

# Rôles and Meanings of Transitional Spaces: Some Aspects for Consideration

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of transitional spaces comes to the fore within the context of the EUROSPAN 3 session devoted to the current interpretation of what it means to feel "at home" in a city, and to a discussion of "the city in all its senses".

It questions the nature of these spaces, their meaning and their rôle in other cultures of Western Europe. This is because transitional spaces are often considered superfluous in cities where their potential for urbanity is denied, and where they are only recognised as having the functional rôle of providing a restrictive link between the street and the house.

With respect to their design and the uses which they encourage or prohibit, how do these spaces enable us to feel better at home and in the city?

This question, when put to three sociologists, all with different approaches, and to one architect, led to an exchange which we have attempted to record here so that we might draw from it some thought elements useful to design.

## 2. What is a Good Transitional Space?

This is the first question to be asked, and one to which J. Miller and F. Bollerey reply with differing perspectives.

Jacqueline Miller recalls quite simply that, in all European villages, the threshold of the house is still the place where one can sit on a chair to watch people going by and to sun oneself, and where one is "at home in the street". The best, truly transitional space is that space assigned to public use and which the car has confiscated from us.

F. Bollerey introduces her thoughts on outdoor open spaces, by mentioning the small public spaces which have permitted the daily custom of the *al fresco* lunch in the vicinity of New York offices. Employees and secretaries, who want to distance themselves from their bosses, take a break there for a short time. A good space is the space in the vicinity where one can stop for a moment, rest, and choose to distance oneself from other people. In a dialectic manner, the best used squares are those which encourage sociability by offering it as a choice.

### 3. Confrontations and Conflicts of Use

The thoughts of R. de Villanova start from a fundamental point of view on liaison activity, which G. Simmel presents as separating and linking activity, taking bridges and doors as an example. Social activity permanently converts physical space into a reality, whereby human beings occupy a place and situate themselves according to position, rank, or a relational order, to use the terms of Bourdieu (1993). Also, wherever it seems that populations are homogeneous, customs are not. Through their rôle as links and frontiers, transitional spaces also become places of transgression and aggression, in which sense one can say that they are "highly sensitive" spaces or "at risk spaces".

R. de Villanova notes that the design of these spaces may lead to new situations for which no code of conduct has been passed down by tradition; one no longer knows whom one should greet as a near neighbour and where anonymity begins.

The centres of housing blocks, with public status, thus appear to be the most difficult places for negotiation between diverse user populations when organising numerous facilities and collective uses.

At another level, thinking about the comfort and quality of living spaces would give more possibilities for non-conflictual uses of these extension spaces: balconies, loggias and terraces. Too exposed to being overlooked, or poorly positioned and windy, they are not conducive to taking meals on in good weather and are ultimately used only to air clothes, a use for which, incidentally, they were not intended. It is not a question of making housing suitable for a particular culture or for certain social classes, but of thinking again about comfort, according to the demands that cut across them.

Nevertheless, J. Miller remarks that the most sinister (or disaster-stricken) common paved area, where a very high population density leads to very excessively large pedestrian spaces without urban facilities, can find a new lease of life if a weekly market is held there.

A search for quality in the area of housing and public spaces can prevent transgressive conduct for those who internalise regulation to a greater or lesser degree.

### 4. A Question of Behaviour

A good public space in the vicinity would, therefore, be the one which enables and allows new behaviour to be developed.

It stimulates new behaviour, and supplies new, alternative routes between the home and the office.

F. Bollerey remarks that these changes in behaviour with respect to public spaces occur very quickly, and prove how these spaces correspond to an existing demand.

When discussing the topic of high-density housing developments, R. de Villanova observes that at Chanteloup les Vignes in the Paris region, spaces which are too vast cause disorientation (Villanova, 1987). A dense user population

accentuates confrontational behaviour and conflicts over usage. In particular, she stresses that the design of these spaces can give rise to new situations for which there are no explicit rules of civility.

Rules relating to usage must then be collectively defined and clarified. In the case of council housing and its collective spaces, management follow-up can reduce the risks by laying down rules for their use. Yet, with collective customs and staged events at stake, these spaces have to be the subject of a consensus ("Le résidentiel et l'urbain", 1988).

## 5. Collective Customs and Communal Spaces

Beyond the formally planned parks or squares, there is a need for spaces organised and used by the people themselves, leaving to their whims and imagination the option of creating the occasions and reasons for meeting one another.

In New York, in the five districts of the city, the associations for outside spaces campaign, whenever possible, to obtain plots of land which they occupy in order to grow their tomato plants or aromatic herbs there at the foot of skyscrapers.

Similarly, in Mediterranean societies, which are still traditional, but not exclusively so, spaces are used for group, family and neighbour activities, and for domestic activities which require air and light. These spaces are situated in front of the house or in the courtyard.

This is why the surrounding areas of council housing developments studied by J. Miller seem so senseless in our suburbs - they do not have any precise use, they literally serve no purpose.

We must remember, as Jacqueline Miller does, that it is these spaces which are responsible for the forms of relationships with the neighbourhood. Areas surrounding houses are the primary spaces for socialisation, where neighbourhood relationships take shape and gain in strength.

## 6. Who needs Transitional Spaces?

The use made of the spaces outside the home is more obvious in Southern societies. In Mediterranean countries, balconies, loggias and terraces, patios and courtyards are for women, while the men occupy the public square and the markets.

However, according to J. Miller, countries of the north do not ignore this use of the threshold, and we are familiar with the symbolic use of the threshold of the Amsterdam house with its three varnished ceramic steps. It recalls a truth that these "extra" spaces are really much more useful to the poor than to the rich and that the street has always been the "poor man's sitting room".

Across the whole of Europe, these spaces are more necessary for children and old people than for working adults.

Thus, customs are differentiated not merely by contrasting cultures, but also by lifestyles, age groups, professions, community or campaigning activities.

## 7. Approach Spaces and Extension Spaces

Starting with collective research (Eleb *et al.*, 1993) into living conditions in housing blocks and their specificities, R. de Villanova suggests identifying two categories of transitional spaces: those which serve as a stage for family and neighbourhood relationships and activities, and those which provide the setting for collective activities.

The question is one of how to link the buildings to the locality, and, similarly, the dwelling to the street. It is essential to take into account the town, its topography, its remarkable features and local identity whilst referring to memory.

The distinction between the approach space to the dwelling, and extension space comes back to different architectural scales.

## 8. The Design of Intermediary Spaces

For J. Miller, intermediary spaces seem to have been constantly negated for two centuries. From the middle-class distancing of the Haussmann city, reducing the mechanisms of distribution to vertical circulation and its landings, hygiene rules and functionalism have pursued a rationalisation which has ended in a relational model closer to the transit space than the transitional space.

The street itself has become aggressive, housing becomes foreign to its setting; the possibility of creating links for belonging to both a place and a community is being shattered.

However, the need remains, unsatisfied, and, in this game of rationality, the city itself has not found the possibility of self-stratification and reinvention by those who live in it.

We are aware of the appraisal of the last CIAMs and of the work of the "Team Ten", masterminded by Smithson and Aldo Van Eyck, as regards the question of collective housing and "in-between" places, strongly inspired, it has to be said, by the Mediterranean and its cities.

Nevertheless, beyond the refusals and transitions which are all part of "living in the city", how can this public/private interface be rebuilt? On what should it be constructed if neither gesticulations nor arbitrary gestures?

How can we progress from an architecture concerned with image to one of practical use?

## 9. Density and Relationship to the Centre

Research into contemporary council housing has tended to pass beyond the model of the dense, over-occupied block of flats which falls into disrepair.

The return to the arrangement of two apartments per landing in the 1970s occurred at the same time as a reduction in the size of operations and the scale of the buildings; it has also tended to recreate mini neighbourhood units.

By becoming more neutral, the communal parts have won in terms of neighbourhood relationships; as a representative sign, more space and care has been devoted to them.

In this research, the example of St-Denis and the housing blocks built by Roland Simounet mark a stage. The planning of a complete housing block with courtyards and passageways, far from denoting a characteristic of council housing, tends, conversely, to be synonymous with autonomy, with distance between occupants.

The internal courtyards of housing blocks, linked to the city by passageways treated as public spaces, remain contemplative, silent spaces, with children's games taking place on the more public spaces where the city rises to the surface.

The essential rôle of access, of a link to the centre, to a common exterior, neutralises internal social relationships. These relationships become brief daily exchanges, the result of familiarity gained during repeated journeys. Meetings facilitated by the withdrawal from traffic contribute, visually or verbally, to the constant re-conversion of neighbourhood ties.

## **10. Accessibility of Intermediary Spaces**

To experience transitional spaces is, above all, to pass through them, and to reside in them, in order to sample the unique features which make their particular environment different from any another.

It is thus also a matter of making use of filter mechanisms, of the hidden parts of the city. A matter of recreating places which, if not secret, allow themselves to be discovered. It is to make housing contribute to the restructuring of a city which is undergoing a "reserved" revival, and which introduces thresholds without prohibiting them.

In substance, closed and secret, or open to glances but inaccessible, transitional spaces qualify and characterise places by the emotions they produce and the experiences they allow.

## **11. Work on the Land**

This is an interlinking dimension between city and architecture. It links the topography of the city, the existing neighbouring or more distant buildings, into the scheme by a complex process which takes on the physical elements of the setting: levelled, horizon or viewpoint. It reinserts them, with future schemes, in a syntax which constitutes the scheme of the future context.

The land is then designed as a work of art, public equipment which gives each architectural scheme its place in a reconstituted context containing its spaces for relationships.

This work is that of the intermediary scale, which qualifies the scheme with a defined urban sequence. It tends to restore dimensions of legibility and the capacity of creating images. It identifies places by relationships between minor and major

elements, by the nature of the view, and by interrelating or intersecting visual and sonic data.

It is, all in all, a return to the visible, and to the complex information which the stratified city communicates to us.

The scheme enters into the play of natural and artificial elements to enrich, both semantically and physically, the places where the scheme intervenes by weaving its ramifications.

Architects like A. Siza, N. Baldeweg<sup>1</sup> lay the foundations of their buildings on complex bases which anchor them into the natural land following the contained movement of upward and downward inclines. These movements which lead the eye downwards, or, conversely, upwards, are still in relation to the lines of reference for the eye of the person who is travelling through them, whether it is the horizon, a line of trees, a hill or a monument.

Functional aspects and positivist reduction have relegated this sensitive approach to second place. The shared experience today of the stratified city, rich, composite, full of discoveries and emotions, has made the poverty and rigidity of some contemporary spaces even more striking.

## 12. In Praise of Immobility

One cannot resolve to consider the dematerialisation of the city, reduced to the flow of traffic and its networks, as inevitable, without imagining the revenge of the place - immobility.

Like Sten Hadorny, who declared war on speed and argued in favour of the experience of slowness and immobility, Franziska Bollerey reminds us by means of this that the ideal of the city can also be contemplative and that this is not sanctioned by the city planned on exchanges.

Guy Naizot wanted large and small courtyards for St-Denis where one would have discovered hidden pieces of historical evidence.

When Wim Wenders addressed some Japanese architects, he reminded them, in substance, that, beyond and in contradiction to their rôle as builders, they had to consider the void as the material of the city and to let large and small live together, leaving places where the imagination of children can take over to create their own visual world and feed their imagination. Moreover, when Wim Wenders was filming "Wings of Desire", he remarked on the importance of the open spaces in Berlin where one can discover the horizon, and where the image of the city recounts its history, as we all saw in Prague.

This is how the scales of transitional spaces are based, which are not only an art of making ranges and variations on the theme of collective distribution, but an art of really rooting places so that people and relationships and the imaginary are themselves also anchored there.

<sup>1</sup> El Croquis 1992 n° 54, Juan Navaro Baldeweg 1982-92; Casabella 92 n° 579 Architettura Contemporanea dal Portogalo; Domus n° 679 1987 "Alvaro Siza"; AA n° 278 dec 1991 Alvaro Siza; AA n° 283 oct 92 "Navarro Baldeweg".

If the city of networks and the world of exchanges is a reality for the privileged, the scene of daily life for the most humble, the youngest and the oldest is still the place where they live and dwell.

That the renewal of this thinking has been announced for some years and that the sense of things and the senses in the city are being remobilised by architecture and its links with urban space, can only be a return to an exercise fully taken on by architectural design in the making of the city.

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