

Water Reflections

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After a final approach, the enormous craft touched down in the middle of a fierce snowstorm. Lufthansa flight 3304 from Frankfurt had landed at Prague airport. Just minutes later, the loudspeakers announced that the airport would remain closed to air traffic until the weather conditions had improved.

Sitting comfortably in the coach which links the airport to the city, the cold dark atmosphere outside cut a harsh contrast to the warm and familiar landscape through which we had passed only a few hours earlier to take the plane in Barcelona, the starting point of our journey.

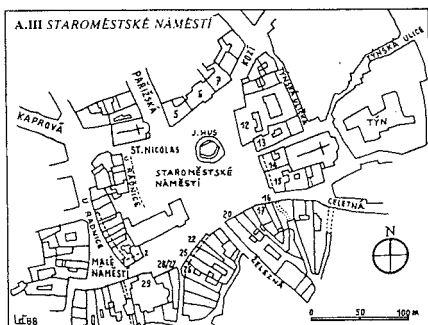
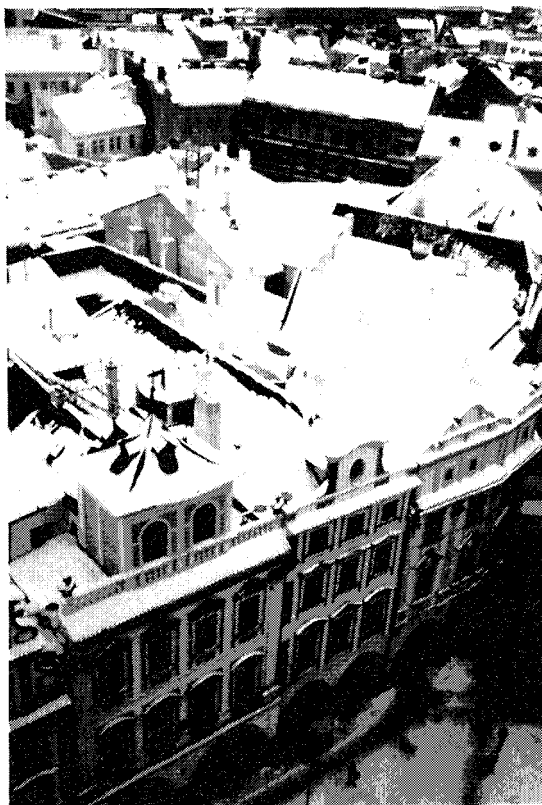
Little by little, with anxious faces of the newly-arriveds reflecting back at us from the bus windows, our ideas, which a few days earlier had led us to write a short article on the subject At Home in the City (Calvet & Corominas, 1993), began to disappear. How were we going to explain in tomorrow's debate what, until a few hours ago, had seemed to be coherent arguments on how to project the public space of the city, now that the context had changed so drastically? To what degree would recounting those specifically Barcelonian experiences serve to illustrate our point of view on the subject, and do justice to the evaluation of the "project" and the role of the "architect" in the design of the urban space ?

A small dark door leads us to a discrete lobby where our room numbers are confirmed. We can only hope that tomorrow will bring relief from the doubts which now assail us.

The next morning, we return to the street and go around the corner, our admiration is gained by an imposing baroque façade which appears before us, with large bay windows at street level which usher forth a splendid entrance. We are at the front of our own hotel, the Hotel Parisz, but which we would have to enter by the rear service entrance because of the restoration work in progress!

We have only a few hours before the conference and we must make good use of the time to visit the historic centre of Prague.

With the narrowness of the streets and the flow of the pedestrians, a simple glance at the guide-plan is sufficient to guide us in the direction we should take. Celetná street is "comfortable". The absence of vehicles and the blanket of snow which unifies the pavement make it an especially pleasant walk. The façades of its baroque architecture, continuous along light curves, entices one to stroll. One question springs immediately to our minds: what type of structure could the city hidden behind this architectural décor have? Crossing the threshold of the doorway to one of innumerable buildings which are being restored, we discover, behind the skin



Plan tiré de Léon de Coster et Xavier de Coster (1988), "14 promenades dans Prague" (Editions Universitaires, Bruxelles-Begedj).

Fig. 2 La place Staromestske Namesti
The Staromestske Nameski Square

which constitutes the main building, how intensively the land is being used. Behind the main building other secondary buildings create a network characteristic of semi-private spaces, accessible from the inner courtyards, which in turn generate considerable urban permeability.

The spacial dimensions of the Staromestske Namesti Square are magnificent. Its irregular shape, presided over by the monument to Jan Hus, reveals a confluence of the various city sectors.

"I'll have three tins of caviar, please". "I prefer to wait a little to see if I can find them any cheaper ... ". We walk along the ramp which slopes gently to the Karlov bridge. As we reach the far end, the view of the Malá Strana Quarter opens out for us, with the impressive Prague Castle overlooking the city.

"This is unimaginable!". Treading cautiously the thick layer of ice which covers the whole surface, we find ourselves in the middle of a singular urban space. The sensation of emptiness and the view to either side of the Vltava make time appear to have stood still. The heavy black statues flanking this imposing "platform", which has united the two cities for centuries, seem to be the only guardians of time.

"This is an impressive infrastructure - it's a raised street, or even better, it's like a square. No! it's an urban space measuring about eight metres wide by five hundred and twenty long, but its function of structuring and linking the two cities gives it its surprising character. Look at the activity it is able to generate: pedlars, collectors, strollers, people zig-zagging from one side to the other, crossing over it ... "

We seem to have made this city ours. This is what they call feeling At Home in the City. Little by little, the doubts of the night before evaporate, and the ideas for the conference occupy the centre of our attention once more.

This short walk through the historic city of Prague and the sensations experienced on the magnificent bridge have reanimated the arguments we have prepared for our conference paper on the nature and the role of the *public space project*. Its importance as an element generating a better quality of life in the residential environment, and by extension in the city, is more than evident:

"Public space has to be interpreted as an element of the city, ... not as a function of the temporary application adapted to any possible users ..., but as an urban potential, which allows its appropriation by its inhabitants as an expression of plurality..." (Calvet & Corominas, 1993)

Let us think of the timeless nature of the "project" and of how this bridge, whose free access and wealth of activities we observe today as something natural, was once the first structural link which established the continuity of space and the physical relationship between two cities, contributing to their overall development as an urban settlement and as a territory¹. Let us think also about "the identity of the public space, in as much that its value depends to a great degree on its structural function, on its quality as an architectural project, on its shape, on its monuments, on the materials employed..., on its ability to attract ..." (Calvet & Corominas, 1993), and of the manner in which this architectural work, albeit an infrastructure, partakes unequivocally of these attributes.

¹ The Karlov brige was the second bridge built over the river Vltava. The work, begun by Peter Parker, was finished in the early 15th century.

These are arguments which seem clearly to coincide with some of the points of view which will be put forward by other speakers in the conference:

"... The adaptation of the environment built up in cities is a relatively long process, and the structure of the city is only marginally altered during the course of the centuries. In other words, the shape of the city grows over a much longer period (the "long term") than the observable changes within it. Hence the need to grasp the concept of urban space more or less independently of contemporary changes and developments of any type."

"The relative autonomy of the urban structure compels us to pay closer attention to the permanent aspects of urban life than to the changes which occur within it. Here lies perhaps the very essence of the life of towns and great cities: this constant tension between permanence and change, between continuity and adaptation, between structure and fluctuation ..., between forgetting and recalling ..."

"..Structures like the Place Royale, the Rue de Rivoli, the Place de la Concorde, and Haussmann's Boulevards in Paris have also shown themselves to be remarkable examples of public places associated with urbanism. They constitute a system intended to control the urban masses, but are also the backdrop to the urban drama, a drama where the citizens are both the actors and the audience."

"The public space should be seen as something durable ... the architect must also be aware of the stage potential of the public space he is projecting ..., of the diversity of options for use ..., of the interaction it establishes with the context into which the project is inserted ..." (Reijndorp, 1993).

- The goulash was really very good and the restaurant welcoming -. Once again drawn into the winding streets of the pedestrian area, we head for the "Obecni Dum", a magnificent Jugendstil building, influenced by the Sécessionist spirit, in which the EUROPAN 93 sessions will be held.

Onto the conference stage we are accompanied by the sociologists Arnold Reijndorp and Vittoria Giuliani, of whom the latter will present in her paper some interesting reflections on the importance of public space in the organization of family life, and the effect of the hierarchy and form of articulation of spaces on the quality of urban life. The hall is full and we begin to speak, to introduce the participants in the debate, and to expound our theme: New Practices in The Public Space.

Many residential districts of European cities, built as a single unit or over a short period of time, are notable for their excessively spatial, functional, and even social, uniformity. One of the most questionable elements of this type of layout is, in most cases, the poor quality of the public space. The lack of spatial definition, the low quality of the urbanisation, the absence of meaning or its uselessness for the local inhabitants, lead to the secondary and even residual character of this type of urban space. This creates a polarization, a dislocation between the private and the public space.

Faced with these situations, how do we avoid this dislocation between the private and the collective environment, and reattract the citizen, with all that that implies? What contribution can be made from the point of view of architectural measures or projects?

Inevitably, the improvement of this type of urban space passes to a question of requalification, as a counterweight to the lack of identity which characterises them.

In this sense, the intervention should above all be sensitive to the type of district or urban environment in which it is to be applied and to pay particular attention to the analysis of two distinct aspects: the first, to understand the behaviour of the user in relation to the public space, his or her way of life as an individual and as a citizen of the district; the second, to synthesize the type of experiences made which are favourable to urban and social integration, and enable project criteria to be established for architectural measures, or to generate new hypotheses for projects with plausible results.

It is evident that today a direct link cannot be established between a local inhabitant and the user of the immediate public space. The street, the square, the park have ceased to be communication spaces *par excellence*. Television, computer networks, mail order purchasing ... are replacing traditional means of interrelation and information. The individual cell is becoming stronger and stronger compared to the more classical community relations models. The intercom, as a reception system, is a good example of the proliferation of this social model based on the individual.

It can no longer be guaranteed that a public space, a utility, or a commercial zone, will be used primarily by the inhabitants of the immediate locality. Often these activities are closely linked with the place of work, leisure or study, entirely remote from the place of residence. This is why the public space closest to the home is frequently only a place of passage or a car-park, neutral and of little practical value to the resident. Perhaps it is no longer necessary to associate the inhabitants of a neighbourhood with its collective elements, the reference area is no longer the district, but the city, the urban agglomeration, the territory ... There is a new reference scale. Distance, in terms of space, has been substituted by travel time, the organisation of collective transport as well as the convenience of private vehicle use. The individual-to-space relationships in the city have changed. It can be said that the urban environment as a limited, restricted or local concept, has given way to these new forms of interaction, and it is now necessary to speak of urban agglomeration, of territory.

Public space needs to be re-interpreted in terms which allow it its own identity, not as a function of a temporary use suitable for some possible users living in the neighbourhood but as a new urban potential, a resource which can be appropriated by the citizen as an expression of the whole and of plurality.

This identity which we claim for the public space lies perhaps in its role as a backbone, in the quality of its spaces, of its monuments, of its trees, in its power of attraction, in what it offers as a commercial area, and even in its own shape, for lack of an external definition all in all, in its capacity for insertion into the context (Calvet & Corominas, 1993).

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Photos by author