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The Placebo Effect_ Towards the idealized Public Space

Abstract

Contemporary reality proves that public space is shifted from the traditional square to the shopping mall - cities is now impossible not to take into consideration the dynamics of these new spaces and especially the way in which they try to impose as part of the public domain or, even more, as the ideal public space. But how is it possible to depart from the idea of shopping malls being described as non-places, an idea that has been generally adopted and repeatedly used, and move to an idea that wants them to represent the new public space? Are the qualities they claim to have, sufficient enough to go through such an approach? This paper therefore aims to examine the different levels of publicity in the shopping mall and, from this perspective, to discuss whether this “idealized” place, is a vital public space, or just an illusion, instead of a real answer, to people’s continuous need for a high quality public space.

Key words: shopping mall, public space, urbanity, publicity, spatial cognition

1 Introduction or Shopping as a Public Affair



FIG. 1 I shop therefore I am, Barbara Kruger, The famous slogan which describes best the new relationship between people and goods. Source: <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html> / last accessed on 14/05/2013

It would be a contradiction to claim that shopping is an activity that takes place independently of the rest of the life of a community – contrariwise; it is absolutely interwoven with public life. And this is said having in mind that trade is an important aspect of economic reality, which in turn can't be separated from all the other aspects of this reality, whether they are called social, political or cultural. Under this framework and attempting the transfer of this general idea into space, it becomes clear that, respectively, consumption and public space are inextricably connected – and this is something that can be confirmed historically, both over time and over place.

It is thus worthwhile considering the example of the Ancient Agora, in the very heart of ancient Athens, which was the focus of political, commercial, administrative and social activity, working at the same time as the centre of religious, cultural and judicial affairs - and this still considered to be the model of public space. It was “the place of citizenship, an open space where public affairs and legal disputes were conducted, and it was also a marketplace, a place of pleasurable jostling, where citizens' bodies, words, actions and produce were all literally on mutual display, and where judgments, decisions and bargains were made” (Hartley, 1992: 30). Similarly, the medieval market, which takes place in the central square of the town, is another example that is not to be ignored or neglected.

It is not therefore difficult to reach the conclusion that public affairs, along with trade and spectacle, all mixed equally together, constitute public space, or, to put it differently, that public space contains commercialism in the same sense that it

contains all the other public activities. The point where this balance seems to be disrupted is when these conditions are reversed, and commerce becomes the dominant element, under the authority of which a new kind of public space is established. Thus, from this point of view, the famous phrase “perhaps the beginning of the twenty-first century will be remembered as the point where the urban could no longer be understood without shopping” (Koolhaas, 2002), needs to be reconsidered – it’s not the existence of this relationship that is new, it is the terms under which this relationship works that has changed [Fig 1]. It is an undeniable fact that in contemporary societies the shopping malls work as simulators of public space – in many cases they have completely substituted the traditional one. Considering that our cities is now impossible to ignore the dynamics of these places and especially the way they impose themselves as the ideal public space, it becomes vital to examine the terms under which this relation is formed.

2 Identifying the Issue

What is nowadays observed is a shift of public space, moving from the traditional square to the shopping mall and in the same time, from the centre of the city to the suburban areas, having in this sense a double impact in the production of space¹, both in the conceptual and the geographical part of it. Thus, the shopping malls, behaving as the new urban capacitors, form the intermediate zone between the city and the rural, while raising concerns about a general discount of public life or the ways it attempts to reinvent itself. But neither this observation applies to these days only.

It has already been suggested that “the urban public space has been attacked the last 20 years from the increasing privatization and the expansion of the mall – effect” (Mitchell, 2003: 3-4). Or, even more than a decade earlier that that, the observation that “...most radically, perhaps, our own peculiar rituals of social interaction have eased into a set of privatized public places unique to our time, including the atrium, theme parks, shopping malls, and those ‘festival marketplaces’ made popular in the United States. They are flourishing as the social accouterments of a suburban settlement pattern that dominates....Europe as well” is equally important, an observation led to the conclusion that “patterned in 1956 by Victor Gruen...and replicated hundreds of times...the shopping mall is now a fact of life. It is extremely important to whole classes of people... And it presents us with some interesting social and political issues” (Kostof, 1993: 185-185).

¹ The phrase, here used figuratively, refers to Henri Lefebvre’s concept who, in his homonymous work, described the way space does not exist in itself but is associated with the social reality. Similarly, every society produces its own space, as it is the result of all the different simultaneous relations that take place in each case. Lefebvre Henri, 1991, *The production of space*, transl. by D. Nicholson – Smith, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing

But first, it would be more appropriate, in order to avoid creating unnecessary overlaps, to point out what exactly the term public space includes, the concepts that are involved in this and maybe also consider how we came to seek for a refined or idealized public space. Even if we accept that our contemporary society needs a new (ideal) public space with new features, is it possible to seek for it in a place like the shopping mall, which, by definition, is not public? And additionally, taking for granted that the malls have been widely criticized as “lacking identity”, “limiting interaction” and “enforcing consumerism” (Pedersen) or have just been described as non-places² – something that itself does not leave any space for negotiation – how possible is it to move to a concept that accepts the shopping mall to represent the new public space?

3 On Public Space

Public space is a concept quite complex, enclosing multiple interpretations and experiences. It would perhaps be an oversimplification to define it as just “a space that is freely accessible for everyone” (Hajer, 2002: 11). It is perhaps the most crucial element of a city in terms of urban planning, defining its social and political existence – it is no random at all that Pausanias, the Greek traveler and geographer of the 2nd century AD, wrote that “it is impossible to define a polis, ‘polis’ (city), if it does not have public spaces and public buildings”. In a corresponding manner, although in a more poetic sense, Petrus Bechorius in the 14th century noted, in order to underline the essentialness of public space, that “since piazzas are areas in villages or cities, empty of houses and other such things and of obstructions, arranged for the purpose of providing space or set up for meeting of men, it should be remarked that in general through piazzas the condition of man in this world can be discovered” (Kostof, 1991: 123).

Public space has in the same time both spatial and symbolic meaning and on this exact dipole lays its special value. If we try to approach the issue only spatially, very soon we will reach an impasse – is it a game where voids and solids alternate, representing the built and the un-built respectively, setting actually the one the limits of the other? This could only be true if we accept that public space is identified with free urban space, like the streets or the squares. On the other hand, we could suggest that public space is what is not private. But again such an assertion incorporates

² Marc Augé (1995) used this term to describe places that do not have all what is needed to constitute place, such as identity or the sense of belonging. In other words, “if a place is defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place”. Thus, as it is very characteristically mentioned, “clearly, the word ‘non- place’ designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure) and the relations that individuals have with these spaces”, while the conclusion that “the space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations only solitude and similitude” is absolutely indicative of the situation they describe. Augé Marc, 1995, *Non Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. by J. Howe, London: Verso, p.p. 63,76,83.

some failure, as it excludes from the outset any other approach. It seems therefore inevitable to examine the term public space as a whole, using also its symbolic meaning – or, to put it differently, to clarify la raison d'être of public space.

Having already said that the ancient agora remains until these days the model of public space – and even we deny that, it was definitely the first of its kind – going back to its concept and to the ideas it expressed in space, seems to be the only way to start. “With the agora was created for the first time in history, a public space as a necessary element of the urban landscape through which to express a community's collective political power” (Kostof, 1991: 153). The word agora itself comes from the verb *agheiro*, meaning to bring together, to meet. From agora comes the verb *aghorazo*, which means to buy, and this is something which clearly indicates that the concept is basically political, by extension social, and far less – or in a second phase – commercial, despite the (recent) tendency it has to be identified with the latter.

The substance of public space in its political sense, as expressed in the agora, has been explicitly highlighted. Access to it is that turns an anonymous person to a citizen. It is the space where man, “having mastered his necessities of sheer life” (Arendt 1958: 37), enters free and ready to lead a political life – respectively, freedom is an advantage that can only be found in public sphere, along with some qualities. Like excellence, for example. “Excellence itself, *areté* as the Greeks, *virtus* as the Romans would have called it, could distinguish oneself from all others. Every activity preformed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public constituted by one's peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one's goals or inferiors” (Arendt, 1958: 48).

Thus, we see that freedom and excellence, two concepts highly meaningful, are connected to the ability of having access to public space, while at the same time “the slave lost excellence because he lost admission to the public realm, where excellence can show” (Arendt, 1958: 49). Ultimately, public space reaches out to be synonymous with the very existence of human nature as, according to Aristotle, only “what appears to all, this we can call Being”.

During the Roman era, public space is regarded and designed as a single entity. Following the laws of perspective and symmetry, axes (movement) encounter squares (stops) leading to the public buildings and the monuments. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance are even using the method of optical illusion in order to attract the user of the city, something that indicates the importance public space had to them. What we therefore see – and this is what needs to be kept out of all – is that, over time, democratic regimes design gathering places, squares, agoras, markets, in order to ensure the communication and interaction between the citizens.

Only after the 16th century, the public is cut off from the concept of “common good” and moves towards what is “manifest and open to general observation” (Sennett, 1977: 16). After the 17th century the notions “public” and “private” acquire a meaning which is closer to what they mean today – “public meant open to the scrutiny of anyone, whereas private meant a sheltered region of life defined by one's family and

friends" (Sennett, 1977: 16). At this point, in public, in its contemporary interpretation, there appears the possibility of meeting absolutely strangers, people from different backgrounds and therefore heterogeneous. In addition to that meeting, in "the public region diverse, complex social groups were to be brought into ineluctable contact" (Sennett, 1997: 17). Even if the political dimension of the concept seems to be loosing ground, the social one remains, as the interaction between people is still considered to be one of the main aspects of life in public space.

Public space is in general interwoven with freedom of expression, movement and action of free citizens, social contact and interaction, leisure and revolution. Even under a context of social conventions, it is impossible to talk about public space without involving freedom, whether it is freedom of speech, expression, access, action or even the "right to stay inactive" (Kostof, 1991: 123). It is finally attached to features related to identity of a whole, and the relationship that connects people with each other and with the city itself. It is in public space that "we exercise...our sense of belonging" (Kostof, 1991: 124).

What can be seen is what has already been suspected from the outset - public space is directly connected to high ideals. It is not easily therefore accepted to perform the term throughout, without first verifying all the parameters that this involves. Indeed, in recent years, and even more nowadays, public space is in constant degradation, regarding its social dimension and also its aesthetical and environmental experience. Today, in more than a few cases, public space becomes synonymous to marginalization, social inequality, insecurity or even danger. But even that way, it is impossible to stop the human need for interaction; sociality is inherent in human nature. "We still want to be with other people, if not engaging them directly, at least watching them stroll by" (Kostof, 1991: 187). And it is at this point where new ways will be investigated as an answer to that need. The shopping mall promises a new experience of public urban life.

4 Shopping Mall and Public Space

"Shopping malls have replaced the parks and squares that were 'traditionally the home of free speech'.... The economic lifeblood once found downtown has moved to suburban shopping centers, which have substantially displaced the downtown business districts as the centers of commercial and social activity.... The predominant characteristics of the normal use of these properties are its all-inclusiveness. Found at these malls are most of the uses and activities citizens engage outside their homes... Within and without the enclosures are not only stores of every kind and size, but large open spaces available to the public and suitable for numerous uses. There is space to roam, to sit down and to talk" (Koolhaas, 2001: 154) [Fig. 2].



FIG. 2 Attracting new customers. "Fun, Food, Fashion. All in the mall" . Source: The Mall Athens, Official page on Facebook / last accessed on 14/05/2013

Indeed, in the shopping malls there are several features that refer to the public and semi-public space of the city. These features are, firstly, morphological. In the shopping mall one would recognize circulation networks, walkways, and terraces, sitting zones and arcades, where that familiar game of exchange between "public and private" is being used. They would also see elements "borrowed" from the natural environment – "...real trees grown in controlled nursery conditions, harvested once they have reached a desired height and girth, and then carefully dissected in a laboratory..." (Koolhaas, 2001: 144). At the same time, shopping malls have also functional similarities to the city; the space they provide is not limited to the commercial activity but it is more often mixed with recreational uses, cultural activities or even, in some cases, with public services. In the mall a miniature version of the city and its public space is found, a microcosm, which works under conditions of comfortable movement and a sense of security. All those elements that create a feeling of familiarity are supplemented by an idealization of their form and the way they are promoted as such.

But the shopping malls make clear from the outset their intention to exist and perform outside the reality of the rest of the city – they do not wish to be part of it but rather something similar to it, which will supersede or replace it (Jameson, 1991). The consumer enters this filtered microcosm "sealed off from the tasks of everyday life" (Crawford, 1992: 22) or even "...still weighted down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns..." (Augé, 1995: 83), just to escape in an illustrated world where advertisement and consumption guarantee an exciting and spectacular way to be, however distant this lifestyle might be from their own identity.

The user of the shopping mall is in that way declaiming their identity and, being absorbed in an imaginary world of attractive images, becomes what they do or experience, performing just a role – that of the consumer. And it is this exact "passive joy of identity loss" that transfers them in a non-place (Augé), a world which is totally separated from the real one. The space is experienced under a predefined framework of specific terms and conditions, choices and communication codes and its user is

treated as a part of the crowd and not as an individual personality. This actually brings the shopping mall in the condition of a non-place, as it “creates neither identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude” (Augé, 1995: 83) [Fig. 3].



FIG. 3. Performing an “identity” that follows the rules of consumption. Source: <http://www.cgarchitect.com/2012/08/ars---shopping-mall> / last accessed on 14/05/2013

It is this deliberate and predetermined absence of a link or a reference to a historical, social and cultural environment, as it has already been highlighted, in conjunction with the fact that they don't seem to concern about the identity, of both the space and its user, that has justifiably lead to them being accused as non-places. By not being assimilated as “places of identity, of relations and of history”, they therefore lack the very essence of the anthropological factor that allows them to be defined as places, let alone public space, within the context ascribed to this term.

Yet another factor that hinders the shopping mall being experienced as a vital public space, is certainly the actual reason of its existence. Its aim is to promote the product, and gaining the attraction of the potential consumer is an essential part of this process. This can only be achieved by “serving” to the consumer what is missing from his (assuming dull) life. The shopping mall is designed to satisfy the average person or even, in most cases, the very specific kind of person the manager of the mall seeks to attract. And the “recipe” to the success is almost concretized.

“Take 100 acres of ideally shaped flat land. Surround same by 500,000 consumers who have no access whatever to any other shopping facilities. Prepare the land and cover the central portion with 1,000,000 square feet of buildings. Fill with first-rate merchandisers who will sell superior wares at alluringly low prices. Trim the whole on the outside with 10,000 parking spaces and be sure to make same accessible over first-rate under-used highways from all directions. Finish up by decorating with some potted plants, miscellaneous flower beds, a little sculpture, and serve sizzling hot to

the consumer” (Gruen, 1963). That is all that needs to be done – six simple steps to make the ideal shopping centre.

What can be derived from that clearly, is the way in which the potential consumer is approached, which is in some way “seductive” and, more over, applicable in the same way for everybody. Such a view becomes even more significant considering that this description has been expressed by Victor Gruen, who, by contrast to what it seems, believed that the shopping malls could actually work in the idea of community centres, meeting points and interactive poles, arguing that they are “able to play the role of a commercial centre but of a social, cultural and recreational crystallization point of the up-to-then amorphous, sprawling sub-urban region” (Pedersen). However, a space that does not promote diversity, but the homogeneity, is far from being perceived as public space.

It is also the question of equality, which is considered to be fundamental for the existence of public space that is necessary to be investigated within the life in the shopping mall. It is nowadays clear that shopping malls are being self-promoted as places that are easily accessible to everyone – and this matter of accessibility includes all its different aspects. Firstly, the new shopping malls, despite the fact that in their majority they are located outside the city centres, they are designed in such a way to ensure the easiest possible transportation to and from them. From the moment that we are considered to be prospective consumers, facilitated access to them should be offered for granted. In Athens for example, all the malls are designed close to the public transport facilities, an element, which is actually used as a means used for their advertisement, underlining in that sense the assured possibility, provided by them and for each one of us, to meet there. Furthermore, all the activities that are offered there for the users’ entertainment are offered equally to everyone –with fashion and leisure being the same for all of us, the mall is there “to prove that consumption possibilities are being equalized” (Baudrillard, 1970: 50).

However, in practice economical circumstances apply, defining in that way the limits and the terms of what is called accessibility. The set of people that would serve as the focal point of each shopping mall is anyway predetermined, something that means that another group of people is almost automatically excluded, reflecting social discrimination in its entire whole. This is revealed in its simplest form by observing the kind of stores that are most frequently encountered in a shopping mall. It is not therefore a coincidence that, while explaining the ideology of consumption, Jean Baudrillard underlines that “...consumption, like the education system, is a class institution: not only is there inequality before objects in the economic sense...but, more deeply, there is radical discrimination, in the sense that only some people achieve mastery of an autonomous, rational logic of the elements of the environment” (Baudrillard, 1970: 59). A shopping mall, which is by definition the spatial testimony of the “ideology of consumption”, is almost certain, according to what has already been noted, that lacks an essential asset of public space – that of real equality.

At the same time the issue of freedom or, to put it differently, what the levels of freedom the user of the space experiences are, that raises some question, by making a comparison with the concept of freedom in public space, having already analyzed the way this should be. The different aspects of freedom that are identical to human activity in public space have been mentioned – what is sought is freedom of expression and action, movement or inactiveness. But even taking for granted that all these take place under the strict framework of social conventions, it is an undeniable fact that public space promotes social relations and interaction. What is not to be forgotten is that the shopping mall is an area strictly defined, systematically controlled and of course under constant surveillance. As a result, both accessibility and expression will be relatively restricted, as these new conditions define to a high degree the limits of human behavior. In order to convey or establish a sentiment of security, what is finally created is just a space whose purpose is to prevent form the unexpected, by avoiding spontaneous and unforeseen activities [Fig. 4].



FIG. 4. Shopping therapy under surveillance. Source: <http://thisbigcity.net/author/lyndseyscofield/> / last accessed on 14/05/2013

It is worthwhile considering at this exact point another term which is connected to public space, used by Michael Walzer; that of “open-minded space”. According to him, “a democratic polity needs ‘open-minded spaces’, places where a wide variety of people can coexist, places where a wide variety of functions encourage unexpected activities, places whose multiple possibilities lead naturally to the communication that makes democracy possible”(Smiley, 2002: 9). In contradiction to that, only as “single-minded spaces” can be classified places that are “so rigorously defined for a single purpose that they exclude the liberating openness of genuine public space” (Smiley, 2002: 9).

Referring back to the way the shopping mall works, and using the elements outlined above, we find that it is not sufficient for a place to provide fixed and clearly defined activities, like the ones seen in a shopping mall, but it should allow, if not pursue, spontaneous and unforeseen activities, in order to truly support a genuine public character. Here instead even art has a place only as part of promoting the goods. And of course everything happening in a mall has to obey a certain 'guidelines', which in turn are just part of the promoted lifestyle.

5 Conclusion – “The Placebo: Is It Much Ado About Nothing?”

“What is a placebo? ...(the placebo) is any therapy prescribed knowingly or unknowingly by a healer, or used by laymen, for its therapeutic effect on a symptom or disease, but which actually is ineffective or not specifically effective for the symptom or disorder being treated. We define the placebo effect as the nonspecific, psychological, or psychophysiological therapeutic effect produced by a placebo, or the effect of spontaneous improvement attributed to the placebo” (Harrington ed., 1997: 12).



FIG 1. Mall = Public Space? Source: Koolhaas, R. ed. (2001) Mutations, Barcelona: Actar

The special relationship that exists between human nature, public presence and collective action has already been emphasized. It is precisely this multidimensional sociality that in each era highlights as key request that for a vital and of high quality public space – a place that will encompass an active and under reciprocal conditions involvement of all the citizens. While there are several reasons pushing the modern man to fulfill this need in the shopping mall, it seems that the continuous deterioration of the cities combined with the current trend that wants consumption

to be the only way for somebody to perceive space, are the most decisive for such a choice [Fig. 5].

Certainly, the shopping malls are manifestations of publicity. We could describe the reality of the shopping mall as a simulating process of public space, the result of which is ostensibly similar to real public space, both in terms of its form and its multifunctionality. Streets, squares, arcades, free space and free time, shopping along with leisure activities and entertainment, elements – loans form public space and city life, everything is there, designed in order to offer the ultimate experience and establish a spectacular urbanity. They also create a model of freedom and equality and even a sense of publicity, as they allow a group of unknown people, strangers to each other, to appear publicly, to come into contact and in that sense communicate with each other. And all these in an environment that operates under ideal conditions and, above all, away from anything different and unpredictable.

The shopping malls however are private areas with relatively public use. But a public use which is subject to strictly specified terms, conditions and limitations, which inevitably deprive its very essence. They are designed so as to create conditions necessary, but not sufficient enough for the existence of a genuine public space. Probably they have a 'therapeutic effect' to their user, regarding their constant need to socialize - but at the same time, and while this satisfaction is only illusory, they contribute to the vicious circle of the disintegration of the public space. There, eventually, the concern comes back. And it seems crucial, not to abandon the shopping mall, but to consider in which way the true character of public space will be protected and highlighted. After all, what would our cities be without their public space?

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