The public space as forgotten element and generator of the city crisis

Recovering the idea of public space as a way to improve the quality of life in low income communities

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Content

"Mumbai nowadays is one of the biggest cities in the World, reaching 20,000,000 people. In 2020 the population is expected to increase up to 30,000,000 inhabitants" *(United Nations source 2011)*

1.   Introduction

The social and urban process that occurred in the last century, promoted some changes in the public space, giving as a result a lot of critical opinions about the development of public life conditions, beside the problems that the society and the institutions set out. Most of these thoughts came up during the second half of the twentieth Century. These thoughts are distinguished by recovering the classical meanings around what is the public. In this meaning it refers to the common, the collective and the visible; addressing the changes, the weakness of the tendencies and its degradation, and emphasizes the differences and the socio-cultural plurality and politics as essential elements in a democratic construction of public life. (Ramírez Kuri, 2006)

1.1. General definitions

1.1.1 The public space

"The public space is understood as the place where demonstration events and social gatherings take place, where the collective urban needs are satisfied, transcending the limits of the city to inhabitants' individual interests."[1] So it is necessary to understand this space not only as the broad and complex area of the city but also as the everyday neighbourhood territory.

The public space, the agora, was born in the ancient Greece. The agora was the place where the idea of civil society was developed and strengthened, where the community met to discuss, talked and learnt. It was the place where the public and the private had come to share the same end and, what is more, the necessary link between the two realities of man. This idea has been lost through the years, with the arrival of marketable securities and the materialism of postmodern society, having an effect on the current architecture, such as the recent years' massive buildings construction, that have accompanied vertiginous growth of economies and have encouraged a lack of reflection on developing cities.

It is very important not to lose the essence of agora in our existing cities, since it is needed to share concerns, worries and stories of our daily life and eventually to build up

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[1] "Entendemos por espacio público aquel lugar donde dónde se propicia la manifestación y el reencuentro social, dónde se satisfacen necesidades urbanas colectivas, que transcienden los límites de los intereses individuales de los habitantes de la ciudad." in Espacio público, participación y ciudadanía edited by Olga Segovia and Guillermo Dascal

all together an opinion about our surrounding reality. What is more we must not forget that the primary is the anthropological and the political need of people to meet and talk, the public space meets this need and thereafter it starts becoming important. If it were not tied to a great need of man it would had never played an important role. Thus, the problem of public space in actual cities is transcendental. The city is in crisis and leaves this need not cover showing it with force.

1.1.2 The public space as forgotten element

"The most obvious expression of the social and political decline is a physical space abandoned. Consequently it is necessary to rescue the social systems and public commitments, to recover the origin of cities."[2] The problems generated by this forgetfulness focus on crowded cities, materializing in high levels of urbanization showing the process of *"urbanization of poverty". (MacDonald and Drummond 2009)* Moreover this phenomenon generates informal settlements that are nothing more than unplanned urban patches, therefore, poor solutions for the inhabitants. As a result the new communities' premature composition suggests a residual space system such as future containers of poverty, violence, illness, vulnerability and natural disasters.

With the aim of improving the situation, the state plans resettlement areas, unfortunately with lack of urban sense, since the cause of concern is hosting the largest number of families, but in fact what they are doing is taking advantage of the main priority of the relocated, which is only the request for living space, where they can build their own houses gradually. Thus the state reduces the formal production of city to delivery of land and the first improvements on it, forgetting the need for social and urban public space, the facilities and the connections with the city, turning these issues into problems to be addressed in the last moment. Finally the urban quality is negatively affected and, therefore, also the quality of life. (Takano and Tokeshi, 2007)

How are these neighborhoods planned? How is the density determined? Are they based on social studies? Are the relocated people points of view taken into account? There are examples like Bilibid Prison community, in the metropolitan area of Manila, where the houses can not breathe because of its congestion and the streets are too wide

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[2] "Un espacio físico abandonado es la más clara expresión del retroceso social y político. Por tanto es necesario rescatar los sistemas sociales y compromisos públicos, para recuperar el origen de las ciudades." Estudios Urbanos. Espacio Público en la ciudad Popular: flexiones y experiencias desde el Sur by Guillermo Takano and Juan Tokeshi

and poorly designed. As a result we can observe that the shady areas and the playgrounds are conspicuous by their absence. Moreover, it is a very dense area in its horizontal plane, with little public space, which is inevitably reduced to the small spaces in between the street and the houses, the semi-public space, where women gather to do laundry and where the small improvised stalls are the children's entertainment. The wide streets that could be used as public space die because of the lack of shadow. Consequently this lack of design denies the neighbourhood life as well as the interaction between neighbours, and because of this communication absence the area turns into chaos.

These small communities should not only answer the housing and urban needs, they should also offer services, facilities and economic alternatives to their inhabitants.

It is necessary to introduce the concept of quality of life through plazas, public spaces and green areas into the public space design. "*The public space quality can be mainly evaluated by the intensity of host and for mixing different groups and behaviours, and for its ability to stimulate the symbolic identification, expression and cultural integration.*"[3]

1.1.3 The city crisis

"The city is the result of the complex organization of large numbers of people inhabiting a certain area. As the human room, the city is also a constantly changing organism that can express art, as well as can be practical. The city is characterized as the meeting point of worship and exchanges"[4]

When we talk about the city crisis, inevitably we associate the forgetfulness of public space as an immediate consequence of the uncontrolled expansion of cities which carries up to the traditional degradation. For example the classical idea of small Philippino communities made up of four or five families where they share spaces for domestic tasks such as washing clothes, preparing food or talking. All of these activities

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[3] "La calidad del espacio público se podrá evaluar sobre todo por la intensidad de acoger y mezclar distintos grupos y comportamientos, y por su capacidad de estimular la identificación simbólica, de la expresión y la integración cultural." Espacio público, participación y ciudadanía edited by Olga Segovia and Guillermo Dascal

[4] "La ciudad es el resultado de la compleja organización de gran cantidad de personas que habitan una zona determinada. Por ser la habitación de los seres humanos, la ciudad es también un organismo en constante transformación y que además de expresar arte, es también utilitaria. La ciudad se caracteriza por ser un lugar de reunión, culto e intercambio". Diccionario de Arquitectura y Urbanismo by Camacho M.

are the natural result of the coexistence and integration with the rest of the neighbourhood. So we can call this the next community level. But if the community is dissolved due to lack of space and the high density causing overpopulation it is unavoidable that this ideal of sharing in small groups will be lost. Therefore the chain community-neighbourhood-city, will be an untidy continuum of residual senseless urban spaces that in the end are nothing more that a manifestation of the life crisis in the cities as the main result of the globalized system.

There are interesting numeric data about the growth of cities, like the city of Bombay which is considered megacity because of its 15.7 million inhabitants and with an annual city growth of 3.3% and Manila with 11.8 million, and an annual city growth of 3.5%. These numbers correspond to examples of megacities with overflowing dumps, rivers full of trash, lack of housing for all inhabitants and above all, big traffic jams. The absence of the city planners coordination together with the continued growth of population and its wealth make city traffic the main concern to solve , making again evident their inability to recover the city and, more significantly, to recuperate the public space. *(United nations source 2011)*

The irregular growing city extensions represent a way of total crisis and spontaneous public space, which minimum urban services and are segregated to the standard city. In addition the public transport systems are insufficient and chaotic. Some proposals came up in response to this issue, using the few public funds such as the rethinking of the urban traffic, the construction of a new arterial network and some mega-facilities. These proposals are not a good solution, because they induce the activities dispersion with construction of shopping malls and leisure subcenters on the periphery that aggravate even more the central city crisis. As Rem Koolhaas said in his text "Junkspace", all of this results in waste spaces, areas within the city that are missing or abandoned. He calls them "non-places", the shopping malls, the precincts and leisure spaces, *"*A *conditional accumulation and a conditioning space"* which turns into unnecessary consumption and shopping mall politics.[5]

Where have the public space need been for the population? Why is reduced into malls? Malls are unnecessary consumption which generates nothing more than trash, pollution and reduce a bit more the limited space left in these megacities. Where are the inhabitants of our cities going? Our citizens consider poverty and pollution as an

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[5] Junkspace , Rem Koolhaas.

unavoidable element of the social landscape and the consumption as the new social expression maxim.

2.   Density as a factor shaping urban shelter design

Many urbanized settlements for low income citizens are defined as overcrowded areas, without planning and therefore with weak infrastructures. Because of unplanned activities such as spontaneous markets and improvised basketball courts polluted environments are created, where the violence and the stress coexist giving unhealthy living areas as result . In most of these areas the housing density is quite high, so there is not enough room for public space and green areas; this is consequence of the poor management together with no planning work. Therefore, the urban development design is the only way to achieve an efficient and sustainable density in addition to combining it   with the regulations and negotiations with government.

When the infrastructure is planned and organized consistently the role of density is playing a positive role in the community design. Furthermore we must not forget that we have to work designing typologies which respond to the environmental sustainability policy as well as taking into account the cultural heritage of the city and its inhabitants. Beside the economics and funding aspects the infrastructure and services optimization should be focused on.

Since we are not interested in designing vertical neighbourhoods then we should avoid thinking about density as growing up in high. It is true that if we grow up we will have more free space but it doesn't mean that we immediately achieve the quality in these spaces; we have to think in its design. Despite we must find the balance between the needs of the community, regulations, sustainability, cultural acceptability, costs of construction, transport system, the demand for facilities, the public spaces and green areas.

3.   The Role of Architects

Previously we said that the state's target is to relocate as many families as they can, whereas the relocated people's aim is to have a stable housing. For this reason the architects' role is fundamental in intermediating between these two goals to achieve both without losing the importance of the public space for social needs. Thus the role of the architect is to create "communities", understood from the term's most pure

definition, with stable housing and habitable areas, but with the ambitions of satisfying the intimately common needs among the relocated and to reconcile the public and the private life.

The urban architect deserves to be seen as a necessary intermediary, trying to make himself to be heard, in his role of optimizing economic sources, materials and space instead of letting the authorities' only interest, making it quick and cheap, rule. ,.

It is also mainly architect's work to find out how to take advantage of the land and work out how to adapt the project to the cultural heritage. The designs are his tools to convince the state and the population, and what is more to encourage the citizens' participation which is vital for creating an identity that connects all the inhabitants, the neighborhoods and the city, reminding us of our social nature and the need of physical and psychological contact that links us to our "community" Thus the density study will also be vital, in order for everything and all to find our space.[6] (Koolhaas 2001)

4.   Criteria and conclusions for sustainable settlements design

It is important to design proposals directed towards finding a better urban quality. The public space in all its dimensions is a task for all and all the citizens, because its development and maintenance belong to the continuous search for a fairer and enjoyable social life.

The main design criterion comes through citizen participation and through neighbourhood associations promoting urban disciplines to reactivate the social fabric. They are the main interested party and consequently they have to make themselves heard. Moreover this participation involves the concept of administration and promotes the involvement which takes place when the citizens feel membership, and what is more community identity.

Since the safety of these spaces is important, we should rethink if they should be pedestrian or could be traveled by vehicles. It is important that these spaces are controlled without barriers; the surrounding buildings should be the natural imposed limits, making them subtly dissolve with the neighbourhood. First of all we need to

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[6] *"In China, 40-story buildings are designed on computers in less than one week. In the context of this overdevelopment, the traditional architectural values, the composition, the aesthetics, the balance are irrelevant. The construction has left the architecture apart"* Rem Koolhaas.

define the space quality, which is determined by factors such as the choice of the pavement materials, the urban furniture and the space lighting design and, if we introduced green areas, which kind of vegetation would be the most appropriate to provide shade. Secondly it is also necessary to study the organisation of transportation into the city from the small communities, trying to make the displacement from urban areas, as well finding the balance between the neighbourhoods, the gathering places, the work, schools and the shopping activities.

Finally designing the city we make people collaborate to create an identity where we can find a connection with the neighbourhood's inhabitants and those of all the city. Furthermore we should always keep in mind the culture, the history and peoples' need to create an acceptable density.

To conclude, it is essential to add that poverty does not mean disappearance of the civil society; therefore, since the public space is an important pillar of the civil society, it can not disappear. If we promote its use and recuperation, these resettled communities' inhabitants could share their opinions and concerns, involving themselves more in the society and thus they would realize that there are common problems that not only they have, and all together feeling strong as a community can face to claim against the state power, which only turns cities into chaos.[7]

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7 *"The more indeterminate the city, the more specific its Junkspace; all of Junkspace's prototypes are urban- the Roman Forum, the Metropolis-; it is only their reverse synergy that makes them suburban, simultaneously swollen and shrunk. Junkspace reduces what is urban to urbanity…Instead of public life, Public Space: what remains of the city once the unpredictable has been removed…Space for "honoring" "sharing"," caring,""grieving"and"healing"…civility imposed by an overdose of serif…In the third Millennium, Junkspace will assume responsibility for pleasure and religion, exposure and intimacy, public life and privacy…"* Rem Koolhaas-junkspace

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