Social Public Life

Improving life on Megacities in developing countries through public interconnected spaces

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"When public spaces are successful […] they will increase opportunities to participate in communal activity. This fellowship in the open nurtures the growth of public life, which is stunted by the social isolation of ghettos and suburbs. In the parks, plazas, markets, waterfronts, and natural areas of our cities, people from different cultural groups can come together in a supportive context of mutual enjoyment. As these experiences are repeated, public spaces become vessels to carry positive communal meanings". (Carr, Francis, Rivlin and Stone, 1993, p. 344)

1 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

Introduction

To get a better understanding of urban shelter design, many factors must be taken into consideration. If we look deeper on it, we can see that we have social economical conditions, climate, housing needs, public facilities and legal conditions. These elements are a few that can be thought of in what matters to urban shelter design.

In this paper I will be focusing on public space and the impact that it can have on social life in developing countries. With this aim, this work is based mainly on the ideas of Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl on the cities of the post modernistic era and how can their ideas be applied in megacities in developing countries.

Mid XX century Cities

"Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success in city building and city design. (…) Practitioners and teachers of this discipline have ignored the study of success and failure in real life, have been incurious about the reasons for unexpected success, and are guided instead by principles derived from the behaviour and appearance of towns, suburbs, tuberculosis sanatoria, fairs and imaginary dream cities – from anything but cities themselves." (1961; Jacobs, Jane; The Death and Life of American Cities; page 6)

As Jane Jacobs declares in this quotation, the cities in the 60's were not being guided from successful principles from the past, where social life was one of the main policies.

Instead the urban planners involved in these processes were trying to create the perfect image of a city. Starting in the Garden City Movement, fleeting throw the City Beautiful and ending in Le Corbusier's Radiant City.[1] About this three plans Jacobs argues that they are irrelevant to the cities life, as they focus on an overall image of building sets and connections rather on the cities necessities.

I do agree with Jacobs, because in the sixties cities started being built without a sense of human scale. It is clear that the main concern was to build an organized and clear infrastructure of out of scale roads and buildings. In this context the quality of the public space was a pushed into a second level of importance. One good example of this is the city of Brasilia.

If we watch Brasilia it is clear the strength of the road infrastructure in the city and the lack of scale.

If we look into Gehl's ideas we can also see the same arguments about this type of cities out of scale cities, he even claims that this kind cities are built from an aeroplane perspective, and in the case of Brasilia, coincidently, it looks like a plane from the top view. Other criticism that we can see on Gehl's work, seen on this picture above of Brasilia, is force that the car roads have on this type of planning.

[1] this last idea from Le Corbusier had a major influence in the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne on the final publication of the Charte d'athènes, that had a huge impact in the post world war II urban design.

2 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

Growth of Manila

"One of the significant phenomena that have characterized the process of development in the Philippines has been the explosive and unabated growth of urban areas." (Carino, Benjamin; Urban Growth in the Philippines: Policy Issues and Problems; page 35)

In the past few decades Manila had an enormous population growth mainly due to the people that daily move from rural places to the capital in search of a better life. This situation is really normal in developing countries, for example after the world war II the number of Filipinos residing in urban areas doubled in 20 years, and this growth has been exponential and nowadays most of the population lives in urban areas.

It is my belief that this factor caused it to become one city planned through addictive solutions. The constant need of dwellings the planning of parcels much more important than to have a masterplan for the city. This cause many problems in the city development but for me one of the main problems is the lack of good public space. In Manila most of the large public spaces are parks. But there is a need of more than parks to have a healthy social life in a city. For instance, as a building needs a program or diverse, a plaza needs its little shops, shaded places, public buildings or it will have poor qualities as a public space.

If we see the Daniel Burnham's masterplan for Manila, in 1905, it can be observed that the plan is base in road connections and there are two main parks one in the edge of Intramuros and another big one that surrounds almost the whole proposal. Also it is possible to notice that he does not propose to upgrade already some of the already constructed areas, since it is possible to understand that in some places the strict grid is not applied.

In terms of public space we can understand that there is no consideration for the human scale, also in the road infrastructure this can be perceived, since there is no logical connections between these spaces. They appear occasionally occupying full blocks, and there is no visible connection between them.

If we compare with what we can see today it is possible to see that these public spaces were not constructed, only the small park surrounding the old city Rizal Park. Here we can see the influences of the city beautiful movement on Burnham's work, with the long axis that has several landmark points on

it. We can also find this in his works in Washington D.C. and Chicago. The main infrastructure is visible and some of the block areas were constructed.
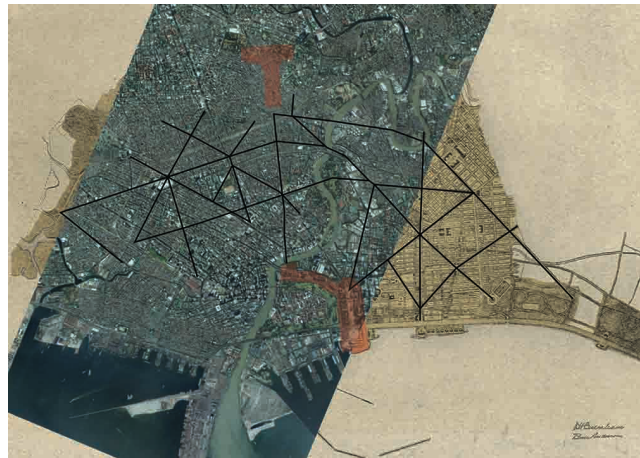
Street Life

"An ordinary day on an ordinary street. Pedestrians pass on the sidewalks, children play near front doors, people sit on the benches and steps, the postman makes his rounds with the mail, two passersby greet on the sidewalk, two mechanics repair a car, groups engage in conversation." (Gehl, Jan; Life Between Buildings, page 11)

This quotation shows a good public scene where people have an active social life, this scene was kind of an utopia in Europe in this time, but if we spend some time walking around manila we can see this happening almost everywhere. The only problem is if we open the eyes and start to see where this happens, normally this happens in streets that were planned for cars and not for people, making the social interaction restricted to a small crowded sidewalk. So the problem is not the empty public spaces, is the lack of good, interconnected and diverse public spaces where there would be a design for people. This idea must be something considered in every scale, from the building, to a neighbourhood or a bigger masterplan.

Changing Public Space

"Achieving the vision of lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities as become a general and urgent desire. All four key objectives – lively cities, safety, sustainability and health – can be strengthened immeasurably by increasing the concern for pedestrians, cyclists and life in general. A unified city wide political intervention to ensure that the residents of the city are invited to walk and bike as much as possible in connection with their daily activities ties a strong reinforcement of the objectives." (Gehl, Jan; Cities for People, page 6)

Through this four principles cities have been changing in the past few years. Following Gehl's work we can get new perspectives on how to ensure that this happens. One of the first measures, which the author talks about, is the traffic reduction. This for me is the main problem in Manila, since roads work as barriers in the street life. From the example of London we can see that a congestion charge area helped to reduce the traffic in the city center. Another thing that can be done is to reduce the number of lanes per road, as it is proved that if you give more space to cars then you will have even more cars on the streets.

Instead of car planning if we start to think on the ground level and give more space to people instead of cars we are able to have a more livable city. Other things can be done in the street level, for instance is to design interconnected public spaces, with pedestrian streets, bicycle lanes and plazas, that will facilitate the movement of people, and will be more important than the car ways so instead of people crossing a road it would be the cars that will cross this street.

And to compliment these improvements on the street, it is also important to improve the public transport system. This is important because if u don't provide it, the car use will be always more attractive. But with a good, efficient, fast and cheap public transportation system the car use will drastically be reduced.

3 The Role of Architects

Public space has been the motor of urban societies, from the street discussions to the street economy. And nowadays in the Philippines public space has been thought has a second need for the people, being the first one to provide a shelter. I think that this supremacy of the housing needs over the public space shouldn't exist. Particularly in developing countries where the needs of housing end up in

minimal dwellings sizes for an average of 5 people families, so I think there is the need of safe outdoor spaces to counterbalance this lack of indoor space.

As an architect I think that the first thing that an architect needs to do before planning in developing countries is to observe the people's needs. Observation and interaction are important steps to understand who we are designing for, and through this processes we are able to design spaces that will have a true purpose for those families, because they know better what do they need than us.

As a result of this observation we can try to change the, usually, wrong ideas that personnel involved in urban planning have on slums. As Jacobs states sometimes these people are blind with the concept of slum, and can't see past this and understand that sometimes the spaces that for us are the ones without qualities are the ones that have the best quality of social life. So is important that architects work as an in-between mediator that will take into consideration the politicians and the people ideas. We can show these ideas through discussion and show that instead of low rising houses with no public space we can try to combine medium rise with public spaces without losing the desired density and also it would help to reduce the urban sprawl.

To conclude I think that architects must have a critical view on the developing cities nowadays and look to the good European examples on how to create a more liveable city and neighbourhoods with the intent of giving people a better social and public life.

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