

Urban [Anti]spaces in the Young City

Modern cities can be described as a young and corporate. Some of them go from cow-town to boom-bust city. In this regard, the advent of the automobile, boom and bust economies, atomic individualism, civic indifference and modernism have all contributed to eroding the public realm in the city.

In modern cities, civic space is disappearing. Our current buildings are free-standing objects that do not create space in the city, but rather form an anti-spatial landscape. In this way, urban spaces are nothing but the side-effect of private investment. Public space is the sum of disconnected individualistic architecture. The space between buildings is disregarded completely and rewarded if it segregates itself from the public by connecting to its neighboring private building with encapsulated bridges that only abridge the public realm.

This problematic reaches its apotheosis when the winter is used as a justification for privatization. Then, the concern is not overcoming these challenges to create meaningful public spaces for the wellbeing of all, but to be content with creating quasi-spaces of private control, such as big-box malls, pretending to be public spaces; skyway networks, segregating access; corporate plazas, carefully curating their occupants; urban defensive architecture, predetermining people's actions in what is supposed to be public space... Unfortunately, in this type of cities architecture—and consequently urbanism—have become commodities. Thus, contemporary cities are built for economic return and not for people and the disturbing aspect is that as we keep developing with this same attitude, our built environment keeps feeding this noxious culture. Economic development cannot be the sole driving force of urbanization! Cities are the result of multiple forces: political, environmental, social, cultural...

Social Humanist Urbanism

We need to go back to the idea of the Polis, where the physical form stressed the public space, the civic where people gathered. For the ancient Greeks, the Polis made it possible for all its citizens to realize their spiritual, moral and intellectual capacities. The Polis was not a place, but a space: a way of life.

We can offer an alternative to young cities by prioritizing the public realm: give importance to public parks; create public and civic squares that can be used and programmed during winter and are truly public, not controlled, open to all; keep community associations small and welcoming, so local people can get involved; create architecture at a human scale that stimulates contact; take advantage of our technological advances to educate and engage people; increase participatory design.

In this manner, we can channel the marginalized aspirations of the city and make them categorically humanistic. Thus, we can turn our futile urban lifestyle into a way of life that can help us realize our capacities. If we create a better physical framework, outdoor activities can grow in number, duration and scope. More importantly, through a built environment centered around people, we can increase civic engagement and strengthen the connection between people in their roles as neighbors, co-workers and fellow citizens.

A Social Urban Living-Room

To prioritize the urban realm in the city, means to give it a high political, economic and social importance. To achieve this perhaps the best solution is to keep everything that touches the ground truly public, with only the bare minimum for access to buildings and for transportation needs. Then the city becomes a real space for interaction and ambivalence, a Social Urban Living Room, a connective tissue that bonds private and public spaces, the building and the ground. The ground remains public everywhere; it becomes an ubiquitous common ground that celebrates dialogue.

Like this, we can recuperate the value of all spaces in the city through grass-roots architectural interventions that are expressed through paraphernalia that allows civic engagement, communication, dialogue, entertainment and expression, celebrating the freedoms and rights of individuals and communities; creating a continuum where there is space for all. We advocate for architectural interventions that create real public life underneath and between buildings and, more importantly, celebrate the ambivalence of the city: a Social Urban Living Room with the capacity of suturing the lost space in the public urban realm.

We advocate for humanist urbanism expressed through small interventions accessible to all, across the city—at different levels of intensity and density, creating moments of intense activity and opportunities for quiet reflection. Like this, we create an ecology of places where citizens can start processes of defining spaces of social interaction, prioritizing these processes over defining constructs of hierarchy. In this way, we can create spaces of connection and reflection. We can return the city to its citizens and turn it away from pure economic ambitions!