

Part 1
New Public Domains

The city inside out

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In the introduction of his well-known book on the new American city, with the suggestive title *Variations on a Theme Park* the editor Michael Sorkin remarks: 'The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. In the "public" spaces of the theme park, or the shopping mall, speech itself is restricted: there are no demonstrations in Disneyland. The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself.' (Sorkin 1992)

It is true: there are no demonstrations in Disneyland. But there are demonstrations just outside, confronting the public longing for a day of undisturbed family amusement with democratic speech. So maybe the challenge of reclaiming the city is not to be found in neutralizing the restrictions of privatized "public" space, but in the interconnection of these spaces with real public space. Democratic speech itself takes the form of a spectacle, making it unclear whether real life is penetrating into fantasy world, or fantasy world is reaching out in public space.

The second question is what makes a public space real public space. In the terms of Sorkin it is the realm of democracy. The struggles for democracy are still fought in the central squares of the main cities. The examples in Eastern Europe were proof of that. However, to these traditional democratic agora's new, unexpected spaces are added as places for protest: motorways, parking areas in the periphery and airports. And what about ordinary everyday life? Public space is not only about protest. What are the features of real public places in everyday use?

Public space is the object of very different strategies and discourses. It is part of strategies aiming at the cultural revitalization of the city and the commercial competition with developments in the periphery. In recent years there is a growing concern with safety and social coherence.

When do we call a public space a good public space? When it puts the city at the cultural map of Europe, as in the case of the Theatre square in Rotterdam, designed by Adriaan Geuze? When it attracts large crowds to the city, as does the tropical carnival that in June brings normal city life in Rotterdam to a standstill? It fits perfectly in the cities festival policy to attract large crowds to the city. When it seduces customers to the city centre instead of the shopping malls in the periphery, as was the aim of the so called 'Koopgoot', 'shopping gutter' in English? It is the nickname of a new shopping street in the centre of Rotterdam, because it is largely below street level and connects the important shopping streets on both sides of the central boulevard. When is it safe? When is it all these things at the same time? But is there still place for the homeless in that case next to the middleclass families?

Cultural exchange

To know what good public space is, we need a central focus point, a cultural perspective. A better look at the public spaces mentioned before shows that the quality of these spaces is that they attract very different groups of people. The Theatre square really works as a stage, where people come to see and become seen. It is a place where different publics come together: visitors of the theatre, the mega cinema, the concert hall and different groups of strollers, youngsters hanging around, people sitting at the long bench. The Tropical Carnival was started by a small group of people originating from Surinam, the Dutch Antilles and Cabo Verde. It attracts every year large crowds from the whole country. The 'Koopgoot' was developed to seduce middle-class shoppers to return to the city centre, but it attracts a wide range of public.

Good public space functions as public domain, which can be defined as the place of cultural exchange between different groups of city dwellers and visitors. Why this is important becomes clear by looking at social and cultural developments that are reorganizing space recently.

The first development is, that the contradiction between city and

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periphery seems no longer a proper distinction. Together they form an urban field. We need a new geography, a cultural geography, that explains what is going on in this urban field. One of the important tendencies is, that the urban field develops more and more into an archipelago of enclaves, of socially rather homogeneous places where



Fear and Curiosity.
(Photo: Leo van der Noort
HH)

people live, work and recreate. There one meets the people who one likes to meet and tries to avoid the others. At the same time we observe a curiosity in the life styles of other people. A strategy of public domain facilitates this curiosity by creating places where different social worlds overlap. Cultural exchange is not the same as 'meeting' people. Cultural exchange takes the form of seeing and be seen, of modest forms of exhibitionism and voyeurism. The space of cultural exchange is far wider than public space in the strict sense. It also contains malls, theme parks, mega-cinema's, highway facilities and the public transport system, large railway stations and airports. Legally these are private places, but they are experienced by most people as public places.

From space to places

The second important tendency is that the rather abstract idea of space as an empty space that must be organized is replaced by a notion of place, of different places defined by concrete activities and memory, and by daily, weekly and yearly routines. Such places develop at the most curious spots in the urban field, from a beach in the harbour

area, an aircraft spotters plot near the airport to a climbing spot in the former coalbunkers of an old steel factory. Authenticity is not an item any more. Every authenticity is in fact a staged authenticity. An outlet shopping centre takes the form of a traditional Dutch small town, including a ships wharf where a replica of an old ship is built. A holiday resort in the east of the Netherlands presents itself as a subtropical paradise.

Many architects and urban sociologists would not call the different spots 'places', but will follow the French anthropologist Marc Augé and call them 'non-places': places without history, without context, without a proper name even, where people do not feel connected, but lost and left to themselves, the opposite of public space.

From non-place to public domain

Augé argues that every place can become a non-place, commercialized or in other ways deprived of the multitude of meanings that characterizes a place. A tourist board or a heritage organization only has to put a sign on it. That is true, but it is not the most interesting point. The question should be: how these so-called non-places can be developed into real places, in places of cultural exchange, in public domain. To answer this question, that is to develop strategies, design strategies for this transformation, we have to look for clues in the rather contradicting developments in the urban field itself. If we cannot find these clues there, we are doomed to the moral appeals that dominate the debate on public space for years. There are indeed no demonstrations in Disneyland, but there are at the gates. This gives us a clue to the design of the public domain: maybe it is not necessary to have everything everywhere, but instead to allow specific places to attract specific groups, and connect these places with places where other groups put their stamp.

The public domain is not a neutral space, where everybody behaves like everybody else. Public domain maybe is not in the first place a space but is the experience of being in public - an experience that is provoked in spaces and at places that are dominated by certain groups in the city. The public domain is the confrontation of different parochial realms, parts of public space that are appropriated in a symbolic way by specific groups. For instance, the vibrant street life of the mixed neighbourhoods around the city centre can be considered to be more public than the city centre itself, which is dominated by tourists. Here public spaces, the streets, become public domains by being occu-

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pied and 'stamped' by a specific group and, at the same time, remaining accessible to other people and different uses. At that moment you experience the proximity of difference.

The way cities look today is very much the result of a symbolic economy, in which specific groups act as consumers of lifestyle products and environments, but also produce cultural facilities and manifestations. Some groups have more symbolic power (which often does not equal their economic or political power) than others. These culturally dominant groups are in possession of what could be called a cultural generator. An example for this phenomenon is the way the creative classes mark the city. The move to certain areas of the city



*Most people experience private spaces like shopping malls as public space.
(Photo: Maarten Hajer)*

which they recognise immediately as their because these areas wear the stamp of their peers. Other groups seem to have lost their generating powers, for example the traditional inhabitants of what were originally working-class districts. Most of the neighbourhood shops, bars and restaurants are now exploited by members of different immigrant groups, who also created social, cultural and religious facilities.

Only in this manner public space can become the stage, where people present themselves, a marketplace, where they compete in a symbolic economy. In this perspective the appropriation of parts of public space is not an obstacle to overcome, but an essential condi-

tion to create public domain. We experience public domain when we are entering a domain that is dominated in a symbolic way by others, with a different life style or culture, and at the same time have the feeling to be free to stroll around and look.

Cultural ecology

The symbolic system of parochial domains that together form the public domain of the city is not always clear at first sight. Some cities are less readable than others. The city of Rotterdam is such a city. The bombardment in 1940 destroyed not only the physical structure but also the mental map of the city centre. Today, 60 years after the disaster, different atmospheres are beginning to crystallize in a way that the sense of a place or area becomes more outspoken. To show this process and the social, economic and physical mechanisms that underlie it, we produced an 'Atlas of the cultural ecology of Rotterdam'.

The atlas consists of two sets of maps: inventory maps and perspective maps. For the inventory of shopping, meeting, going out, night life, events, cultural productions, exchange of knowledge a basic map is used that shows not only public space, but also – like the map Giambattista Nolli drew of Rome in 1748, on which, in addition to the streets and squares, he also presented the interiors of churches and



*Giambattista Nolli. Map of Rome, 1748.
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other more or less public buildings as public space – the interior space of public buildings and commercial facilities. Basic maps have been drawn for the daytime, evening and night, to show which places of the city are open to the public and which are not. These inventory maps show patterns of behaviour that structure the sense of place of the city centre. The perspective maps are an attempt to show the underlying economic, social and spatial mechanisms of these patterns, such as square metre prices of commercial real estate, flows of cars and pedestrians, attainability by car, public transport and walking distances from car parks and public transport stops, safety and security ('the ecology of fear' as Mike Davis calls it) and – last but not least – the division of ethnic groups in the city. These two sets of maps result in a map of parochial domains that together form the public domain of the city.

Design strategies

The challenge is how to connect and confront the different worlds, and put them in a larger frame. For that purpose several design strategies can be used, paradoxically developed by designers of theme parks like Disney Land: theming, compressing and framing. Theming is the creation of a specific atmosphere. That can be a classical theme such as

*SEsc in Sao Paulo. Architect: Lina Bo Bardi.
Different but interconnected spheres.
(Photo: Arnold Reijndorp)*



the garden (*hortus conclusus*) or the lounge, or a new theme like a public sport facility. Compression is a technique used by the designers of theme parks, putting different themes directly near each other. Framing is putting a certain use of public space in a different frame. The skate park that is realized in the central business district of Rotterdam is an example of the use of these techniques: it has a clear theme, connected to a specific youth style that is directly confronted with the world of the office buildings around. The office buildings frame the world of the skaters.

Other examples of theming, compressing and framing can be found in Parc Bercy in Paris, or in the marvelous project in Sao Paulo, designed by Lina Bobardi, which is an example of privatized public space that with a broad range of social, cultural and sportive facilities attracts a very diverse public.

An other important design challenge is to connect the big malls and mega cinema's by opening them in a way, that the activities in the building interact with public space and contribute to the urban theatre. The new mega cinema in the new city centre of Almere designed by OMA and the reconstruction of the Music Hall in Utrecht designed by Herman Herzberger are good examples of this possibility. What is essential in the connection of the 'public' space in these buildings and the public space outside is the way control is managed in these buildings. At which point do you have to show your ticket?

Controlled uncontrol

The work of the British architect Cedric Price in the 60s and 70s contains several notions that can be helpful to undertake such the effort of turning 'non places' into public domain: proximity of difference, specific climates without specific architecture, uncontrolled control. How could these concepts be applied?

Spaces that are transformed into public domains are often multi-layered. According to sociologist Sharon Zukin they are liminal spaces, spaces designed for specific use, like the market place, but provoking other activities connected to or, as in many cases, remain in contrast to the main activity. The market place becomes the central space for all kinds of urban rituals, festivities and protest meetings. The anthropologist Victor Turner proposed the term anti-structure to characterise such spaces in relation to the social and spatial structure of the city. Turner also uses the term liminality to label the situation 'betwixt-and-between', in which the social order is turned upside down in a



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symbolic manner, and everyday routines are exposed and become the subject of ridicule, 'fun' and cultural criticism. Carnival being the most outspoken example of such a situation. As a consequence, a new understanding of social relations may develop. This is not possible from within the dominant structure, because from that vantage point, protests as well as rituals are perceived as activities that disturb the normal course of events. That is why Turner calls the set of urban rituals, festivities and protests an anti-structure. Developing so-called non-places in public domain means to re-invent it as a liminal space, based on uncontrolled control, or - maybe better - controlled uncontrol.

Creating different climates without specific architecture, depends on the differentiation of control. In the climatological sense of the word that is control of heat, air, humidity. In the social and cultural meaning of the term climates or spheres, control is related to access and rules of behaviour. What really makes the difference in the way

*Library Seattle, architect: Rem Koolhaas. Controlled uncontrol.
(Photo: Arnold Reijndorp)*



places and building function as public domain is difference in control. The way libraries are controlled highlights this point very clearly. State libraries can only be entered by showing a membership card. The control is at the entrance. Many new public libraries, such as OMA's recent Seattle Library or also the one in Rotterdam (designed in the by Van den Broek & Bakema around 1980), are only controlled at the exit. The result is, that these libraries are visited by a number of publics with different aims.

In a growing number of cases the controlled uncontrol is the result of a policy that strives to a more public character of private spaces. Amsterdam airport Schiphol is promoted as 'airport city'. Schiphol Plaza, the large entrance hall, has become a favourite shopping place for day trippers living in the wider environment. The addition of other facilities, like a cinema, a congress hall, a museum is a matter of time. The wish to become a city makes the space ambivalent and more public. You cannot control everybody that is getting in and strolling around. The decent public does not like an over controlled space in which street people are permanently thrown out. At the same time they like the reassuring thought of being in a controlled space, of which the many visible cameras are proof. As a consequence of the company policy the airport became a place of democratic protest.

The role of control in the creation of different 'climates' can be furthermore illustrated by the differences in uses and activities in parks and squares. Parks seems to be more controlled public spaces, often provided with a fence and at the entrance with a notice board showing a long list of prohibitions. Nevertheless this form of outspoken control seems only there to facilitate the 'uncontrolled' behaviour that is provoked by the liminal situation of nature in the city that parks provide. Sitting on the grass, eating, drinking, playing music, sometimes half or whole naked, is not allowed in other public spaces. The absence of written rules at these places conceals the fact that only civic behaviour is allowed. A few cubicles of sand can change a quay into a beach, with the adequate behaviour, and the enrollment of some sods turns a rather dull square into a park. Temporal uses like these, and festivals, events, manifestations can help to make clear what the meaning is of public space on a certain spot in the city. It can provoke other uses and other meaning and attract other groups. In that way public space becomes really a stage for urban scenarios.

References

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