and symbols which bind the group together and allow them to communicate with one another. The landscape serves as a vast mnemonic system for the retention of group history and ideas' (1960, p. 126, *apud* Hutter, 2012, p. 138).

Very often in these spaces historical and cultural events took place that are celebrated even in our days. These places are characterized by human interaction, solidarity and urban experience. History strongly puts its footprint on these central places in European cities – important reason for preserving their identity. We have to accept – critically speaking – that if old architecture allowed and still allows, hundreds of years after edification, the identification of the location where different monuments belong to, the new neighborhoods of the cities do not have the same status, that is, individualization and fast tracking (Minea, 2011). It has been argued (and rightly considered) that it was the 'urbanization' that led to 'urbanalization' (Muñoz, 2008). In these terms we can talk, without making hazardous statements, about a decreasing diversity; or, diversity is a condition of perpetuating values, multiplying them in other principles, schemes and algorithms, other than those related to the non-customized imitation of patterns. We can say that we are witnessing an identity crisis of urban landscapes.

7. Urban and art historian Donald J. Olsen suggested in 1986 the importance of conceiving 'the city as a work of art'; probably a 'replay' in an updated form of this expression would be 'city as a work of heart'. Being in the author's consent, we also state that we have to study the city as 'objects to be cherished and understood rather than evils to be exposed, as works of arts rather than instances of social pathology'.

In this context it is useful and interesting to mention another opinion – assessed by Le Corbusier – according to which 'cities are biological phenomena'; from his perspective urban forms of manifestation are just like biological ones, both in their

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2 All these 'works of art' are known, in our Romanian legal framework, as 'public monuments' and are protected by several regulations such as Law no. 120/2006 concerning public monuments, Law no. 350/2001 concerning urban planning and town planning, Law no. 50/1991 concerning the authorization of construction works etc.

existence and composition and reflecting a biological being of their inhabitants, as well as of other living forms that cohabitate with them. Beyond the elements that define and characterize it, the city stores also an inner energy that by complex phenomena becomes and generates a continuous metabolic change; this process is very similar to which occurs at the level of living organisms (Crăciun, 2008, pp. 15-17).

It is very important to take into serious account the fact that major changes are required in the field of special structures composition, which are directly responsible for urban planning activities. Strictly applying the enforced regulations, even if it is a mandatory act (like all rules of public law), not everything is limited to it: modeling urban spaces and adapting to the general dynamics requires more than a blind compliance, meaningless to the fine perception of the phenomena that occur in this area; it requires a good understanding of what 'urban body' means (Minea, 2011).

8. The changing face of cities starts as well from the public spaces! In these circumstances we consider that achieving these objectives must aim to their revitalization, the increase of activities, the promotion of new features, in order to bring back the citizens to the space that we traditionally call as their own, the revival of civic spirit and their motivation for active involvement in the city life. This change that must be operated on the public space can not only be achieved by specialists (developers or architects), but it should benefit of public support and involvement. It is stated that governance of persons and places can be initiated and enacted as much by non-state actors as by state authorities (Rose and Miller,1992, *apud* Lippert, 2012), by 'governance' understanding 'any attempt to control or manage any known object'(Hunt and Wickham, 1994, p. 78). The success of such an approach should mean: providing comfort and a pleasant image (clean places, friendly, green, attractive and safe); accessibility and easy communication (easily accessible, providing the possibility to connect to other spaces of interest); sociability (organized, friendly and stable).

Active involvement of the citizens in spatial planning is an imperative that must be understood and then applied. In the achievement of 'the power of place'[3] (Hutter, 2012), communities play a very important role. One can also speak about 'the sense of place', defined as a sum of fragments, a sum of urban pieces of time that reveals a special kind of interaction between a person and a territory that is characterized by certain features (Muñoz, 2008, p. 83).

Of course, a co-production approach to engaging existing community assets and resources should become an integral part of the development process. This requires the professionals work *with*, not just *for* local residents, business, and community groups

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3 In her book 'The power of place' (1995) Dolores Hayden argues that planners involved in historic preservation should understand that the historic preservation of the architecture and histories of multiple classes, ethnicities, and genders is important. Urban renewal and economic development is a powerful tool that can cleanse the landscape of any references to past inhabitants – their struggles, lives, and uses of place.

(new economics foundation). A broader dialogue and a cultural shift regarding the principles and values underpinning the planning methods, design and development of urban places and neighborhoods must be realized if we want to achieve a sustainable well-being (the personal and the social one).

One of the most important things that influence peoples happiness is the strength of their relationship with others: feeling close to and valued by others is a fundamental human need (new economics foundation) and the strength of our communities also depends on the connections and relations that people have within them.

Ways in which such changes could be made are theoretically very numerous, but they obviously must be approved by the community. The proposed solutions are different, there are the traditional options, based on classic urban interventions (remodeling, rehabilitation, landscape interventions, elimination of traffic in these areas etc.) or models based on the logics of virtual networks (panel screens to facilitate mass virtual communication). Taking into account the young generations' preferences for virtual 'are we destined to withdraw further into cyberspace as the popularity of Internet expands?' Banerjee (2001) asks himself.

9. Given the fact that people spend a lot of time indoors, the fact that we accepted (even in a tacit manner) the communication that doesn't require direct contact, we could say that either option could be appropriate. If we also consider the cohabitation with the computer screens, both at home and at work, solutions would be heading towards the traditional option. Sustainable development, that is our common goal, involves the powerful penetration of nature in the grey areas of cities. The bioclimatic urbanism seeks the best use of settlements' natural potential as an effective means to promote their identity (Higueras, 2006). The competition between modern technology and spaces defined by their natural aspects should not be encouraged and the public character of the urban activities should be read in another key – it is not so important the fact that public spaces belong to everybody, but the fact that they are used by everyone.

Anyway, there were a lot of critics concerning modern communication technology brought in the street: urban critic Michael Sorkin (1992) described the 'city as a theme park' as characterized by places that are synthetic and simulations of real places. Michael Dear stated that 'the phone and modem have rendered the street irrelevant, and the new city threatens an unimagined sameness, characterized by loosening of ties to any specific space, rising levels of surveillance, manipulation, and segregation and the city as a theme park' (Dear, 2002, p. 19, *apud* Hutter, 2012).

Professor Francesc Muñoz from Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona speaks also in one of his books (Muñoz, 2008, p. 86) about spaces as theme parks, identifying them with malls and outlet stores, stating that actually they alter the density maps of metropolitan regions. He states that in the actual context a new type of territories appeared – *multiplex spaces* – which implies the logic of flows. Through them time and mobility arches are created: arches between inhabitants and between inhabitants and places. Multiplex spaces give rise to a genuine map of weekend leisure. This mapping,

comprising places and moments, is characterized by multiplicity and flexibility: we got, this way, multiplex places and moments! These issues influenced entirely public spaces by altering their traditional functions, character and morphology. In this frame we have to restate concepts like inhabitant, community, living space, local culture, in a context in which flexibility and mobility of human behavior characterize a metropolitan inhabitant who lives in a changing geography and in cities with variable geometry.

10. Urban public spaces are those where all the processes related to people's existence take place and, especially, peoples cohabitation. These places are a reflection of the social structure, of the level of development and computer technology, not a flat, clean and shiny surface. They can and must become surfaces able to reflect, as a magic mirror, the real human happiness, a real human smile, being able to dissolve the evil and the madness that had subjugated humanity during (at least) last decades.

Public spaces are locations where, somehow independent of their will, all the social categories meet. The social segregation – real and sustained even by inappropriate or wrong urban decisions and actions – can be mitigated by bringing the members of the community together, in the same area, where appearances can erase significant differences between the old and the young, the healthy people and the ones with disabilities, people with full account and those with debt, direct communication, direct eye contact, people standing face to face, direct socialization, all these could be an effective treatment for various urban diseases (loneliness, stress, apathy, depression etc.). Here, where it is more discernible than elsewhere, the sun, the sky, the rain, the snow, the wind, pretty freely offered equally to all, one should really feel like going back to Agora!

Conclusions

'Seemingly, three major trends: privatization, globalization, and the communication revolution – will continue to shape the future demand and supply of public space. Planners must anticipate the effects of such trends, but also focus on the concept of public life, which encompasses both public and private realms advancing the cause of public space and the opportunities and initiatives for the future' (Banerjee, 2001). In this respect we appreciate that several axes of thinking and acting would be interesting and useful to follow:
  – The interaction between generations must be encouraged: groups of different ages have to occupy the same space by avoiding the separation of younger and older people.
  – Security and accessibility – in terms of possibility to easily arrive there and the pleasure to be there – are very important also. It is stated, meantime, that access includes the ability to occupy a place and the activities contained within (Nemeth, 2012, p. 815). Accessibility is the key determinant of publicness (Varna and Tiesdell 2010, p. 578 *apud* Nemeth, 2012). If physical/social accessibility is generally recognized, an interesting position (Mandanipour, 1999 *apud* Faye and

Le Fur, 2011) shows that public spaces have also accessibility constraints, derived largely from social practices that implement social exclusion (Lehrer, 1998).

– With respect to what 'urban' means, I think that we must instil a particular version of 'civility' within the urban and suburban vernacular (Mcleod and Johnstone, 2012). Bannister *et al.* (2006, p. 928) states that 'in city centres civility is founded on the removal of 'otherness' or contrary actions and behaviour'. Although it was said that 'communication is not free, nor is use of space' (Németh, 2012), we sustain that the cited 'Code of conduct' would be an extremely useful and profitable regulatory framework in terms of education (young people have to be conducted to achieve good manners for certain circumstances). Being free to use something (including public spaces) doesn't mean we must accept anything – also inadequate language and behaviour – in the name of recognized and established freedom.

– Centrally situated public spaces, dominated by important and monumental public buildings or decorative compositions (historical monuments, palaces, statues, colons, fountains etc.) are fragments of a city, its inhabitants identifies with them; they constitute a renewed focus for regeneration due to their network interconnection role and their capacity to 'encapsulate' the history (Smith *et al.*, 2002 *apud* Faye and Le Fur, 2011).

– We have to redevelop the piazza style square, at night and at day.

– We must impose a social control that will have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the meanings of public space, social justice and the parameters of state power (Colemann, 2003, p. 21).

– The provision of facilities such as toilets, suitable seating, lighting, signage, have a great influence on peoples attitudes to the public spaces, as these most common activities (sitting, walking, waiting, watching, chatting) take place in these areas; there is *a must* to provide them in the best manner possible.

– Cities around the world have placed more emphasis on policies for arts and culture over the past years, a shift that reflects the centrality of culture in promoting an urban renaissance. Policy makers see cultural industries as a source of new jobs; not only does culture enhance urban quality and multi-functionality, it has also become a key economic sector in itself (Herrero *et al.*, 2006 *apud* Van Aalst and van Melik, 2011). It is shown that cultural functions make an essential contribution to the urban economy: 'concentrations of arts facilities did not only represent aesthetic amenities, they also raised property values and attracted commercial development' (Zukin, 1995, p. 117).

With no intention for an apotheosis approach of the presented issues we firmly state that changing the face of the cities starts from public spaces and that, beyond economics, social and cultural aspects, the city – as a 'whole' – and public spaces – as components – must be a work of heart.

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