

Public Space and Quality Life

The Urban Space as a Source to Promote Social Equality



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Abstract

“A good city is like a good party – people stay much longer than really necessary because they are enjoying themselves”¹

If the city is the stage of collective life, where people move, develop, transform, we all should take active part and participate in its construction. The recuperation and construction of public space is essential for developing the city. Mobility through a city is one of the pillars of development, mobility requires a common infrastructure, but infrastructure is not enough, infrastructure needs a “know how” to use it, in order to guarantee the creation of a more equalitarian society. “There is a huge expression of democracy when a citizen with a 30 Euro bike has the same rights than a citizen in a million Euro car”².

¹ Jan Gehl, *Cities for People*

² Enrique Peñalosa, Former Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia (1-1-1998/31-12-2000)

Introduction

In my recent visit to Manila, Philippines for some weeks ago, the first and more marking impression was its chaotic traffic, as soon as I went out from the airport into the wild I was welcomed with one of the biggest traffic jumps I ever experienced. My memories went back immediately to my childhood in my home city Bogotá in Colombia, it was kind of a time travel, I saw the city I was born, and it made me think how come now days Bogotá has changed so much? Through a small research I realized that the main changes in the Colombian case have been first at all a Change of mentality, and second but not less important the construction of infrastructure with a careful plan in a way to provide in a cheap way a massive public transport system, a system that some how gives the Bogotá dwellers a better quality in the everyday mobility. But Manila is more than twice the size of Bogotá, the history is something else, the culture is also different; the challenge is then how to change the Filipino way of thinking, how to conceive, maintain and expand a better public transport system? Even worst, how to reorganize the chaos of the existing system?

It is incredible how much things we do not even think about (because we take them as the normal) affect us in our everyday; let's just say the time that takes to go and take a bus, the way we take, the waiting time; of course when you only have heard the story in a way is hard to imagine that it could be different.

One of my first experiences when I came to Europe (Germany) was that the cities were extremely organized, services like water, sewer, electricity, were spread to the whole population, they even have hot water! Other wonderful things I could realize was how the municipalities set focus for the develop and maintenance of public spaces like boulevards, squares, sidewalks, cycle paths, parks, etc., also how careful the public transport has been planned, and not to talk about the conscience, the respect and the responsibility people has of the use of the public transport and also of driving a car. There are more cars per inhabitant³ and many of the urban streets are thinner, but traffic in the Northern part of Europe is a heaven compared to what I have experienced in Colombia.

³ List of countries by vehicles per capita, Wikipedia

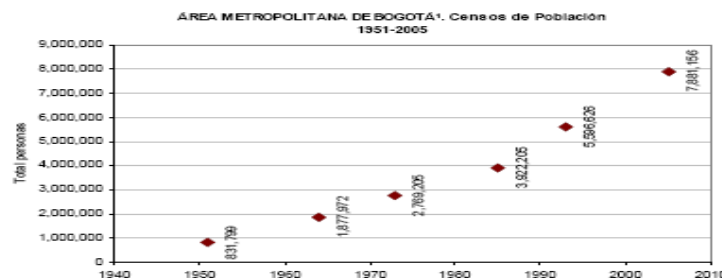
In 1900 about 10% of the world population lived in cities. By the new millennium the percentage reached a remarkable 50% and all forecasts indicate that the urban population will be 80% in 2050.⁴ Sixteen out of the first twenty Megacities are located in the so-called 3rd world countries,⁵ where Industrialization came late, just after the great depression; and when it came these countries were not prepared. The establishment of the new industries took place in the main cities. Farmers affected by the low prices for their crops, were pushed to move to the cities to be the new low price labour power.

The consequences were an immigration explosion and a not organized urbanization. The low resources of the newcomers and the non-compunction of some constructors made a total chaos of the cities.⁶

Historical Aspects

Most of the Latin-American cities were founded in the XVI century and become important urban centers at the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX; in this process there has been a big incidence the construction of public services and the implement of collective transport services,⁷ essential aspects to understand the proposed transformations through mobility.

The demographic explosion suffered by Bogotá is remarkable from less than hundred thousand inhabitants at the end of the XIX century to more than eight million now days.⁸



⁴ Kristoffer Horn. Editor Cities on Speed

⁵ Thomas Brinkhoff, Die größten Agglomerationen Der Welt

⁶ Metropolitan Manila Development Authority, (35% of Metro Manila buildings does not comply the government standards)

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Gestión y Ambiente, (22% of Bogotá's inhabitants live in an illegal generate urban settlement)

⁷ Ricardo Montezuma, Bogotá: Ciudad y Movilidad

⁸ DANE, Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas, Colombia

In 1884 Bogotá was a small town with 90000 inhabitants in 3000 houses and 35 villas. The public services were precarious, water supply was serving only 300. The main transport system was to walk, horse back riding or being carried by slaves.⁹

In 1882 the mayor signed a contract with a USA company given them the rights to construct a public service tram, similar to the one constructed in New York. “The Bogotá City Railway Company” (B.C.R.W.Co.),¹⁰ opened its first tram line, pulled by two mules, bringing the modernization.

The fast growth of the city, and the incessant demand showed the tram’s deficiencies too soon, a trip which should be done in 30 minutes took normally 2 hours, because of problems like derailed, the bad use of railing or the undernourished mules. Even so the municipality or the private companies could not invest in an alternative massive transport system because of a exclusive clause on the contract with the B.C.R.W.Co., just until 1910 the municipality ended the contract with the North American company and bought all the rights.¹¹ The new company “Tranvía Municipal de Bogotá” T.M.D.B. Introduced new electric trams, which worked together with me mules old ones until 1923.

The buses came in 1927 when private capitals decided to import them, the municipality assigned them peripheral trips with the purpose of protect the tram, giving a reason to start confrontations with the new association until the tram disappear totally in 1951 post consequence of vandals who were supposed to burn the trams paid by the buses owners.

Generally talking after the tram disappear the urban landscape of Bogotá went through a drastic changed; the public transport was in hands of private monopolies which brought more mistakes than right solutions. The municipality tried a couple of times to recover the control of the public transport, bringing trolley buses and high capacity articulated buses.¹² In spite of these efforts the power of the transport companies was even bigger without matters on its deficiencies, arbitrariness, and

⁹ Martha Jeanet Sierra, Del Tranvia al Transmilenio.

¹⁰ Los Tranvías de Colombia

¹¹ Alcaldia de Bogotá

¹² Francisco Pardo, Breve historia del transporte en Bogotá

the habitual aggressions which have been part of the live of the Bogotans; without counting on side but not less important problems like pollution and insecurity.

The transport system in Bogotá until December 2000 can be summarized as slow₁, inefficient₂, inequal₃, high polluted₄ and dangerouse₅.¹³

The Change

Cities are essentially a collective product , which are in a constant change and where diverse cultures and mentalities meet. “The cities everyone wants to live in should be clean and safe, possess efficient public services, be supported by a dynamic economy, provide cultural stimulation, and also do their best to heal society’s division of race, class and ethnicity”.¹⁴

These urban qualities are the ideals of transformation worldwide and difficult to disagree with. However, as obvious as they look like, they are even more difficult to bring into reality. What is the relationship between urban development and political strategy? Can planners and politicians interfere with the forces that co-exist in urban space? How can the urban planning and the politician’s good intentions affect an enormous, complex metropol like Manila? But the main question is what tactics and strategies should be applied to orchestrate a chaotic city?

Social engagement and the power of knowledge as strategic

In the case of Bogotá we could appreciate how moral issues were confront through politics, and it is with this shift that begins the change in Bogotá. Empowerment through knowledge and education is the key element to create better citizens and it was the ideal of a former mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus.

¹³ Transmilenio

1. Average traveling time for an ordinary journey in Bogotá: 1 hour and 50 minutes.

2. Very long public service routes, with old buses and low-occupancy levels.

3. Around 95% of the road network is crowded by private cars totaling about 1,000,000 vehicles transporting merely 19% of the whole population.

4. Circa 70% of particles emitted to the atmosphere came from motorcars.

5. High car-accident rate, as well as a significant number of casualties for the same reason.

¹⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Open City*

Through action and engagement on a local level, the former mayor initiates social intervention to transform the city. He thus operates on a tactical level, using the inherent social capacities within the city as a scene to change the wider context. For example the use of mimes to interfere with and mock people in traffic, which shows that Bogotans are more afraid of being ridiculed than fined. Other interventions he implement were the “carrot”¹⁵ hour law; the so called “women’s night”;¹⁶ the red and white card;¹⁷ the demand for the Bogotans to hand in their weapons to the police to reduce murders crimes. By engaging citizens ethically in civil resitance, the strategy is to educate and thereby transform the urban within. “We should assume and departing point the people’s inherent sense of ethics. Knowledge empowers people. If people know the rules, and are sensitized by art, humor, and creativity, they are much more likely to accept change”.¹⁸

The idea of public facilities as means of creating the good city

Following Antanas Mockus administration came a new strategist, a completely different than Mockus, but as well a visionary, former mayor Enrique Peñalosa, his strategic is to transform the city into a decent public realm by means of material and physical planning. The efforts are effectively implemented, urban spaces and recreational green spaces are now easily visible. His most successful projects include the adoption and implementation¹⁹ of a high successful bus-based transit system, the now famouse Transmilenio;²⁰ the planting of more than 100000 trees; the transformation of the deteriorated downtown into a dynamic pedestrian public space; reconstruction of hundreds of Km of sidewalks; more than 300Km of bicycle paths, pedestrian streets and more than 1200 parks.²¹

¹⁵ All public establishment who sell or expend alcohol should be close by 1a.m

¹⁶ A night which the city’s men were asked to stay at home for an evening to look after the house and children. Showing how women are less violent than the opposite gender

¹⁷ Drivers were ask to show a card either from the red side in case of an uncorrect behavior in traffic or from the white side in case of a positive one. The idea was to replace the bad words and agressive gestures for the cards.

¹⁸ Antanas Mockus, Former Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia (1-1-1995/8-4-1997)
(1-1-2001/31-12-2003)

¹⁹ Vidisha Parasram. The Curitiba transport system

²⁰ Bus-Based system in Bogotá

²¹ Cities on Speed

His management has led to international recognition, as Peñalosa is regarded as one of the pioneers of public space, much in accordance with the values of social democrat and urban planner, Jan Gehl, whose influence is widely felt in a Danish urban context²². This Ideas of the good city gives priority to children, public spaces and public transport, which are seen as ways of upgrading urban social life, signs of respect for human dignity. "Urban space play an important role as a catalyst for change".²³

The Role of the Architects

Walking the streets of Manila, I wonder how much longer they can sustain the idea they have of how they develop the city. I wonder where their social priorities lie, and what their politicians concerns their selves with.

Now days we are in a critical moment of finding strategies with respect to urban development, we find our selves between the idea of provide urban space to dignify the human and the economical challenges which limitates the freedom of design. If our challenges are difficult, so too are our opportunities multiple. However, unlike past moments in our history, it seems that we have some ideas that might appropriately generate more desirable patters of urban planning.

Architects have played an important role through out urbanism history, many of Renaissance great architects were urban postulators, from Brunelleschi and Alberti to Bramante and Borromini. As well at the end of the XIX century, the architect Eugene Henard pointed at a dynamic for the city that was both referential and contemporary for Paris. While Otto Wagner develop the idea of "Ringstrasse", modern and functional movement system fit over the small town scale of Vienna and its old city walls. Wagner's contribution was to help further shape Vienna with an extraordinary design for its metro system.²⁴

Then at the beginning of the XX century, Louis Kahn in his attempt to streng then the presence of urban form in the city of Philadelphia, coincived of powerful pieces, especially related to the car, which used the urban reality as the way to

²² Jan Gehl, *Cities for People*.

²³ Enrique Peñalosa, Former Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia (1-1-1998/31-12-2000)

²⁴ Paul Heyer, *Urban Essays*

challenge an idea of a new sensibility toward a new idea of urban architecture. Probably the whole passion to shape the city in the late 50's and early 60's in U.S.A was the spirit that inspired Kahn.²⁵

And a more recent view of the importance of the role of the architects is the case of Bogotá with more than 8 millions inhabitants after some invest in a careful planned develop of public spaces, transport system and education has changed the point of view of its citizens to a more friendly city fitting some basic, but forgotten needs of its population.

Conclusions

Every single urban organisms must stay in a positive evolution, they grow, they change, they continue; with our help as architects, restructuring and redefining their own possibilities.

How important the history is and how we as architects have a huge responsibility to create and develop this kind of spaces, where the respect for the living situation is the first priority.

The need of urban planners whom with their vision of restructuring urban form which comes from the moral issues and physicality to have the will, the believe, the passion for our future to have a drive to create cities born of a social conscience and responsiveness.

Architects must take a central role in planning, shapeing a vision, not in isolation but as sensitive participants in creating the process that grows, inically out of caring for the idea of the vision and not out of how much might be parsonally gained from it. The reward is in the commitment, the legacy to the futureis in the magnanimity of the spirit.²⁶

Bogotá may have become a more human city in terms of its sustainable, green and public outlook, but reises the question if is weather these material interventions have any impact on the healing of the society's division of race,

²⁵ Louis Kahn, Complete Work 1935-1974

²⁶ Paul Heyer, Urban Essays

class and ethnicity as suggested by Richard Sennett²⁷. Difficult to find the final answer, like the dilemma of the egg and the hen. Can urban space promote social equality, or is it the other way around?

²⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Open City*

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