

# Public Spaces and Visibility

Isaac Joseph

Lyons 2 University

Avenue Pierre Mendes-France

69500 Bron

France

## 1. On Public Space

In a recent article (*Le Monde*, 19.10.1992), Antoine Grumbach invited architecture "to take control of itself again and to participate in the edification of the vacuum which separates its building projects". It is significant that, by denouncing "single machines" and indifference to context, this architect has since received the *Grand prix d'urbanisme*. It is even more significant that the new sensitivity of architects towards public space recombines, in the very terms which convey this, firstly an already ancient current of political philosophy and secondly the more consistent analysis of the theatrical space.

It is a long time since the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt (1974) developed this theme of public space as a common world of action, as a world "between" self, capable of bringing together, but also of separating, and which is based as much on the interval as on the simultaneous presence of perspectives. The analysis of the theatrical space proposed by Peter Brook also defines this as a void space: "Someone is crossing that void space while someone else is observing it, and this is sufficient for the theatrical act to begin" (1972).

Beyond the debates of this workshop, one might explore the directions for research and action suggested by combining three viewpoints with respect to public spaces: that of architecture and town planning, that of political philosophy and that of scenography.

## 2. Affordance

One can imagine cities whose morphology is such that one passes daily from one's home to another "at home" on the understanding that in both cases, whether they be private or segregated spaces, access to them is controlled. For example, one knows that, in cities such as Los Angeles, the history of town planning and campaigns for security have ended in the destruction of the public space as an accessible space. Mike Davis (1990) described the Californian metropolis as a "forbidden" city where urban property conveys a "sadistic" conception of the street.

It is, therefore, necessary to agree to freedom of circulation and freedom of movement which are the thought principles behind public spaces. That is to say, one must take seriously the elements - mechanisms, amenities - which not only make it possible to circulate in a city, but make the city "available", offering "holds" (affordances) to the passer-by or resident. It is on that condition that one can truly

rehabilitate the context of architectural work, to make it so that such or such a building is not a "single machine". Moreover, rather than talking about contexts or environments - terms which leave one to suppose that one is only interested in what surrounds or accompanies the building (its façade, its withdrawal space) - it would perhaps be better to talk of the public space as a space of adherence to an urban function, that is to say, space in which the activities of the citizen can overlap, branch off according to the occasions, and articulate themselves on one and the same journey. One "sadistic" concept of circulation would be the rigid form, captive, without a way out, which would forget what the people of the theatre and the historians of the metamorphoses of the scenic space know, that is, that "the street is the most economical means of combining the unity and multiplicity of places" (Schéerer, 1992).

The question of the privatisation of public spaces, which is crucial for diagnosing the recent development in American cities and, to a lesser extent, European cities (Trilling, 1993), therefore concerns both the architect and the specialist in town planning law and urban anthropology. A privatised space can be defined in this way from the viewpoint of its legal ownership, its legitimacy for being appropriated (one does not appropriate an underground railway station as a collective space in a suburban city), or even the relative "porosity" of the activities which take place there. It is quite clear, on this subject, that a certain number of built spaces regarded as public - a station, for example - are, in fact, only conglomerates of thresholds and interfaces joining in several territorial and usage logic systems. J. M. Duthilleul, responsible for planning with the SNCF, says as much of the end of "Bâtiment Voyageurs". In a universe of thresholds, the factors which decide the frontier between the private and the public domains are very complex: the institutions responsible, whether private or public, must co-ordinate their missions according to specifications where technical constraints and professional resources are decisive; as for the users, what interests them is to be able to combine, in one and the same journey space, several rôles and several activities. Hence the development of integrated services - the "carte orange" "passport to the city" (travel season ticket) - which assumes co-operation between several partners who set themselves the aim of offering combined services to the same "customer". The question of the privatisation of public spaces is thus continually shifting, and is leaving the organisational field to settle at the required level of professional ability - for instigation, reception, administration - to manage these spaces and propose to the agents a *common working plan* capable of co-ordinating their *actions* in terms of *involvement and language*.

### 3. Visibility

We are now tackling the theme of the workshop which relates to what is visible. The coherence of the visible in a public space is an aesthetic question since it implies standards of display (signposting/identification, for example); but this is also a technical and institutional question, since it assumes that one is taking account of the visibility of the agents responsible for managing access to the space of services.

The text of the general orientation of the programme, under the conceptual pairing of intimacy and urbanity, implies the combination of two levels of preoccupation: that which comes under the logic of the district and the spaces in proximity to

it, and that which relates to daily journeys. This pairing requires one to define a public space as a *meeting space*, and to ask oneself about *the social organisation of meetings*. This is, in the dual tradition of urban anthropology and interactional micro-ecology (Hannerz, 1983; Goffman, 1963, 1973) one principle of analysis of public spaces: they are spaces for circulation and communication.

I will limit myself to a few remarks on this.

### 3.1. *Accessibility*

Firstly, if, when talking about public spaces, one can refer to the Fontaine Saint-Michel, les Halles and the Gare du Nord, to speak only of Paris, one sees that one might distinguish the places in question according to usage:

- 1) what one might call *established intersections* - for example the market/souk in the Arab world, or even the area surrounding a central monument;
- 2) *word sites* which are substitutes for the lost space in the proximity, places for meetings in an urban space where the residential area has dispersed;
- 3) *zones*, which are often places chosen by marginal populations, but which can be defined more widely as overdetermined spaces, or which are covered with different populations and activities, these latter being legal or illegal.

Several studies on the uses made by suburban young people of a transport network such as the RER show that, for them, it is a substitute for a lack of territory. If it is necessary to stress this point, it is that it seems to me that we should abandon the mythology of urban nomadism and its cult of mobility to understand the phenomena which preoccupy the elected representatives and managers of the cities. What is expected of a public space is not mobility for the sake of mobility, it is *accessibility* and that must be included as a quality of the space, but also of time (let us think about the value of what is available "at any time" and of what is "permanent").

### 3.2. *Passage*

Secondly, and this point is linked to the previous one, a public space is not necessarily a collective or collectively appropriable space. Being an "established intersection" does not mean that it fulfils a community function; being a place for meetings or a "word site" does not infer that those who find themselves there share a common identity or common values; and being a "zone" assumes that those who cross mean to keep their distance and, sometimes, even to avoid one another. Thus, by passing from the district to the city, the definition of urbanity is obliged to free itself from the problematic of identity. There is no public space, for circulation or communication, which does not conceal that share of avoidance described by Simmel or Goffman as indifference to the difference of things, as avoidance. With respect to identity, it is necessary for us to pass on to *duplicity*. Let us understand by this both the double articulation of the space between the city and the district and the duplicity of behaviour between people who remain strangers to each other, the dual language of those who come out of the intimate or community universe and adopt other modes

of communication and are capable of changing code (on the concept of "code-switching" in the ethnography of communication, see J. Gumperz, 1989).

Work on public spaces therefore enables one to understand the convergence between three ways of thinking: that of the scenographer who makes theatrical space out of "void space" (Brook, 1972) where the characters and their movements are *observable*; that of the architect attentive to the thresholds, values of *spacing* (Gaudin, 1992); and finally the thinking of the philosopher who defines the common space as an *interval* (Arendt, 1974, 1983). These are three ways of indicating that the plurality of perspectives is the condition of possibilities for any public space.

It is, therefore, quite natural that, since Benjamin, the *passage* has become the privileged form and formula of the public space. The passage is what frees the architect and the social sciences from the monumental frontality of the "fatuity of façades" (Gaudin, 1992) and the requirements of recognition. However, the passage is there for us to say that urban sociabilities would be confined if they were evaluated solely using gatherings as a yardstick; they can, and know how to, play on the dispersal of centres of attention, they know the resources (and the constraints) of what specialists call "multi-channel" communication.

#### 4. Lightings

This is what we learn from the scenographers of light and, for Laurent Fachard, the leading scenographer is A. Appia (1983). By trying to go beyond the décor of painted canvasses, they have known for more than a hundred years how to free themselves from the traps of representation and the *sign*, to let the *action* be seen. Theatrical action is constructed on a drama or an intrigue but it is for us to know how to dramatise every day events and the activities of the housewife doing her shopping before going to fetch her child from nursery: in one and the same movement and in a space where accessibility is the golden rule.

To take care of visibility is, therefore, not in the least to give in to the delights of luminous animation which can reach a point of saturation. The profusion of "globes" in contemporary lighting goes against the primacy proclaimed by the user: it overloads the territory or a route with signs and corresponds more often to a desire to recognise the town council rather than an effective design of spatial organisation. Far from integrating the nocturnal dimension of the city, it operates like a screen to vision, like a decorative ostentation.

Two different and perhaps complementary orientations open up on the subject of the treatment of light and visibilities:

- a dramatic orientation, in which the lighting operator is at the service of the town planner or the architect to let his argument be seen. This is the example of the plan of Laurent Fachard for the Place des Terreaux in Lyons, which can, at one extreme, be designed without any lamp-posts and is rooted in the architect's intention to design luminous fountains;
- a plastic orientation, that of Yann Kersalé, who dissects the architectural object to bring out one or other element, the façade (Opéra Bastille) or the technical element (lifts and air-conditioning in the Grand Palais). The light designer can also intervene in the identity of a place to propose a lighting

programme, that is to say, to accompany the gesture of the work; a "continuous creation" as Descartes would say, supported by the movements of those who inhabit it for a given time.

That involvement of the inhabitants is explicit in the principle of the experiment carried out by the "Cité de la Création" - group in the United States' quarter in Lyons. Halim Ben Saïd recalls how the plastic expression, the drawings of Tony Garnier covering 24 gable walls of the district, has resulted from a discussion with residents and how much open air museography owes to discussion about the history of the district.

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