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PRZESTRZEŃ PUBLICZNA OKREŚLANA NA NOWO

REDEFINING PUBLIC SPACE

Sukces systemu franczyzowego połączonego z uliczną gastronomią tchnął nowe życie w główne ulice handlowe miast europejskich. Politycy mówią na to „renesans” centrum. Krytycy złością się na „banalizację” i „prywatyzację” przestrzeni publicznej. Jaka więc miałyby być dzisiaj rola architektury – teatralnej dekoracji na potrzeby społecznej pantomimy?

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń publiczna, komercjalizacja przestrzeni, centrum miasta, centrum handlowe

The success of the franchise system combined with pavement gastronomy has injected new life into the tired Highstreets of European cities. Politicians call it the «Renaissance» of the centre. Critical eyes are up in arms against the „banalisation” and „privatisation” of public space. So what might architecture’s role today be – the theatrical backdrop for a social pantomime?

Keywords: public space, commercialization of the space, city centre, shopping mall

With the success of the franchise system new life seems to have been injected into the familiar pedestrian zone typology and tired Highstreets of the European cities. In addition, the concurrent surge of pavement gastronomy has led to a hub and a bustle in the cities which politicians and developers like to call the «renaissance» of the centre.

However, not everyone is excited. Those with lots of money avoid these places. They fly to London, Paris or Milan to shop «in style». Those with an educated or critical eye are up in arms against the „banalisation” and supposed „privatisation” of public space. A German comedian described his trip, let’s say from Hamburg to Berlin: I leave home, pass C&A, BURGER KING, MANGO and STARBUCKS, ZARA,

HENNES&MAURITZ, MACDONALDS, DOUGLAS and GAP arrive at the station; get off the train in Berlin, out of the station, pass GAP and DOUGLAS, MACDONALDS, HENNES&MAURITZ, ZARA, STARBUCKS and MANGO, past BURGER KING, C&A and arrive at my destination. If „banalisation” means the ever increasing amount of merchandise by ever bigger, but also fewer, brands pushed onto the eager consumer by globally identical shopfronts, then this argument certainly holds true. If „privatisation” of public space means the growing commercial exploitation of in themselves quite reasonable facades as frameworks for advertisements or the commercial exploitation of pavement area in public streets and squares for stalls and cafes, this argument also rings true, or at least

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partially, for cities have always been the centres of commerce. Infact their very existence was due to the commercial potential of a particular geographical location on the intersection of trade routes.

There are of course very important mutations between the historic and the contemporary city. Where in medieval or Renaissance cities the centre was brimming with stalls, workshops, offices, lodgings, pubs and bathhouses, for our centres all these functions have been evacuated to the periphery, except consuming. What was once the rich soil, the humus for the drama of social life has narrowed down to a mono-function, however popular or even socially and individually important consuming may be. Since shopping for daily nourishment is done at the local supermarket, furniture, toys, D.I.Y. and other specialised goods at peripheral shopping centres and books, music, films as well as many more inessentials via internet and or mail order, the visit to the city centre's fashion and luxury shops has turned into a communal ritual of celebrating life style. This is further supported by an annual array of staged events, fairs and festivals. Extraordinary to observe, the so called «public viewing» during football championships in thousands of rigged up open air theatres across Europe, present a kind of modern urban hysteria, an activating of the city's open spaces for Life Aid or Dianamania. So what might architecture's role today be – the theatrical backdrop for a social pantomime? And can architecture any longer fulfill its traditional role of identity giver and enhancer of a particular place within the sameness of global and commercial requirements that it must increasingly respect?

We have seen in the 20th century fundamental ideological shifts regarding public space. While the modernists, Le Corbusier in particular, idolised speed and mobility and planned huge solitary housing blocks surrounded by free flowing acres of green, a vision taken up in postwar housing and planning, the postmodern era as a reaction to this unloved and

socially problematic strategy reverted to an idealised past with its clear cut and moderately scaled streets, squares and urban blocks. Whereas this sactioned the preservation of many old buildings and city spaces and curbed the rampant demolition of the 1960s and 1970s, a rather unreflected appropriation of the classical arsenal of architectural elements left Postmodernism almost immediately questionable. Especially so in the light of a radically changed 20th century reality of pathological mobility, just-in-time-logistics and ubiquitous communication, which in turn has lead to a new perception of public space (Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan). Such form without content, an exchangeable costume, served most to demonstrate that the decoding and interpretation of architecture is, on a wider cultural platform, a lost art. Technologically it is now possible and viable to built anywhere with the same materials and construction methods as anywhere else. Rem Koolhaas coined the cynical verdict: Fuck the context. Architecture's context today is global and medial. Like big corporations city authorities have bought into the star architect's signature to stamp their buildings with a marketable icon, an identity rating in the global village. Contemporary architecture delivers most extraordinary, if often extremely foolish, shapes and forms to serve the desired «look at me» purpose, a powerful image thrust upon an innocent city, an icon fit for broadcasting digitally. The place itself rarely benefits longterm. Convinced as I am that architecture's role is in the first instance the making of a place, an «Ort», I would like to focus on two aspects regarding these changes and redefinitions of public space. One is the inversion of «public» and «private», the second the proliferation of the Mall.

Since the 18th century sociologists have identified natural behaviour with the private, the family and the indoors. The cultural on the other hand is associated with the public and the outdoors. Today millions and millions of people, from the solitary confinement of

their individual cocoon, partake in the global communication of television or the internet. They are watching millions of other individuals in chat shows and «big brother» trials, exposing their innermost private and intimate lives to the world. The appropriation of public parks has come a long way from «keep off the grass» to the exuberant picnicing, partying, barbequeing and sunbathing, in german parks at least. Starbucks furnishes its cafès like living rooms, bars are being renamed «lounges». In recent years we were caused to admire many a pierced belly and a tattooed rump; people now dress for their city shopping as they would for the beach. In fact our social codes for public and private, including dress codes have become almost indistinguishable.

Is there a parallel in the perception and the delineation of private and public property? In general the street surfaces are publicly owned and the accompanying street facades privately owned. Architecture in the past generated intricate elements and devices negotiating between the public outside and the private inside: Porticos, colonnades, steps, benches. Thus the massive stone border of walls, clearly dividing private from public, contained soft elements, of transition. The opposite is true with the glass facades of today's shopping street: these are highly transparent and open widely, some even disappear completely. The seemingly open border however is rigorously controlled by close circuit television CCTV and security gates. Thus the city is in danger of reducing the social theatre to invisibly but stringently controlled spaces, spaces that keep undesirable, non-consuming citizens out. This amounts to a somewhat mono-social clientel programmed to shopping mode and unsuitable or unable to generate or to develop new modes of social interaction. Society as a whole loses its only real space to interact, to linger, to play. It is therefore imperative to protect and to provide public space with no particular definition, perhaps only with elements for individual

interpretation like seats, trees, grass, water. There exist many fresh and subversive moves to reclaim urban space for uncontrolled/non commercial and spontaneous action.: Guerilla Gardening in California, David Belle's Parkour from France, Soft Golf in the City of London. Architecture and city planning can support a programmatic openness through design.

Churches, museums, theatres and libraries, the last bastions of publicly funded buildings need to be open and of course free of charge. They thrive traditionally in locations with high frequency. Their positioning in the midst of traffic or commerce benefits all sides.

This leads us to the second point, the progression of the mall towards a new urban typology, a Hybrid Mall. From the grand Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele in Milano via Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace and the classical department stores with their huge glassed domes, Victor Gruen invented in the 1950s the american shopping mall. Moving on from the first wave of giant malls I.M.Pei developed a combination of shopping and culture within simulated urban settings, the underground at the Louvre exemplifies this category. Railway stations and airports are not only places of highest frequencies, but also prime examples of this rapid development towards a new type of space, that of «Continuous Interiority» (Mark Pimlott: . This global typology, safe and dry, pleasantly lit with soft unoffensive music is usurping the role of the old wet and windy traditional street. A vision from the 60ies seems finally to have come true, Archizooms ironically-utopian Non-Stop-City.

Rather than accept the market as our only compass we as architects and planners have in my opinion a duty to proffer alternatives, to open doors to the full range of possibilities for public space. We also have the responsibility to wherever possible influence and inform politicians poliya makers and those who invest in the city, and ourselves to build truly public spaces.