Urban Public Space-Changes in the Era of Consumerism

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Abstract

Public space in contemporary cities is affected by different tendencies and is the subject of complex tensions and opposed strategies that aim its organization and utilization. We are witnessing the development of a complex strategy that tries to domesticate, civilize and control the urban public space, under a large process of comodification and privatization. The commercial significance of the city's center has changed drastically in the last decade, in most of the European countries. This phenomenon is a consequence of the competition between the city and the architectural programs that create perfect and ideal replicas of the city. In this constant struggle to keep up with the changes that are taking place in the way of living, the way of using public space, the space within the city center is changing. Globalization overrides non-consuming place and replaces them with something that can be consumed. The fragmentation of public space is a phenomenon connected with privatization trends of the city. In this context, what is the relevance of public space, did he become just a source of entertainment? Public space as it once existed has disappeared. He was replaced by the space of the new mega structures and malls, that replaced its traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity. Public space , with the function to receive and transmit information has been reduced to a visual preception. Can we see the mall as an alternative to the real public space?

Rezumat

Spațiul public în orașele contemporane este afectat de tendințe diferite și face obiectul unor tensiuni complexe și strategii opuse, care au drept scop organizarea și utilizarea acestuia. Suntem martorii dezvoltarea unei strategii complexe care încearcă să domesticească, civilizeze și să controleze spațiul public urban, în cadrul unui proces amplu de comodificare și privatizare. Semnificația comercială a centrului orașului s-a schimbat drastic în ultimul deceniu, în majoritatea țărilor europene. Acest fenomen este o consecință a competiției dintre oraș și programele arhitecturale care creează replici perfecte și ideale ale orașului. În această luptă constantă pentru a ține pasul cu schimbările care au loc în modul de viață, modul de utilizare a spațiului public, spațiul în centrul orașului se schimbă. In contextul globalizării, relevanța spațiului public rezidă in devenirea lui sub formă de sursă de divertisment. Spațiul public asa cum era el odată a dispărut. El a fost înlocuit de spațiul noilor megastructuri și mall-uri, care au înlocuit străzile sale tradiționale și au disciplinat spontaneitate lor. Spațiul public, cu funcția de primire și de transmitere de informații a fost redus la o simplă imagine. Putem să vedem mall-ul ca o alternativă la spațiul public real?

Key words: public space, city center, crisis factors, consumerism, globalization

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1. Introduction

Public space in contemporary cities is affected by different tendencies and is the subject of complex tensions and opposed strategies that aim its organization and utilization. We are witnessing the development of a complex strategy that tries to domesticate, civilize and control the urban public space, under a large process of commodification and privatization.

The commercial significance of the city's center has changed drastically in the last decade, in most of the European countries. Retail activities and consumption patterns are an important part of the spatial organization of contemporary urban spaces. . Retail spaces such as shopping malls, hypermarkets and theme parks, usually located on a city's periphery, have become the core of the urban experience: public spaces divorced from the city center and the surrounding streets, which were the traditional focus in urban centers. The mall is seen today as an alternative to the traditional public space, to traditional markets and public squares. In metropolitan areas, where the retail structure is more complex than in smaller centers, changes in the relation between the city and retailing express a clear center/periphery dichotomy that challenges urban sustainability in many countries. [1] This phenomenon is a consequence of the competition between the city and the architectural programs that create perfect and ideal replicas of the city. In this constant struggle to keep up with the changes that are taking place in the way of living, the way of using public space, the public space within the city center is changing. Globalization overrides non-consuming place and replaces them with something that can be consumed. Global trends in urbanization and the consumption-oriented organization of daily life have affected different cities in the same way.

The fragmentation of public space is a phenomenon connected with privatization trends of the city. Public space as it once existed has disappeared. He was replaced by the space of the new mega structures and malls that replaced its traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity. Public space, with the function to receive and transmit information has been reduced to a visual perception. Can we see the mall as an alternative to the real public space?
The competition between new retail and consumption spaces and their environments and the traditional forms has significant impacts on urban public spaces. Public spaces now often become a consumption object – either being strategically developed or used by new retail developers or unintentionally replacing urban public spaces. Consumption and retail developments offer a variety of uses and meanings that might help to create more socially and environmentally sustainable cities, spaces where most of citizens needs are satisfied.[1]

Urban sustainability requires the viability and vitality of the city center, part of which involves the resilience of different kinds of retailers. In recent decades, the process of retail decentralization and urban sprawl has contributed to the decline of city centers. In Europe, city centers are not only the most important shopping districts but also contain the symbols of a city, essential for citizen identity, is the place where all de public and social functions are concentrated. [1]
We can analyze the public space from different points of view: theoretically, politically, socially, architecturally, but they will always emphasize one important issue -the fact that the urban public space is a crucial subject in the context of the changes that are taking place at different levels of contemporary life and its study can help us understand how a city evolves, changes, declines or blooms.

2. The concept of "public space"

What is in fact the urban public space, what does it mean and especially how do we see it nowadays? The definition of public space has become richer and more complex in the modern society. The paper refers in this case to the public space located in the city center, the traditional

public space with the characteristic that define it, without denying other forms of public space. Because we analyze the urban public space in the consumerism era, the definition of the consumerist public space is necessary: Consumerist space can be defined as space in which users are encouraged and provided with opportunities to spend money, in contrast to non-consumerist space, that does neither. [2]

Jahn Gehl defines the space within the city by emphasizing three vital functions: a place to meet, place for changes, the place where you can establish connections. As a place to meet, the city has been the scene for the change of any kind of information. As a place for changes, has been the place where people can change goods and services, and one of the main characteristics is the fact that , the streets of a city are giving us access to all the connections that are taking place between all the elements/ entities that define the city. Public spaces are the ones that are free to use, they give the possibility of public and free manifestos , they are part of the community. All the activities that place in the urban public space, its vitality, freedom control affect clearly its quality.

Parks, high quality urban areas play a crucial role to promote the comfort feeling of the human being and the social characteristic , of the economical values and the environment of a city. A better understanding of the links between the quality of public spaces and quality of life is vital to justify, and incentivize, greater investment in regenerating and improving our public realm. Quality public spaces create positive, lasting economic, social and environmental value in a very wide range of ways. Successful, quality spaces can be the making of a place; attracting people to live, work, visit and invest in a particular area.[3]

There is no doubt that cities all over the world are becoming more consumerist. A major spatial effect of capitalist globalization is to squeeze out non-consumerist space and replace it with consumerist space anywhere that people are likely to gather or pass through. The use of buyer-generated advertising (wearing and bearing designer labels on clothing and bags, drink and food containers) on the streets of cities, towns, even villages all over the world is one highly visible indicator of the colonization of public space, by the purveyors of the culture-ideology of consumerism [2]. The improvement, regeneration and adequate resourcing of our public spaces are a must. Quality public spaces contribute to life quality, and are a market for the level of wealth of every community. an equity issue.

3. Crisis factors of public space

Cities and settlements have evolved through three historical eras. In the first era, they were primarily market places, places for exchange; in the second, primarily centres of industrial production, and in the third, the present time they are primarily centres of service provision and consumption. The original basis for cities was people's need to come together, for purposes, such as trade and the exchange of goods and services, access to information, engaging in with others etc. all this activities and purposes bought people together, made them communicate, use the space. People coming together in space and time accordingly is the essence of the urban.[4]

The structure of urban places matters. There is a clear relationship between the spatial and physical characteristics of a city, and its functional, socio-economic and environmental qualities. The need, therefore, is to design and to transform cities and urban places to work well, to be people-friendly and to have a positive environmental impact. Without public gathering places integrated in people's lives, the city has no future. Nevertheless, whatever their scale, all urban design actions are embedded within and contribute to their local context. All acts of urban design are therefore contributions to a greater whole.

All the great urban transformations that took place in the contemporary history have always caused radical changes in lifestyles, in power relationships between social groups and in the urban environment. Change is inevitable and often desirable. The change from the last decades is market by the increase in development pressures on particular places, and in the homogenization of places and contexts. Pressures include globalization and internationalization, standardization of building types, styles, and construction methods; loss of vernacular traditions; use of mass-produced materials; decentralization; estrangement of people from the natural world; pressures for short-term financial returns in the development industry and in the decisions people make about their living environments; the public sector's often unthinking and homogenizing regulation of the built environment; and increased personal mobility, and dominance of cars. These pressures, which have both local and global dimensions, define the actual scene of the urban within the city. [4]

There are a series of tendencies that affect the contemporary public -far from having become marginal in a society in which virtual interactions have a primary importance , urban public space could be represented as a field in which various types of dialectical tensions operate, on which the power relations and lifestyles of contemporary societies significantly depend. In particular, on the one hand contemporary cities are affected by processes of control and normalization of citizens' behavior; on the other hand they are witnessing the development of social practices aimed at countering the control and to propose alternative ways of use of public space. [5] "A large part of the debate on public space in the contemporary city revolves around the analysis of crisis factors of public space, or rather the transformation trends of the post-industrial societies that bring a radical change in the functions of urban places, their meanings and symbolism, the practices that are carried out in them." [5]

Talking about crisis factors, there is always a tendency of emphasizing the split between traditional models of public space, or even of industrial modernity models, and the current postmodern forms. Studies highlight at the same time the crisis and the persistent vitality of urban places they study, showing the evolution of practices deriving from the emergence of new actors or urban populations, or from innovative design trends, as well as the presence of new forms of social conflict linked to the city use. The fragmentation of the urban public space is an important subject , a phenomenon also connected with the privatization trends the city . Its interpretation can starts from the macro-social level, as well as an observation based on the urban micro-spaces. When analyzing the problem from more general viewpoint, the segmentation and specialization of the urban space is, "at the same time, the spatial reflection of processes that regard the social and cultural sphere – and which lead to the multiplication of groups and lifestyles – and the effects of capitalist and neoliberal policies, which lead to the reduction of the common goods sphere and the appropriation of them by the market. This fragmentation of the market and consumption, in their various aspects, corresponds to the subdivision of the city into spaces, pieces, each of which takes on a peculiar character and aims at a particular target of consumers. [5]

The commercial significance of the city center has declined over the past 30 years. In part, this reflects competition from the decentralization of retail, office and entertainment facilities. At the same time, a loss of population associated with inner-city redevelopment has resulted in a reduction in the spending power of the immediate population precipitated by the suburbanization of the higher-status market and its replacement by a lower-status population. The process has frequently been accompanied by deterioration of the environmental attractions of the city center. Fragmentation of city center functions and the creation of isolated areas between the nodes of activity have been marked features of the process.[6] Safety considerations concerning public spaces have accentuated the emerging problems of the city centers when compared with the more easily accessible and safer 'private realm' offered in malls. Ideally, cities should aim to extend the activity period of their public space into the evening and night by offering a wider range of

facilities likely to appeal to as wide a social spectrum as possible and to attract as many citizens as possible.

With globalization has come 'mass' culture, emerging from the processes of mass production, marketing and consumption, which homogenize and standardize cultures and places, transcending, crowding out, even destroying, local cultures. The loss of meaning in places is also related to the processes of globalization and the creation of global space .[4] Meaning of place is determined by the relationship between local and global, and is really important to keep alive the local differences of urban spaces in order to make the space, the city attractive. All the particularities we can find in a space make it more desirable, pleasant and unique.

As the economic, social, cultural and technological context continually changes, so does the urban environment. Local actions have global impacts and consequences, while global actions have local impacts and consequences. There is often a tension between the meeting of human needs, aspirations and desires, and environmental. If human needs are considered to be short-term and 'urgent 'and those of the environment long-term and 'important', a balance is needed between short-term and long-term interests. The problem is the tendency to privilege short-term urgent needs at the expense of long-term important ones. As we live in market economies, most urban actions occur within a context based on fundamental forces of supply and demand. The problem is that, many decisions that have public consequences are made in the private sector, being dictated by the economic factor and by the one that concerns the citizens. The context for decision-making in the private sector is, however, usually mediated by policy and by regulatory frameworks and controls designed to offset or, at least, temper - economic power so as to produce better outcomes.[4] The main problem is that in Romania this control policies and regulatory frameworks do not exist or they are not present enough. Only the economic aspects are taken into consideration and in many cases the urban specialist have no power to decide or to choose what is best for the city. Sometimes we find ourselves in a chaos where public space is judged only by its economic aspects and the social and public manifestation needs are just economic instruments. The need to have a public, free and calling space is no longer primary so we find ourselves- as citizens- in the situation to find and use places that give us the feeling of a sort of freedom and that comes with the recourses to respond the daily needs.

Urban space can be divided, besides being public and private, in the movement space and social space. The social space is the space for social experiences while the movement space is composed by the car movement and the pedestrian movement. Pedestrian movement is compatible with the notion of streets as social space. There is a symbiotic relationship between pedestrian movement and interpersonal exchanges. By contrast, car-based movement is pure circulation. Opportunities for most forms of social interaction and exchange only occur once the car has been parked. Public space has been colonized by the car and the social aspects of the 'street' suppressed in favor of movement and circulation - the 'road'. A particular problem in this regard is the tendency for major roads to act as barriers to movement across them, creating severance and fragmenting urban areas. Movement between the fragments becomes a purely movement experience rather than a movement and social experience. Containing both social space and movement space, walkable streets connect buildings and activities across space. Containing only movement space, roads divide and separate areas. For reasons of safety and traffic flow, accommodating the car in traditional streets has typically led to an effacement of social space by movement space. The problem is not only that demand for movement diminishes the potential of streets to function as social space, but also that greater concern is given to traffic than to pedestrians. There is a need to reconcile and to protect social space from the impacts of cars and the creation of areas that, while accessible by cars, are pedestrian-dominant. Contemporary urban spaces are more about the exclusion of non car users. The accessibility of citizens is diminished.

Many cities and countries have retained their identities in the face of significant social, cultural and technological change and have won the battle with globalization.

4. New forms of "public" space

What is the relevance of the public space when is has become a source of entertainment and how is it influenced by the changes that take place within the city?
The mall concentrates more and more the public space, which is transferred to the mall from the city. The mall sustains the idea of offering an ideal space, attractive, where the urban mess is missing, its offering everything and is decreasing the need to go somewhere else, especially trough its diversity. The mall compressed and intensified the space. Here architects manipulate the space and light to obtain the density and bustle that is so specific to city centers., in order to create the essential of the perfect urban fantasy, without the negative aspects of the city- bad weather, traffic, poverty. [7]

The public space of the new mega structures and shopping malls has replaced the traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity. Freitas sustains that the commercial centers, malls, symbolize the ideal city. This space is protected from pollution and nature. [8] Consumers use this space like a scene where they manifest different believes and where they interact. Even if they give the impression of liberty, mall are made of controlled spaces, where each element has a specific space and delimits a specific area, where everything is studied to the smallest detail.
This qvasi-public spaces do not reflect a thing from the local history of a place, but express the tastes and global cultural identity of consume. Because of this, the community loses its uniqueness. Spaces become duplicates of the elements they have like models, becoming equivalents of city streets, squares, parks that are so specific to traditional urban.

Miller says that shopping not only reproduces identities, but it offers an independent and active component to shape the identity. [9] The success of these spaces derives largely from the ability and those who create them to be associated with a certain lifestyle, a certain ideal of public life private but at the same time. They promote, support a certain lifestyle, a certain way of perceiving space and using social event spaces. Instead, within such spaces can be anywhere and everywhere- whether they are located in a city center, airport or mall, consumers can not develop a sense of belonging, interior and meanings are the same.

The mall is an experimental space where business success depends on the fact that nothing is left to chance, from design escalators inputs, temperature, lighting, mirrors, cleaning, and especially floor plan, organizing it "too direct and obvious route between input and output should be avoided "... the idea is to build a scenario that maximum opportunities to attract the consumer by consumer and make him stay as long as possible. Each city now has its mall, and at least in a minimalist sense, it can be argued that many, if not all malls element acquire iconic status locally, just by the fact of being malls- are known to all locals, symbols have specific qualities in terms of aesthetic modernism and / or postmodernism cruel and / or themes vernacular. [10]

Social interactions that take place and function in the mall indicate that the cultural boundaries between shopping malls and other public settings are weaker than expected. Malls imitate, build cities, one that exceeds the natural product, the limit goes perfect illusion. Moreover, groups or individuals import rules of social interaction, relationships and emotional connections in malls. Shopping centers and social media work by wider rather than through there, and in isolation. [9] We can actually say that certain characteristics and meanings are imported and transported from the urban city in the "urban" virtual mall. With this award meanings and symbols, malls are places, landmarks, acquire certain significance, and are often used as a medium to enhance, strengthen

personal relationships. Improvement, regeneration and adequate resources in terms of public space is a complex issue today. The quality of space is reflected directly on the livelihoods of those who turns on him. That is why we are continuously seeking to manifest and to hang out in public spaces, urban quality, whether public or completely private ones belong to the category like shopping malls. High-quality public spaces create lasting positive economy, social and environmental values in a wide range of ways. Spaces quality and success can create place, they can attract people to live, work or even to invest in a certain area.

In a city, it is very important interests are granted quality public space, this is directly related to how people use certain spaces, is manifest in them. To revitalize certain areas of a city, in the present context of its center, it is necessary to give space quality, animated, safe in the city that can compete with those inside large shopping centers or other programs that will duplicate or emerging space «perfect».

5. Conclusion

Public space was defined as an urban center where changes of ideas take place and was permanently influenced by the opinions of the ones that used it. Once shopping as we all know it know appeared, a commercial simulacrum replaces the public space. Mall together with squares and special places for events and casinos, have changed dramatically the urban context and the urban public space, all this having repercussions on the way the public space is seen and used by the citizens.

Facing al the crisis factor that a city faces, measures need to be taken, otherwise public space will continue to decline gradually and will be replaced by the "fake" public spaces, that only give us the impression of freedom, and public, a slightly shadow of a real urban public space. Even if the mall tries to create a public space, a replica of the city, there will always be a crucial distance between this space and the real one that is part of the city trough history.   Instead, the lack of the variety of formal expression, the limited potential -even if the activities that take place allow it to build, to mime the effects of a city, the mall cannot be compared with the dynamism, rhythm, perception of the space within the city in all the moments of a day.

Successful places are those who are animated, full of life and vitality, used in permanence. They are characterized by the presence of people. If they are to become peopled and animated, they must offer what people want, in an attractive and safe environment, have a proper image, be comfortable, give the possibility to express and manifest, and to be accessible. Only by having as many attributes like the ones enumerated above, public spaces can win the battle with their replicas.

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