

Public spaces as an everyday element

Lively or lifeless public spaces in Guayaquil?



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1 Introduction

“A humane city – with carefully designed streets, squares, and parks- creates pleasure for visitors and passer-by, as well as for those who live, work, and play there everyday.” (Gehl, 2010) The importance of “well designed” public spaces increases more and more everyday. According to some studies, it has been reflected how a public space can influence peoples conditions and quality of life. Despite what has been shown in the studies, it has become very difficult specially for developing countries to implement solutions to design carefully an open space with optimum characteristic to make it a “well designed space”. The rapid population growth generated by the migration of people to the city and the natural growth are some of the causes of the problems and challenges that cities are facing now a days.

Open spaces in developing countries changes their situation everyday and sometimes in a wrong way making them worse than the days before. The society tends to take over the public space according to their needs without customizing the laws. Open spaces rather than being used as a meeting place are transformed into parking spaces, places for informal trading, small kitchens, etc becoming increasingly smaller and affected by insecurity noise and pollution. Jan Gehl

defined that some cities can be lively or lifeless. (Gehl, 2010) At this point an interesting question can be asked. Do developing countries have lively or lifeless public spaces?

For a better understanding of this topic it is necessary to define what is a public space. According to Olga Segovia and Guillermo Dascal a public space is understood as a place where demonstrations and social encounter take place, where collective urban needs are satisfied. “entendemos por espacio público aquel lugar donde se propicia la manifestación y el reencuentro social, donde se satisfacen necesidades urbanas colectivas, que trascienden los límites de los intereses individuales de los habitantes de la ciudad”. (Segovia & Dascal, 2000) A public space is not only an open area, it is also an everyday element for people.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the terms designated by Jan Gehl “lifeless and lively” to define and encourage a discussion about whether public spaces in developing countries qualify under one of those terms.

2 Literature Review

Jan Gehl claims that it is possible to see through the urban structure and planning how a city functions and how it impacts human actions. He mentioned some examples like the medieval city and how they planned short walking distances, squares and marketplaces to support the functions as centers of trade. With the passage of time it can be noticed how some good traditions and solutions have been lost. In 1961 there was a change of paradigm, cities were thought of as a machine. (Gehl, 2010) Cities were planned for buildings and not for people. At this point we must question who is responsible? Which are the reasons? According to Guillermo Takano and Juan Tokeshi the political aspect has a lot to do with this change of paradigm. “Un espacio físico abandonado es la más clara expresión del repliegue de lo social y lo político.” (Takano & Tokeshi, 2007). This means that an empty abandoned public space represents clearly the conflict between the social and the political aspect. Being an Ecuadorian this phrase represents some of the problems regarding the management of our public spaces. One of the problems that can be related with the phrase mentioned before is that public spaces are provided by a political entity and given to the society without having a good relationship or plans for the future. That's one of the arguments mentioned in the book, they remark that this political entity passes the basic

responsibilities to the community. The lack of dialog between the society and the political entities is the generator of the conflicts. The society takes the responsibility for the issues and begin to lose respect for the rules that are given by the authority. “la calificación pública es dada por la gente no por el planificador” (Takano & Tokeshi, 2007) It means that a “public space is defined by the people and not by the planner” depending on the level of apropiation. People actions is what characterized a public space and in the same time it gives them its own identity. This statement sometimes can be bad when the level of apropiation is too high. This situation starts to create other conflicts regarding inequities. The rules given by the authority are being ignored so the society starts with new rules. The disputes about the control of spaces initiate because of the different groups in the society and the social inequalities, such as gender and age starts to show. The public spaces start being use whether as a fully time commercial space or as a point of delinquency. (Takano & Tokeshi, 2007)

Another big consequence that has to be with the statements mentioned before is the traffic. According to Jane Jacobs the increasingly growth of car traffic and the urban planning ideas and criterias of modernism separated the uses of the cities transforming the city as individual buildings and not as a mix of agglomeration of open spaces and buildings. (Jane Jacobs in (Gehl, 2010)). Those problems can be translated into the term of lifeless cities mentioned by Jan Gehl. In the other hand, there are also well organized and designed cities that follow some criterias that Gehl mentioned in his book.

“Life in city space has a significant impact on how we perceive the space. A lifeless street is like an empty theater: something must be wrong with the production since there is no audience.” (Gehl, 2010)

Jan Gehl in his book *cities for people* makes interesting analysis of cities, creating a list of some design criterias that can be use to determine if a city is well design or not. According to him a city needs to have social interaction to be considered as a lively city. Sometimes this statement can be misunderstood. The first question that appears in my mind is what is “lively”. A place with many people? A lively space is not a crowded space, its not a matter of quantity, its more a matter of quality. One of the first criterias that he mentioned in one of the chapters in his analysis is that the place needs to have a variety of activities. It should be planned in a way to maintain people entertained. Shops restaurants monuments should be

placed in a coherent way. With this strategy distances seem shorter and the walking can turn into an experience. “Combine the useful with the pleasurable by foot” (Gehl, 2010). A second criteria and that can be linked with the first one is to have a simple and basic structure to create a hierarchy of streets and squares. This basic structure allows also to make the distances shorter. Another important criteria is to have few important spaces, it grants the possibility to create a better quality as an individual space. A mix use is also important. To implement commercial activities in the ground floor is always a good idea, Jan Gehl mentioned this criteria as “Active ground floor frontages”. It grants people to participate in the urban life. As well social and recreational activities are very important and have to be mixed. This spaces should have a moderate dimension. It is better to have many smaller spaces than a bigger one. “Good habits and daily routine, good space and critical mass” (Gehl, 2010).

After making a smaller list of some criterias regarding lively and lifeless city, the next part of the paper will be a briefly analysis of a public space in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

Guayaquil the biggest city in Ecuador, has been characterized as the principal urban center and as the most populated city in the country, with a population more or less of 4 million inhabitants. It is located in the coastal zone and has the most important port of the country. The port in the city became the main economic source and attraction for the society. It was located in the city center but in the decade of the 60s it was relocated to the southern part of the city. This was one of the main reasons that caused the urban degeneration. Because of the lost of the port activities the site was forgotten. Many people move away,



Ilustración 1 urban regeneration Guayaquil. recovered 23.04.2016.

instead of being a residential area it turned partially into a commercial area. During the decade of the 90s the urban degeneration started to be visible. For this reason the municipality decided in 1992 to revive the public spaces of the city.

BEFORE AFTER BEFORE AFTER

So far the different municipalities continued with the plan, a foundation was created and its called “fundación malecón 2000”. The foundation focused in the recuperation of plazas, parks, markets, tunnels and vehicular circulation. (Guayaquil, 2009)

After the introduction about the city of Guayaquil im going to make use of the terms from Jan Gehl “Lively or lifeless”. Are Guayaquil public spaces lively or lifeless? to answer the question it is necessary to do an analysis of a public space in Guayaquil. The plaza Rodolfo Baquerizo is a really interesting public space for a analysis. It is a meeting point that can be called or I can referred it to as an everyday transition place for many people. It is centerly located and directly adjacent to the main street of the city, avenida 9 de octubre and to the estuary “Estero Salado”. Plaza Baquerizo Moreno is used as mentioned before as a transition space for many students and different persons. It is located in between two of the biggest universities of the city, Universidad Católica Santiago de Guayaquil and Universidad Estatal and beside the Malecón del Salado and tennis club.



Ilustración 2 site plan. recovered 22.04.2016 google maps

The name Rodolfo Baquerizo Moreno was given to commemorate the former owner of the plot. Mid XIX century the site was a famous theme park called American park. This park was the only recreational gathering place of the city. Every type of person, from different social classes flocked there. The park had also a watering place called “los baños del salado”. Over the years the park was deteriorating so the municipality decided to make this area part of the urban regeneration of the city mentioned before. The plaza was opened to the public the 22 of April 2004. (Empresa Publica Municipal de Turismo, 2015)

The main purpose of this project was to rescue the lost traditions of the city and to revive the attraction point that was before, as well as to implement recreational activities, outdoor presentations and to reconnect the city with the estuary, to make people use the open space and to exploit the existing nature and landscapes of the site.

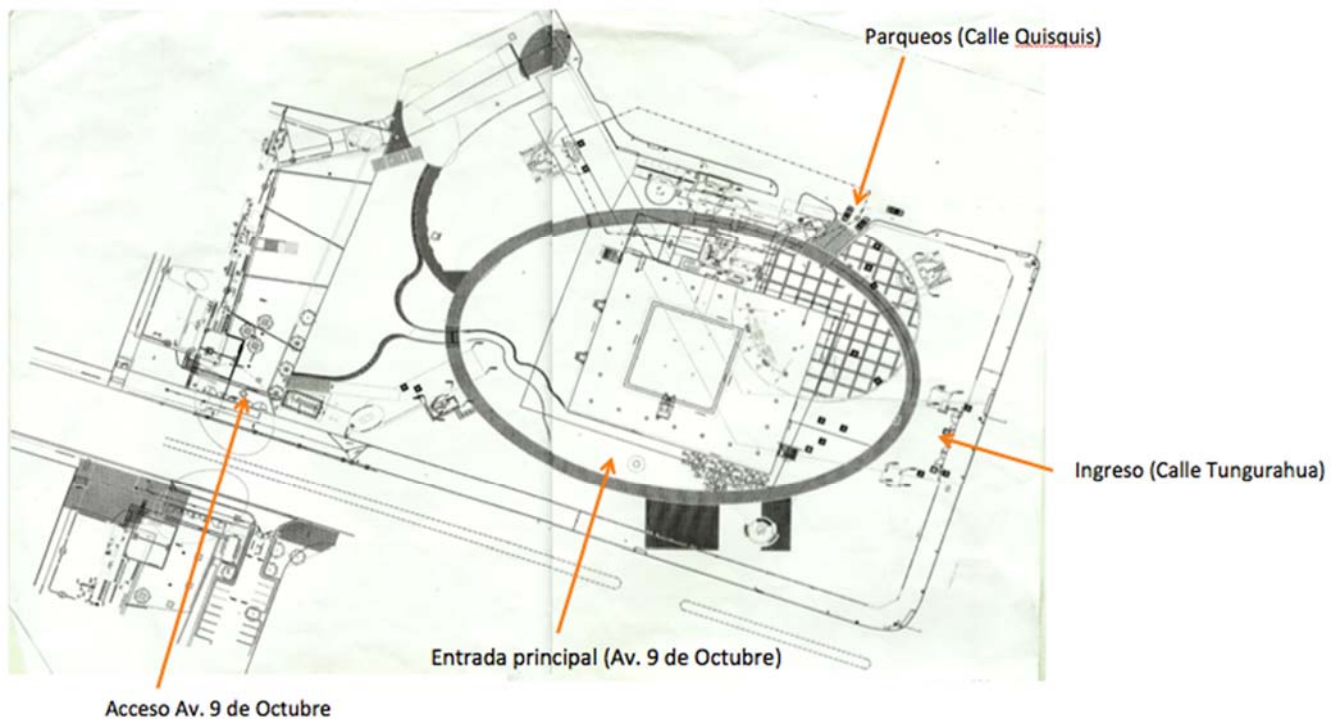


Ilustración 3 main entrances of the plaza. Photo made by Viviana Estrada 2013

The plaza Rodolfo baquerizo has 3 main entrances (Ilustración 2), two are in the streets and the other one connects the plaza with the Malecón del Salado. The plaza is well connected to the city and accessible for everyone, many bus lines can be taken from the site. The main element within the plaza is a building made with aluminium, glass and iron. It is 9,70 meters height and 1600 square meters. The building consist of three storeys, the top floor is a exhibition center, the ground

floor is an open area that allows free circulation for pedestrians and has different uses as offices, storage room, fast food restaurants, bank, and bathrooms. The third storey is an underground parking. Beside the building is an agora used for outdoors presentations. The plaza as mentioned is surrounded by the nature, this feature is one of the reasons why people visit the place. A natural environment can be felt in the area because of the gardens that are surrounding the main building. Some students in the Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral (ESPOL) made a research to know the level of satisfaction in people who visit the place. According to it, people are very satisfied. The interviews reveal that the cleaning, the security and signalling are the main reasons (Moreno). To check if the place is lively it is necessary to compare and analyse the site according to the criterias determined by Jan Gehl. One of the criterias is the variety of activities. The site has mix activities and they are arranged all over the place as we can see in the illustration 3. The plaza has a basic and simple structure with a main walking path that surrounds the main building and at the same time It divides the place in different areas. This basic structure creates a hierarchy in spaces and allows only to have few spaces. Jan Gehl criteria has been fulfilled here, less spaces the better quality in each of them. One problem that can be seen in the place is the

dimension of the places, it has very big green areas without a use. The lagoon is not well maintained and people complain about some garbage in the water.

4 Urban Shelter Design and the role of architects

To achieve a good or well designed open space the municipality or the government should be more involved and responsible during the process. As mentioned before there is a lack of communication between the authority and the community. The role of the authority is important in the design process, they are the ones that approve the design. Political actors should try to look for a way to consider people's opinion, to make them part of the design. If this process is put into practice many problems can be avoided. People will feel like they are part of the owners of the space. This implies that they would take care of it. The same strategy should be used by architects. Architects are not only the planners or

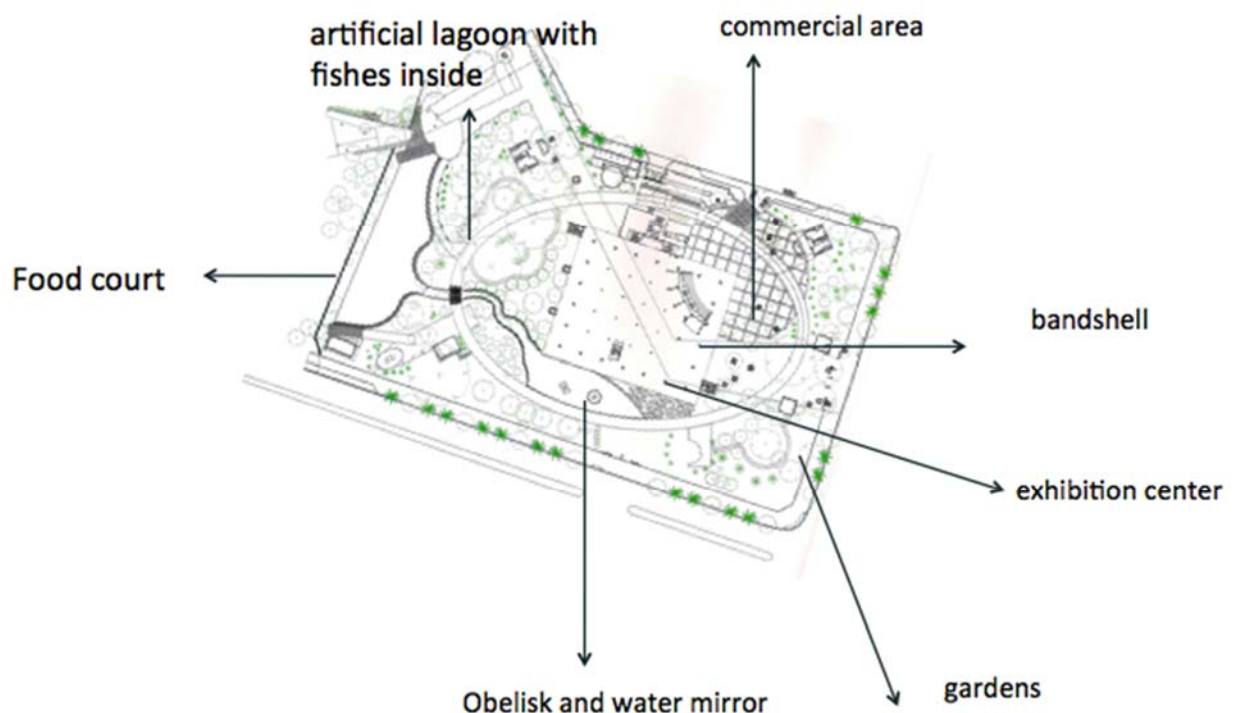


Ilustración 4 zoning-activities located within the plaza. recovered 03.05.2016 <http://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-350618/plaza-baquerizo-moreno-juan-xavier-chavez>

draftsmans. They should get involved with the community lifestyle. They should think not only as the manager, they should also think as the client or user. Two months ago my way of thinking became clearer. The Manila trip changed a lot my way of seeing things. During the visits we were able to see many different approaches. Some constructions made by the state and some by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Comparing some of them it was a

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noticeable difference regarding the design and the maintenance. The projects in which the community took part of the design and building process were more “lively places”, with more activities and people using the public space. Adopting Saint Hannibal as a main reference. Saint Hannibal is a housing project located in Passay, Metro Manila in the Philippines. It was organized by a NGO and the local church, the aim of the project was to transform the urban poor community giving them housing, livelihood, education, health, sanitation, etc. (CENTRE, 2015) With all this aims the purpose was to create a self sufficient and empowered community. The community took part in the design and construction process. The place looked well maintained, colorful, full of life, and clean compared to the other places. People felt secure and at “home”. They created their own place and environment. There are some examples of this strategy but Architects and governmental actors don’t put it into practice.

The plaza Rodolfo Baquerizo didn’t involve the users in the process but fulfilled some of Jan Gehl’s criteria. The rehabilitation of the site and the creation of the plaza gave the city a pleasant place to pass through or to stay. With the passage of years it has been shown that many people like to flock there like the old times. The plaza Rodolfo Baquerizo Moreno can be considered as a lively public space.

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