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## **Open Spaces, Public Spaces, Publics, Open-minded Places** ***Spazi aperti, spazi pubblici, publics, luoghi open-minded***

In 1993 a double issue of the international architectural review (published in Italy) "Casabella" was dedicated to "The design of open spaces"<sup>1</sup>. Different positions and scholars and diverse point of views explored this complex theme, trying to explain the reasons, the modes and the possibilities of a new strategy in design research and practice. The starting point was the very term "open space", which doesn't belong to the classical vocabulary of architectural theory, with no reference to modern town planning manuals. If the modern city can effectively be described through a character of "openness", in association to the demolition of defensive walls and the development of means of transport which produced a large expansion of the city, the paradox is that it has not been built through a rigorous codification of typological "open spaces". While in the historic city the physical relationship between mass and void could be described in terms of proportion and valuable qualities, as demonstrated by Camillo Sitte in his "The Art of Building Cities"<sup>2</sup>, in the "open city" of modernity this relationship get impoverished, becoming just an interval and distancing, sometimes monumental, between various building objects. Even the definition of green spaces didn't simply provide alternative aesthetic models to the historic city, but ensured a maximum rationalization in land-use.

Bernardo Secchi, discussing the hypothesis of a specifically modern conception of open spaces, suggested a re-interpretation of the Modern Movement, as a long reflection and exploration around a new "land-use project", and the way the space "between things" was designed, filled with functions, roles and meanings, producing a new vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the dwelling space, yet to be explored. According to André Corboz, the CIAM generation believed that space is "empty", intended as all that which is found between what is "full": space appeared evident to them, available all around, unlimited in quantity, offering no resistance. So, the creation of large open spaces often reflected a purely functional necessity, but the consequence of this development process was a superimposition of a new kind of landscape, made with railway yards, urban freeways, fair precincts, enclaves, as described by D. Graham Shane, as a result of a growing functional specialization of some parts of the city. The birth of clusters of malls, office developments and entertainment complexes progressively eliminated the idea of "fabric", generating also a different way to enjoy public space, more related to functions. Richard Ingersoll explained some of the effects the automobile had on the conception of modern urban space. The growing need for empty space produced by circulation and parking has both dilated urban space, so that the dimension of road design is based on the repetition of a module determined by the car dimension. The design of these "car open spaces" only rarely moved beyond pure utility into the realm of architectural quality.

The well-known book "Life between buildings"<sup>3</sup> by the Danish urban designer Jan Gehl, first published in 1971, pointed to the urban voids as a dimension of architecture, urban design and city planning, to be carefully treated. But if in the consolidated city the piazza is a space, "open" and "exterior" by nature, well recognizable in its morphological structure, in the modern dispersal city the idea of public space is detached from this "openness" and "exteriority", it is more related to the

crisis of some clear oppositions, such as open-closed, exterior-interior, public-private, on which the traditional town was organized. Marco Cenzatti and Margaret Crawford analyzed the forms of socialization in different kind of spaces, more related to interiors, identified as “quasi-public space” and “public quasi-space”. The first ones, shopping malls, stations, airports and convention centers, are private places but open to public use, accessible to all people who have a credit card or can buy and spend money: they express a new form of social space, something between the domestic and public space, with a strong mechanism of inclusion and often, only formally, similar to squares. The second ones are sons of new communication networks, electronic mail, fax, modem, telephone, TV and have no relation between physical place and social experience: they create a new way of looking at the city, not a static organization of physical objects around one centre or more centres, but organization of networks, often invisible, able to multiply the possibilities of communication and interaction at a distance and to eliminate the need for a physical place. Franco Purini defined that “quasi-public space” as “non places”, even if main elements of the dispersal city landscape, and questioned about the lack of a theoretical and interpretative support for that special “poetics of emptiness” which hides away in the expanses of “terrains vagues” of living peripheries.

It appears quite evident that in the past decades the notion of public has become more and more elusive, full of contradictions and meanings. A wide body of criticism, in the anthropological, sociological, geographical and philosophical field, influenced the urban design discipline. Cutting-edge research activities were mostly related to topics less devoted to design and transformation of the urban space. The theoretical research on the psychology of perception by Kevin Lynch<sup>4</sup> (1960), the empirical sociological approach by Jane Jacobs<sup>5</sup> (1961), the analysis of successes and failures of public spaces in New York City, based on the direct observation of human behavior in urban settings by William H. Whyte<sup>6</sup> (1980) are just a few examples of inspiring experiences, able still today to influence research, experiments, actions and interventions in the public realm.

Twenty years passed since that meaningful issue of Casabella, visions and thoughts are still relevant. Planners and urban designers, architects, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists are still questioning, due to a growing intensity with which public spaces are currently used around the world, as well as the increased general interest in the quality of cities and their public spaces. A huge amount of essays, books and projects, events and public exhibitions are presently available for a large consumption, taking advantage of high visibility derived from a web spread sharing and mainly from social networks.

Nowadays the difference between “open space”, as indicated in regulations of urban city spaces, and “public space” has found new declensions related to public life of groups or individuals, taking place in consolidated environments as well as in peripheral areas or in residual spaces up to edge cities, able to give values and functions to neglected or abandoned places. Next to public meeting spaces, such as large congress hall, fair precincts, political or cultural events, shopping centers, and to waiting spaces, such as offices, public institutions, underground stations, airports, many public spaces do not have an architectural connotation: life can be found at the corner of two suburban roads, where spontaneous conversation or some kind of special event slowly starts to layer, indicating a kind of rituality, or in anonymous suburban places where minority ethnic or immigrant groups gather, becoming places of solidarity and sharing. All these expressions, as already Vittorio Gregotti pointed out in his introductory essay on Casabella, articulate in a new way the demands for public space and for its architectural definition.

In the contemporary urbanism emerging principles are becoming new paradigms, developing innovative design approaches. In American urban design theory the concept of “everyday space” defines ordinary places that function as connective tissue in the dispersal urban morphology of the modern city. These spaces can be ambiguous, obvious, banal, un-designed or invisible but

with the potential to foster new forms of social interaction even if they work as collective places only a few hours during the day or only a few days during the week or the month. This reverses conventional concepts of “public” and “space”. Instead of reproducing the morphology of “public spaces”, this theory collects and analyzes experiences and activities of different “publics”, observing the temporal rhythms and daily itineraries that define their spaces. Often such common places as vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards, parks, parking lots, serve as public space for private, commercial and domestic purposes. So, the social life of different “publics” produces places with community significance<sup>7</sup>. These spaces, both urban and suburban, constitute an “Everyday Urbanism<sup>8</sup>”, continually shaped by communities and redefined by their transitory activities. Apparently empty of significance, such open-minded spaces<sup>9</sup> can acquire constantly changing meanings, social, aesthetic, political, economic: in opposition to single-minded spaces, designed and used for a specific purpose, they are designed for a variety of uses, including unforeseen and unforeseeable ones, used by citizens who do different things and are prepared to tolerate, even take an interest in, things they don't do.

The notion and the approach to public space still needs a deep clarification, for scholars, architects and urban designers, mainly in the process of analysis and understanding of its complex evolving nature. This task appears to be much more complicated when involved in the academic education of young architects, because it deals with contemporary culture and sophisticated needs and desires of open-minded citizens, much more related to aspirations of community and public administrators rather than a design process, based on negotiation practices and sensory experiences. A general reflection is needed together with a specific cultural activity, as a permanent education, able to widely open eyes and look at the city with a conscious mind.

After twenty years from the publication of “Casabella” issue we still need to understand how to shape the world around us, we still need to define new concepts, images and tools to outline the entire existing urban landscape. What is evident is that architects should act as a part of contemporary society, rather than superior and outside it, using their specialized knowledge inside this complex process, on a common ground of debate and growth.

## NOTES

[1] «Casabella», n. 597-598, 1993, Milano, Italia.

[2] Sitte, Camillo (1889), *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Verlag von Carl Graeser, Wien

[3] Gehl, Jan (1971), *Life Between Buildings, Using Public Space*. Arkitektens Forlag

[4] Lynch, Kevin (1960), *The image of the city*, MIT press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

[5] Jacobs, Jane (1961), *The death and life of great American cities*, Random House, New York

[6] Whyte, William. H. (1980), *The social life of small urban spaces*, Washington D.C., The Conservation Foundation

[7] Bravo, Luisa; Crawford, Margaret (2013), *Publics and their spaces: renewing urbanity in city and suburb*, EAEE/ISUF International Conference proceedings, New urban configurations, 16-19 October 2012, The Netherlands, TU Delft, forthcoming

[8] Chase, John L.; Crawford, Margaret; Kaliski, John. (2008) (edited by), *Everyday urbanism*, Monacelli Press, New York

[9] Walzer, Michael (1986), *Pleasures and Costs of Urbanity*, in «Dissent», n. 33, pp. 470-475.

## Past present and future of public space

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The present issue of *IN\_BO. Ricerche e progetti per il territorio, la città e l'architettura* collects experiences from scholars of different countries. It explores possible, critical paths and approaches for understanding and designing public spaces, presenting and discussing projects developed in academic courses, in Italy (University of Florence), Israel (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design), Canada (Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism), USA (University of California, Berkeley), Australia (Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane), China (The Chinese University of Hong Kong). These scholars joined, at the end of 2012, to the "Past present and future of public space" international project, developed at the University of Bologna, with the support of the "City Space Architecture" cultural association. The project aims to discuss the complex issue of public space through time, trying to find a new innovative approach in city understanding, in a multidisciplinary field of action, from morphological design derived from the tradition to emerging trends of the contemporary dimension.

First results of project activities will be presented, exhibited and discussed at the "Biennale dello spazio pubblico" national conference, promoted by the Italian National Institute of Urban Planners (INU), to be held in Rome, Italy, on May 18th at the Faculty of Architecture Roma TRE. The project will be developed throughout 2013. A call for papers will be launched at the Biennale session, through the web site of City Space Architecture ([www.cityspacearchitecture.org](http://www.cityspacearchitecture.org)) inviting scholars, architects, public administrators, artists and designers to contribute with their ideas and proposals in the pursuit of this challenging task. A final event is expected to take place on June/July 2014.

With our work we hope to give a meaningful and valuable response.