Architecture and the City: the Space of Participation

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The architectural profession has struggled for over two centuries to define its potential contributions to modern culture through its primary urban vocation. In his now canonical book *The Fall of Public Man,* Richard Sennett has demonstrated the changes in the valorization of public space that took place between the European eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.[1] These changes eventually affected the whole of the Western world, and are now taken for granted in our technological world village. Succinctly, Sennett describes how the inhabitants in the large eighteenth-century European cities still understood the primary importance of the public realm, literally identified with the space of the theatre, where all significant actions took place. In sharp contrast, after the French Revolution and during the nineteenth century, it is private space and the expression of private feeling that are valorized. These changes are obviously concurrent with the emergence of the new democratic individual, endowed at birth with human rights and driven by the pursuit of pleasure. Such transformations in societal priorities have had a profound and disorienting impact on architecture.

The problem has become only more difficult since cities have increasingly proliferated everywhere on our planet: often hostile and unmanageable entities, yet today the privileged habitat of over half of humanity. It is understandable that the practical problems of providing sustainable housing and infrastructure for billions of people dominate the agenda, often clouding issues of well-being and cultural sanity. Still conceptualized by planners as efficient functionalized systems of circulation and consumption, the contemporary metropolis is often polarized between the traditional aspirations of urbanity and the early modern dreams of suburbia.

Even cursory historical knowledge reveals that the primary function of pre-nineteenth-century architecture was to open up communicative spaces for focal actions: disclosing a political, social or mythological order to a community, making a good life possible. It has not been, as it is often assumed, to design aesthetic objects for clients. While the definition of architecture has shifted historically, I would like argue in this essay that its main interests have always related to the configuration of meaningful, resonant public space, that its forms of production have traditionally gone far beyond buildings to include interventions - such as ephemeral structures - we today associate with other artistic disciplines and alternative practices, and that this is a crucial issue as we must account for transitional forms of dwelling in the contemporary metropolis, crisscrossed by local interests and the motorways of telecommunications.

Indeed, the central, traditional concern of architecture has been the disclosure of a social and political order from the "chaosmos" of experience, starting from the perceptions of meaning particular to each of our world cultures, embodied in stories, habits and physical traces, while projecting imaginative alternatives that enrich life and values. Arguably, today good architecture may even propose alternatives beyond stifling and repressive inherited institutions. Thus, in the best cases, architecture has provided spaces of encounter and participation where the Other is recognized and respected, spaces that enable human freedom, often - seemingly paradoxically - by revealing the limits associated with particular human actions. This intersubjective and emotional space of face-to-face communication is crucial for human self-understanding.[2] In recent times, however, the very possibility of such a public realm in the contemporary metropolis has been disputed. Many cultural critics and even celebrated architects like Rem Koolhaas write skeptically about the possible existence of public space in any form that remotely resembles its traditional incarnations,

1   Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
2   See Nick Crossley, *The Social Body, habit, identity and desire* (London: Sage, 2001).

a suspicion often vindicated by the interests of modern consumer societies. Such critics believe it is futile to question commercial and economic interests, preaching that it is simply better to play the game and go with the flow. While granting that talented architects such as Koolhaas sometimes have the good judgement of not believing themselves their cynical pronouncements, and produce work that enriches programmatic or urban experiences, such statements are profoundly problematic. It is important to clarify how the proper vocation of architecture is indeed the configuration of public space, meaning specifically a poetic proposition disclosing collective order: one that embraces fictions to open us to the abyss, the *abgrund* of human meaning.

Obviously, the operation invoked here is hardly analogous to the now fashionable and celebrated definition of design by Bruce Mau, understood as clever or aesthetically pleasing planning, an activity which is increasingly associated with many human endeavors. While it could be argued that the privatizing tendencies of most modern societies remain on the rise, and that individuals in the industrialized and developing world are suspicious about "symbolic space," usually associated with repressive political or economic forces, it is also true that our sense of radical homelessness encourages dangerous pathologies. We interact more with machines than with other human beings, and this results in narcissism, alienation, and the incapacity to grasp a sense of purpose for our actions; this sometimes translates, in our epoch of incomplete nihilism, into violent expressions of nationalism and fanaticism. In other words, while it is healthy to recognize the fallacies of ethnocentric nationalism, and we may increasingly feel comfortable with the idea of planetary citizenship, we also know that qualitative places are a constitutive dimension of our consciousness.[3] We need to feel at home, and this need for dwelling is always a living with others: it cannot be reduced to a private, perfectly serviced cubicle, as eloquently demonstrated in the precocious and now classic science-fiction novella of E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops* (1909).[4]

The functioning power of public spaces as a site for intersubjective meaning started to deteriorate after the closure of what Michel Foucault called the age of representation, at the end of the European eighteenth century. Understanding the problem in a longer historical perspective is important to help us contemplate possible alternatives in the age of telecommunications. While we cannot conceive of public space as simply a "designated area" in the city, no matter how formally appealing, I believe our cultural heritage still offers alternatives distinct from the flat space of our computer screens which have recently become so effective as a forum for information exchange and even political activism.

Using the Greek *polis* as a point of departure, public space was famously defined by Hannah Arendt as "the space of appearance." It is the site where I find myself and recognize my place *through* the presence of the Other. Public space is a space of full embodiment, a space of dialogue, gesture, and erotic exchange. It is fundamentally "situated," bound by the temporality of experience, capable of conveying a mood (*Stimmung*), resonance or attunement. In the Classical and Christian worlds this experience was generally described as "harmony:" the well-known central value in architectural theories from Vitruvius to the end of the Enlightenment.[5] Public space is thus ultimately irreducible to the geometric spaces of architectural design, regardless of its form of representation, whether on paper or on a computer screen. The communion it enables is also irreducible to other forms of communication, regardless of the technology we may invoke, from printing to hypertext. Like orality with respect to written language, it is always antecedent.[6] In the Western tradition, public space - urban space - was also political space. As opposed to cyberspace, it is a space with boundaries; in fact, it is the space where the horizon may (and must)

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3   This is a phenomenological insight now corroborated by third-generation cognitive science..

4   E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops* (London: Wildside Press, 2013). See also Vilém Flusser, "Taking up Residence in Homelessness", in *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91-103.

5   See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement, Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016).

6   For the primacy of orality over writing (and Derrida's *écriture*), see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

become visible: our inescapable mortality. Its reality was traditionally made possible by the inner workings of a culture and its rituals.

In the case of our late-modern societies, justifiably suspicious of traditional rituals and political values, the architect (like the poet or the artist) should try to implement alternative programmatic strategies in his urban interventions, revealing forgotten yet present meanings in the sheer visibility of the quotidian, empowering fictions and poetic images at a particular moment in time, even if the experience is ephemeral. Ever since the late eighteenth century, cities stopped being articulations of ritual places and became mere circulation: circulation of fluids, such as air, fresh water and sewage for hygienic purposes, circulation of goods for commerce and consumption, and circulation of people, always with a pre-planned destination in order to be significant, now served by GPS systems that never allow us to be lost. The master metaphor of planning for 200 years has indeed been circulatory: efficiency in this regard seems to be all that truly matters. And yet, we remain fundamentally embodied consciousness, and we are lost and incomplete when it comes to our true purpose - regardless of what we do or how much money we make. This is our true nature: our mindfulness is not computer memory, and we are not Cartesian points in the ether of telecommunications.

I would like to argue that an obvious point of departure to reclaim public spaces as poetic events in the contemporary metropolis is to challenge the dominant concept of the city as a circulatory system. This is of course simple to state, but it carries immense economic and practical implications, and the manifestation of this challenge in architectural and urban design projects will always be difficult and case-specific. Put very simply: we are in fact not merely voyeurs perceiving the city - mostly as visual "phantasmagoria" - through autonomous senses sending data to the brain, as was famously claimed for the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Rather than experiencing cities by "circulating" (usually today in some sort of vehicle), it is indeed rather crucial to walk and linger, and to engage in focal actions, while recognizing our place in the labyrinth and our openness to desire. Cities must start by being places where one can experience reality synesthetically - that is, privileging an embodied, multi-sensory consciousness that may remind us how reality is not reducible to sense-specific information. This awareness is paramount in our designed interventions. Human perception of meanings is enactive (not passive, like digestion) and in pure presence, not merely the result of an addition of sense-specific sensations connecting to a computing mind.

Montreal, the city I call home, is a large island, yet its connection to the surrounding water is invisible, forgotten. It possesses a large network of subterranean tunnels and shopping malls, yet the meaning of being underground is rarely acknowledged. These simple, forgotten conditions raise questions that may be addressed, thus creating potential spaces of participation. Montreal also possesses, like many other North American cities, liminal, obsolete areas left over by development, areas such as suburbs and industrial parks that contain a mortally wounded or dead technology, places which, when properly recognized, seem particularly poignant. Regardless of our skepticism, these questions and observations, among others, start to reveal fertile grounds for a potential public space. The poignancy of such potential spaces is often made clear in literature, painting, in-site installation works, multimedia, and film. Less often they have been recognized by mainstream architects and planners schooled in rationalist or formalist theories.

Examining the history of public urban space in Western architecture, we may identify, for the sake of our argument, two traditions. Resonant with the theoretical philosophy of Aristotle, one of these traditions celebrated the indicative uses of language, endeavoring to name things clearly. The *agóra* was the space for public speech and the debate of political issues by citizens: the space for commerce and the communication of information. Describing at the outset of his first book the possibilities of architectural meaning, Vitruvius analogously insisted that the semantics of signifier and signified were at work in architecture, implying that the building signified the order of the universe, an assumption accepted in some measure by all his successors, at least until the

late-seventeenth century.[7] Even during the following century, Enlightenment theorists employed linguistic analogies to account for the problem of meaning originating no longer in nature, but in the cultural conventions inscribed in history. While traditional cosmic and linguistic analogies always allowed for the possibility of poetic expression, the semantic model became reduced to indicative meanings in the semiotic architectural theories of the 1960s. Perhaps paradoxically, electronically-enabled public spaces in the web offer today opportunities for communication that have been rightly praised as the new truly public *forum*: indeed, enabling communities of like-minded people to debate, participate and find a voice in their respective political constellations.[8]

Our Greek cultural ancestors, however, also valorized poetic language, the language of fiction, superior according to Aristotle to the indicative language of history, in its evident capacity to reveal important, orientating truths around human affairs: *phrónesis* as opposed to the theoretical *epistéme*. This lead to the instauration of an alternative tradition of public space that may perhaps be more useful to unpack present possibilities. They associated this alternative public space with the theatre and our encounter with the arts and poetry, a mediated public realm that celebrated not clear information but the poetic utterance, speaking to all our senses beyond denotative signification: opening the word to its limits in the artistic event of tragedy (the *triune choreia*, involving dance, poetry and music) that took place in a "clearing" made possible by architecture. Interestingly, Vitruvius recognized the theatre as perhaps the most important of all urban institutions, analogous to his own description of the origins of architecture.

In the opening paragraphs of his second book, Vitruvius describes the origins of architecture as a clearing in the forest that *makes possible* language and culture.[9] The space of architecture is suggested by necessity, by the possibility of maintaining a fire initiated by the branches of trees rubbing together during a storm. In Vitruvius's story the space of architecture *coincides* with the space of culture. A primary technique emerges with culture; the domestication of fire brings men together. They recognize the others, begin to *speak*, and eventually *build*. This emerging language, in continuity with gesture, is poetic: the nature of all human "natural" languages.[10] The poignancy of this story cannot be overemphasized. The fire is not stolen from the gods. It is a gift, a heavenly spark generated by the wind, still perceived by Vitruvius as the breath of nature, an invisible force that lights up human desire in our hearts and is responsible for our health and wellbeing. Appropriated by the first humans, a clearing opens up: a place for dwelling. Architecture is poetic, yet coincidental with the origins of language and culture. Its primary role is not to build shelters but to reveal limits that "make sense" and allow for more properly linguistic cultural operations to take place.

Elsewhere I have elaborated on that famous neologism Plato uses to describe "space" in his *Timaeus*. He associates *chóra* with both the primordial space of the womb and the primordial seminal substance, while designating it as the third element of reality, one that allows the mysterious intertwining of Being and becoming, Ideas and their embodiment in actual things, as we experience reality in our cultural (i.e., linguistic) space - being thus distinct from *topos* or natural place. In connection to our present argument, allow me to point out the fact that Plato's term is cognate to both the central space of the dance, the clearing of the theatre where the choir performs (the *chóros* or orchestra), and with the word used to designate the "region" of a city, beyond its physical limits (as in chorography, the word for a regional map). This I would argue challenges simplistic distinctions between urban and suburban space, and invites meditation on the nature of the cultural space of the metropolis.

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7   See Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, ed. Ingrid Rowland and Thomas Howe (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34. The notion that architecture functioned as a cosmological image was questioned for the first time by Claude Perrault in his *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes* (Paris, 1683).

8   Yet, as Gianni Vattimo has shown, it is debatable whether such transparency actually contributes to better communication among humans of different nationalities and persuasions. See Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

9   Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, Book 5, 65-70 (ed. cit).

10 I understand natural language as explained by phenomenological hermeneutics in the works of Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur among others. For further elucidation and its consequences for architecture, see Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement,* ch. 6, 165 f.

In the Greek theatre a catharsis took place, a purification that allowed each citizen to discover a sense of purpose and belonging, the sense and mystery of uncertain human fate as reconciled with our capacity for rational understanding. Vitruvius describes the manner in which the theatre conveys this sense to the spectators as they participate in the event of the dramatic representation. The circular plan of the building is mimetic of the cosmos, its twelve divisions that generate the parts of the building emulate the order of the zodiac, and proportional harmony is crucial. Yet the meaning of the building is not given as an aesthetic experience reducible to disinterested contemplation: it is not in the details, the materials, or our experience as voyeurs. Rather it is a resonance, only conveyed "when the spectators sit, with their pores open" at a performance, and the whole event becomes cathartic, a purification that allows for the spectators to understand, through their participation in the space and plot of drama - which is also the space of architecture - their place in the universe and in the civic world; for the citizens' places in the amphitheatre corresponded also to their origin in the disparate tribes that constituted Athens.

Let me now go back to the initial question. Is it possible, despite our obvious distance from Classical culture, to imagine this model of "architecture as event" as a framework to configure potential urban space in our cities? Despite our radical skepticism and our lack of shared beliefs and rituals, is it possible to imagine that such experiences may indeed bring us back to introspection, allow us to ask important human questions, and even change our life? Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly have recently argued for the possibility of a non-theistic perception of meaning in the classics of Western literature, an appreciation shared by George Steiner and Mark Johnson for other artistic disciplines.[11] Dreyfus and Kelly further argue that this perception of things "shining" depends on the acknowledgement that what matters to us is always part of larger meanings that we do not create or control through our free will. Thus they speculate such experiences may still be available to us in communal activities, such as some forms of participatory contemporary theatre, ephemeral urban events and even in popular sports spectacle.

Furthermore, as we walk through the prosaic and relatively inhuman spaces of our cities, there are sites that have a greater potential to escape the hegemony of panoptic domination and technological control. These are found by framing the city through appropriate questions, by means of alternative mappings that have nothing to do with geometric precision, such as are evident in some modern and contemporary cinema and novels where urban environments play an active role in the plots. They are sites that appear to have been torn from the seeming continuum of progress and that reveal particularly propitious chasms and wounds. The surrealist writers of the early twentieth century taught us very well how to navigate through our seemingly prosaic cities and appreciate their capacity to reveal the vectors of desire,[12] proposing, if not a new "mythology," at least the openness of our world to mystery, our capacity to reveal the "weakness" of the truths we associate with political systems, technology and science and to accelerate their demythification. I believe it is possible to profit from the opportunities offered by the modern metropolis to create works that may allow inhabitants to recognize that which is new and yet familiar; that which, although we must receive it in silence, demands to be articulated in words: namely, the coincidence of life and death in a moment of poetic incandescence.[13]

This mode of working is obviously very different from an architect or planner finding a site and merely using it as a neutral canvas, as a geometric or picturesque space. Potentially participatory *places* that may be truly pregnant with qualities are not found merely through some sort of

11 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, *All Things Shining, Reading the Western Classics to find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011). See also Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body, aesthetics of human understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), and George Steiner *Real Presences* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

12 See for example, Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (London: Picador, 1987), Andre Breton, *Mad Love* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), and Philippe Soupault, *Last Nights of Paris* (Cambridge MA: Exact Change, 1992).

13 I use the concept of poetic image as defined by Octavio Paz. See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 81-107.

passive revelation either: the hermeneutic imagination of the architect is indispensable. A "park," for instance, is not necessarily meaningful as an a-temporal type capable of reconnecting us with nature. It is not enough to find or preserve a site, as merely naming it could accelerate its demise. First we must understand and acknowledge the importance of history, while recognizing its affinity with fiction, as Jorge Luis Borges has taught us. This is of particular concern for the development of appropriate urban programs. It is paramount to avoid aestheticism, reductive functionalism, and either conventional or experimental formalism: to consider seriously the potential of narrative as the structure of human life, a poetic vision realized in space-time. The urban artist or architect, given such a task, must also write the "script" for his drama, intended to become an explicit or implicit transformation of the "official" urban program. This is, indeed, a crucial part of urban design activity, as well as the vehicle for an ethical intention to inform the work. We should always keep in mind that for modernity, whenever buildings or works of art become "idols" (or signposts - like the logo of a corporation or a national government) they lose their capacity for edification. They should rather allow us to see through to meaning precisely by not restricting it, in themselves meaning no single thing.[14] Only under these conditions may urban interventions become spaces for collective participation, where individuals may exercise, with their freedom, a reciprocal responsibility to "participate" in the recreation of a communal project that is no longer dependent on a shared cosmic order.

Such places, moreover, cannot be merely the result of the egocentric imagination of an architect, nor mere novelty, the product of deranged computer virtuosity: they must refer to the natural and cultural horizons intertwined in their sites. Potentially effective urban space is therefore articulated as a narrative, "metaphoric" projection grounded on recollection. On one hand it should resist easy consumption and celebrate traces of cultural continuity. On the other, it should invite the inhabitant's intimate participation in recreating the work through language for it to yield its "sense," gathering a potential recovery of communal purpose and human solidarity.

Richard Sennett has pointed out that spaces come to life when they are used for purposes other than those for which they were conceived. While this is often true, it is important not to misconstrue this statement as a plea for the artist or architect to abdicate responsibility for the program, as is often the case today. Openness is key, but this is precisely the character of works of imagination: open enough to invite participation, but engaging a critical view. In our predicament, this critical attitude must be addressed primarily to the hegemony of a technological world-view and its instrumental systems of domination and control, now extrapolated to all aspects of existence, in the hope of weakening its hold on our way of life and revealing the ultimately mysterious horizon of our meaningful experiences. There are alternatives to the voyeuristic reductions of existence present throughout our consumer society, reductions caricatured in extreme forms as theme parks and fenced-in housing communities. Yet, to propose alternative urban spaces it is perhaps crucial that we first retrieve our capacity to recognize purpose in human works, to see not deception but real values in our cultural and artistic heritage, thus healing ourselves from the cynicism and despair brought about by subjectivism and the homogenization of difference often reflected by post-structuralist criticism.

Potential urban space is neither exclusively a dematerialized, infinitely malleable cyberspace nor a reticent, inanimate extension of material objects: a rectangle with a fountain in the center and four little trees. Rather, it is the place where technology may be cracked open by the imagination, where humanity may become aware of its capacity for true understanding in the dark and silent space of metaphor, which may also include spaces *within* technology, revealing the *actual presence* of mortality, the imminence of being. For as Friedrich Nietzsche asked rhetorically, while modern humanity may pursue its quest for scientific understanding and control, "Is not seeing itself - seeing abysses?"

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14 I take this concept from Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2001).