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# The Postmodern European City



One of the books I would love to write, but probably never will, is a history of the European exterior, a complement to Mario Praz's 1963 monograph on the European interior, *La filosofia dell'arredamento*, the first version of which had appeared in 1945. Praz covers interiors from Greek and Roman Antiquity up to English Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau, mainly through paintings, watercolors and engravings. These images reflect the domestic bliss of an elite who could afford this happiness and afford to commission artists to depict it. Despite the double layer of mediation—this being Praz's reading of images that by themselves offer a filtered interpretation of an idealized, protected daily life in the interiors of a privileged class—the book manages to transmit the sense of a bygone life between walls.

The book of Praz can be easily dismissed as nostalgic, romanticizing the premodern past and there is undeniable a deep sense of loss. Praz concludes the introduction of the book, which has been translated in many languages, with a gloomy observation how the Second World War has almost completely erased the culture he describes.<sup>2</sup>

In the hands of a writer as perceptive and talented as Praz, a book on the exterior world would be able to revive the fleeting past life of streets and squares. Just as many interiors are taken for granted, so is the bread-and-butter of the city, the streets and squares which are crucial to keep it going. They are so ubiquitous that they mostly lead an inconspicuous and unnoticed life as thoroughfares and intersections.

Praz restricted himself to Europe (with the exception of one single image of an interior in New York), and there are good reasons to limit this hypothetical book on public space to Europe as well. Obviously, neither private interiors nor public outdoor space are exclusively European. There are interiors in every building, and public spaces in every village, town and city on every continent. Yet despite their global presence, public spaces elsewhere do not necessarily have the same significance as in Europe. While Europe cannot claim ownership or parenthood of public space in general, it seems that there is something very European about the way the publicness of its public spaces is understood. And I am saying this with full realization of the danger of sounding Eurocentric and awareness of the difficulty of truly understanding what this publicness entails and encompasses. After all, many of the spaces that are public in the legal sense—meaning they are universally accessible—are not public when social interaction is taken as a defining criterion. Not everything with paint on it is a painting, and accessibility alone does not make a space public.

Public spaces include everything from the ceremonial to the mundane. The far ends of the total field covered by public space are relatively easy to identify, and are common nearly everywhere. One end consists of ceremonial public spaces, which are intended to be exactly that. Usually they are large and designed to be monumental. The typical example is the main central square, often in front of one

Frontispiece Bjørvika, Oslo, 2016.  
Photography: Anne-Stine Johnsråten (from Barcode – Instant City (Stockholm: Arvinius + Orfeus, 2016).

of the seats of power or another important public building. These official places are the sites of celebration of mass gatherings and the symbolic representation of imposing abstractions such as state, power, religion, citizenship or nationality. They are the common sites for demonstrations of and sometimes against power. Their size allows for parades, festivals, protests, concerts and all kinds of Potemkin-like events which gather large numbers of people but mask the absence of a truly public life.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the informal public spaces that exist no matter how little, if any, design is invested in them. The street corner is the typical example of this pedestrian kind of public space. Thus one side contains those examples of extraordinary public spaces, which come to life on special occasions only; the other comprises the plurality of spaces which cater to the public on a daily basis, and usually both the space and the activities that take place are “infra-ordinary,” to use Georges Perec’s term. The extraordinary spaces are all unique in their own way, but almost interchangeable in their uniqueness; the infra-ordinary spaces are apparently all the same, but for the people who use them every day they have an undeniable singularity.

Both the extraordinary ceremonial spaces and infra-ordinary quotidian spaces can be found everywhere, from Brasilia to Beijing, from Brisbane to Brazzaville, from Boston to Bangkok, and from Barcelona to Berlin. But what Barcelona, Berlin and every other European city also consist of—and what isn’t so common in other parts of the world—is a very rich middle ground of public spaces that can be situated somewhere between the extraordinary and the infra-ordinary, offering neither the pomp and circumstance of the ceremonial public space nor anything else other than the mundaneness of the quotidian.

If there is a truly European aspect to public space it is to be found in its neighborhood parks, squares, playgrounds, green pockets, skateparks, bike lanes, pedestrian areas, basketball courts and all the regular urban spaces. And it does not even have to be a full space, it can be a couple of benches here, a few trees there, a well-positioned bicycle rack, street lighting, a water feature, a consistent street profile, a bus stop, a pavement, a public art work, or even markings on asphalt road surfaces that reveal that public space matters. This extends to the maintenance and care taken of it. In this respect, there is a parallel with architecture in Europe, which excels in a similar kind of middle ground, with all its collective housing, its schools and libraries, its sport facilities and community centers.

One reason why this middle ground exists in Europe in the first place is undeniably financial: dirt-poor countries can lavish huge resources on a single monumental square in front of the presidential palace (even if it would be better if they didn’t), but only prosperous societies can afford this whole infrastructure of well-designed middle-

ground public spaces (and architecture for that matter). Not every country that could pay for it is willing to do so, but in most European countries municipalities are. And they are usually the clients and financiers of public space. Or they manage to coerce project developers to pick up the tab as a condition for the permission to build. By doing so they manage to protect public space from the erosive powers of privatization, which were part and parcel of the pervasive political ideology of neoliberalism that led to the application of the logics of markets even in fields and disciplines where there is no real market. And despite huge technological changes that are deeply affecting everybody's understanding of public and private spheres, the hardware of the public space is still appreciated in Europe as essential to accommodating and generating a diversity of social interactions, expressions and gestures.

Because ultimately, no matter what the political color of national or municipal governments may be at any given moment, there is a European-wide consensus that public space contributes to the common good, and that the quality of public space can and does make a difference. This consensus is grounded in a very implicit yet fundamental belief in the values of democracy, and how they play out into public space. Even for people whose knowledge of Greek Antiquity goes no further than Plato and the Parthenon, there is some vague understanding of the possible relation between urban space and democracy, between the *agora* and the *polis*, in its double meaning of both the place and the people inhabiting it.

This kind of democratic middle-ground public space seems to flourish particularly in countries with the lowest income inequality, of which many are European. One tool to compare equality is the Gini index and, although there are several Gini indexes, all of which differ slightly from each other, it is striking to see is that the most equal countries in the world are almost all European. This correlation deserves a deeper analysis, but for the moment suffice it to say: "Show me your Gini and I will tell you what your public space looks like." Or the other way around: "Show me your public spaces and I can tell you how equal your society is."

Berlin and Barcelona are not randomly chosen to fit in the earlier alliterating enumeration of cities with names starting with a B. West Berlin of the Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA) in the 1980s, in what was then a still-divided Germany, and Barcelona in anticipation of the 1992 Olympic Games, in the first years of a new democratic Spain, are actually two crucial references when it comes to understanding the recent development of public space in Europe. Both reflect the postmodern turn of the European city: a reappraisal and rediscovery of forms of urbanity that rely not on the discontinuities and openness of modern planning but rather on finite and defined urban spaces and dense urban fabrics.

Barcelona and Berlin offer two models of understanding the city which are in almost every respect antithetical to the modernist ideals which were developed in the period between the two World Wars, and implemented on a large scale after 1945. No matter how much diversity one can discern in recent city planning, it is evident that if it is framed in terms of Colin Rowe's and Fred Koetter's figure-ground plan, the prevailing discourse about the contemporary European city is closer to Parma, than to Le Corbusier's plan for Saint-Dié, to refer to what is probably the best-known spread in *Collage City* (Rowe & Koetter, 1968, pp. 62-63).

Even if urban plans consist of freestanding buildings, they are never freely floating in a seemingly infinite space but rather set in well-defined, and usually meticulously designed urban spaces, as can be witnessed throughout Europe, from Aarhus Ø to Amsterdam's Eastern Harbour Area and IJburg, from Hamburg Hafencity to Île de Nantes, from London's Olympic Park, to Oslo's Fjord City and from Tallinn Rotermanni Kvartal to Zurich's urban transformations of its former industrial zones.

In that respect the short-lived open planning in which the public domain was submitted to the ideal of infinite space, has been nearly completely replaced by an ideal of a defined, and finite space.

The starting points of this return to finite space can be found in the IBA 1987 in Berlin and Olympic Barcelona. Berlin and Barcelona were the inspiration for many urban designers, mayors and civil servants since the 1990s. The reconstructed urban fabric of Berlin and the new squares and parks of Barcelona were examples of what turned out to be a contagious new faith in the city, a new confidence in urban culture.

Looking at it from a different angle, it seems that there is not only a European specificity to its public spaces but to the interrelation between architecture and the city as well. In Europe, buildings are often not only in the city, but deliberately of the city as well. The idea that a building is not only for the client and the user but also for the city and the citizens appears to drive more of Europe's architecture than that of any other continent. And not only because there are architects who are willing to balance the interest of their clients with a greater common good, but also because many patrons of architecture have an acute awareness that building in the city assumes responsibilities to take this building's impact on the cityscape and city life into consideration.

One way of understanding this 'in' and 'of' the city is by exploring the difference between city building and urbanization, as Pier Vittorio Aureli (2011, pp. 1-46) has done in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Short and simple, Aureli makes a distinction between the city with its defined form, and urbanization with its isotropic concept of limitlessness. The birthplace of this unconfined urbanization is nineteenth-century Barcelona, where Ildefonso Cerdà formulated his novel ideas on urban planning as *a posteriori* legitimization of his revolutionary Eixample. Cerdà's intention may have been to achieve

urbanization, but the fact that the Eixample isn't infinite makes it an even more intriguing project. To stay close to Aureli's book title, it is finite but nevertheless hints at the possibility of an infiniteness.

Despite the European origin of the idea of the infinite urbanization, the European city itself is less the outcome of urbanization than of city planning. Unlike in the rest of the world, urban sprawl is not very prevalent in Europe. Its cities have maintained a remarkable compactness, hovering around often centuries-old historic cores, still recognizable and identifiable within larger urbanized regions. The built environment of Europe is a cityscape, not an infinite urbanization in the Aurelian sense.

As a speculation, this could offer one possible explanation why the modern utopias of infinite space emerged in Europe, in reaction to the condensed cities of finite space, and ultimately met the resistance of this type of city, which has turned out to offer a stronger, unified and more resilient template, than the analytical understanding of the city as the sum of its constituent parts.

Despite the evident attraction of the modern planning ideals and their unconventional yet compelling picturesqueness--who can resist the attraction of the grandiose and unforgiving perspectives of Ludwig Hilberseimer?--their practical applicability has been limited. This is partly because the only way to really fulfill the promises of this kind of modern planning is their wholesale execution. The political, social, and economic reality of the European city at the end of the twentieth century however has encouraged a different type of planning, which is based on incremental changes: Aldo Rossi's concepts of the analogue city and of the architecture of the city, O.M. Ungers understanding of Berlin as a green archipelago of urban fragments, Josef Paul Kleihues' piecemeal method of critical reconstruction, Manuel de Solà-Morales' strategy of urban acupuncture, and even Rob and Léon Krier's idea of the reconstruction of the European city were relying on an understanding of changing the city through small, fragmented, partial, sometimes even provisional intervention.

These are all examples of a very European approach to architecture and the city, where urban form and building, city and civic programs are usually deeply interrelated. And these ideas form an essential part of the discourse on architecture, and architecture and the city, that materialized in the postmodern years,

This rediscovery of the city and of urban culture, this "triumph of the city" as Edward Glaeser (2011) has called it in the eponymous book, overlaps with the rapid ascent of the notion of public space, which had hitherto not entered professional parlance, as Thierry Paquot (2009) has noted in his concise *L'espace public*. Significant in terms of the still short life of the expression are the changes in the title of Jan Gehl's groundbreaking *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, which is another important reference in this postmodern turn. When it was first published in Danish in 1971, the title was simply *Livet mellem*

husene, “life between buildings,” without any subtitle. The second Danish edition, which appeared nine years later, was given a subtitle: *Udeaktiviteter og udemiljøer*. This translates as “outdoor activities and outdoor environments”: no sign yet of public space. Only with the English translation of 1987 did the two words public and space appear on the cover and the title page. And subsequent translations in other languages included those words as well (Gehl 1971; 1987).

Before the 1980s “public space” was mainly used to describe the metaphorical public domain, of which newspapers, public opinion and democracy are examples. Paquot (2009, pp. 3-4, 10) dwells on the difference in French between the plural and the singular form. The singular *espace public* refers to what he calls the “factory of public opinion.” The plural form of *espaces publics* describes concrete urban spaces which, as Paquot convincingly shows, are not universal constants but differ from place to place and from period to period. They are not the same in Europe and, say, the Middle East, and today they are not the same as in, for instance, medieval times.

Shortly after the first edition of Gehl’s book appeared, another important publication came out which didn’t use the term either but was also about public space, albeit from a formal perspective instead of a social one: Rob Krier’s *Stadtraum in Theorie und Praxis* (1975). Both books target modernism and its shortcomings in producing public space, and offer a toolkit for making more meaningful spaces. In this respect, they are both truly postmodern.

These two publications fit into a wider postmodern discourse on the city and public space, which originated in the 1960s, gained traction in the 1970s and started to materialize in the built environment in the 1980s. This discourse was not limited to Europe only and was even seemingly dominated by American voices, such as Kevin Lynch (*The Image of the City*, 1960), Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961), Erving Goffman (*Behavior in Public Places*, 1963), Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter (*Collage City*, 1978) and William Whyte (*The Social Life of Small Urban Places*, 1980), and later by the New Urbanists. But this says more about the role of English as the lingua franca, also in architecture and urbanism, than about the real center of gravity where these ideas on the city were put into practice, which was undoubtedly in Europe. Oriol Bohigas and MBM in Barcelona, Kleihues in Berlin, Aldo Rossi and his concept of the analogue city radiating from Milan, the morphological studies of Jean Castex and Philippe Panerai in Paris (*Formes urbaines: de l’ilot à la barre*, 1977), Rob and Léon Krier’s pleas for the reconstruction of the European city, Maurice Culot’s activist urban design in Brussels (with ARAU) and his curatorial work in Brussels and Paris, and Jan Gehl’s studies and interventions in Copenhagen were just a few of the players who were active at the time.

The urban orientation of European postmodernism sets it apart from its American counterpart, which concentrated much more on

architecture and symbolism. Obviously there were cross fertilizations of all kinds; by and large, however, the urban perspective was more extensively developed in Europe than anywhere else.

Zooming out from this short postmodern history, it is possible to paint a picture with broader brushstrokes in which recent public space is a continuation and outcome of a longer trend that started with the rapid urbanization everywhere in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This unprecedented urbanization started in England, the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, and reached Poland or Greece much later. But the general pattern was the same, with a societal shift from a predominantly rural culture to a predominantly urban culture.

This urbanization created not only what classical Marxism would term an “industrial proletariat” but also, and equally importantly, a new middle class of city dwellers. The correlation between this middle class, the city and civil society, is as obvious as difficult to articulate. The nineteenth century witnessed a fundamental transformation of European societies with the rise of the middle class, which ultimately became not only the main user of the city, but directly or indirectly the client for it as well.

When in the nineteenth century urban planning as an independent profession was still in its infancy, it gradually moved away from the affirmative monumentality which sustained the power of a king, or the Church, to building cities for citizens, and by doing so, giving shape to society. The result might still be monumental, as we see from Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards, Cerdà’s extension of Barcelona, or Vienna’s Ringstrasse, each of which were commissioned by the ruling powers. Yet these rulers were no longer only glorifying their own power; rather they were catering for the city and its citizens as well. Cerdà’s repetitive structures of chamfered blocks in the *Eixample* offers the most striking example of the absence of conventional axial and directional monumentality, but also on the impressive Ringstrasse each part is commensurate to all the others, nullifying spatial hierarchies. The same is true of the boulevards of Paris, which imposed a new order on the city, and although they are monumental in themselves, in essence they are all equally important.

Back to postmodernism and the present. Compared to the transformations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when many European cities changed and grew beyond recognition, the last few decades are certainly less dramatic, and less radically disruptive. Even the largest projects of recent times, like the interventions in Olympic and post-Olympic Barcelona, the Eastern Harbor Area in Amsterdam, Hamburg Hafen, the IBA and reunification of Berlin, Copenhagen Harbor or the Île de Nantes, are minor in relation to the scale of the city. Their physical impact, while still significant, is limited



because they are more based on incremental changes than drastic make-overs. This is urbanism as “tinkering with a running engine,” as Bernardo Secchi put it.

In this light, Berlin and Barcelona of the 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point not only after modernism but also after 150 years of rapid urbanization in Europe. It is unlikely that European cities will see substantial continuous growth. With a population that is only slowly increasing, a momentarily stagnating economy, and urbanization having reached saturation point, the future trend will probably be for many urban issues in Europe to remain downscaled from regional planning and building complete cities and districts to incremental interventions on the level of a neighborhood, a block, a square or a street. This means it is quite likely that concern for public space is here to stay; indeed, it may even become more important than it already is.

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