Public Space, meanings from everywhere and nowhere: The spatial conditions of alienation?

Abstract

The contemporary city is a living cultural space produced by social relations that are neither neutral, uniform nor exact, and is subject to change under a multitude of forces ranging from economic, political and social factors to natural phenomena. Although relations of belonging and attachment to the city may persist, the flow of local and global conditions seems to have an impact upon collective experience in the urban territory.

Connections caused by the flow of content coming from “everywhere” not only reveal disruption to the boundaries of the urban environment and power arrangements, but also point towards dissolution of meanings that might affect the collective public experience. For Delgado, the anti-city of the present leads to urbanization that is subjected to urban ideologies characterized by themed spaces that deny functional and human diversification (the “creative world-class city” promoted by “place entrepreneurs”). For Low, the public space – as a field of everyday practices – faces struggles between global and local forces that tend to reshape specific landscapes and identities.

The contemporary urban space, which is also produced by a de-territorialized condition of interwoven transversalities, demonstrates both an excess of conditions that tend to disassociate people from the specific features of localities (as a genuine field of common experience), and also homogeneous forms of programmed consumption and the weakening of systems of political representation: actions that impose social discipline and affect the sense of primacy of the urban public space.

From our point of view, this dissolution of the urban environment creates a public space that is no longer the physical counterpart of a civil society understood as a subject of the city, and leads to the impoverishment of symbolic systems, social polarization and retraction of collective forms of life, or even the reduction of ‘public’ value, which for Augé establishes “blind spots” or spatial conditions that promote alienation between the city and its citizens.

In a context of increasingly hybrid, flexible and multi-layered public spaces (hybrid not just in production, but also in reception and continuous development), this paper investigates the following questions: What kind of public space can be produced/recognized in conditions in which urban form (its meanings and references) is a product of the sterilisation of multiple identities? To what extent might ‘intensity’ and ‘density’ provide conceptual keys for understanding the (re)signification of public space? What collective practices and discourses are being (re)produced as mechanisms for the signification of contemporary public space?

Public space. (Re)signification. Urban meanings. Collective practices

Introduction

Recent decades have seen the appearance of theoretical formulations of exceptional conditions of the urban – from both the social, physical and material point of view – and spatial formations associated with their different rationales of (dis)order and (de)regulation. Currently – (re)produced in conditions of identities of places in transit, with unstable content and forms (Augé, 2010) –, the urban phenomenon is giving rise to a particular space of social relationships characterised by a complex network of uses, agreements, impositions, and mutual adaptations and adjustments (Delgado, 2008).

The contemporary city is a living cultural space produced by social relations that are neither neutral, uniform nor exact, and is subject to change under a multitude of forces ranging from economic, political and social factors to natural phenomena. In this space of intersections – pervaded by individual and collective subjectivities – the socio-spatial practice, form and dynamics of the city reinforce a semblance of interaction, co-presence and maintenance of the meanings of places.

But new formations of socio-spatial phenomena in the use and appropriation of the urban space – particularly spaces in the public domain\(^1\) – are encouraging different spatial conditions: representing meanings derived from the prevailing social imagination, which are reproduced associated with the absence of boundaries and

\(^1\) It is essential to consider that the notion of public domain is not necessarily associated with the public space, just as the private domain is not associated with the private space. Different private domains can arise in public spaces and vice versa; the public domain is here considered as an interface where means of recognising that which relates to the “public space” emerge, where social interaction, variety, communal appropriation, symbolic identification, access to use and content – albeit in different formats – can coexist, so different levels of public domain can be recognised in the space.
the spreading of spatial formations in which a common space is not the general rule and interactions are not based on the idea of integration or on common collective references.

Although relations of belonging and attachment to the city may persist, the flow of local and global conditions seems to have an impact upon collective experience in the urban territory of a city where the practices of everyday life contain the coexistence of at least three models of structuring the urban space which do not correspond to the paradigms of totality or spatial unity: contradiction, fragmentation and division.

Connections caused by the flow of content coming from “everywhere” not only reveal disruption to the boundaries of the urban environment and power arrangements, but also point towards dissolution of meanings that might affect the collective public experience. The contemporary urban space, which is also produced by a de-territorialized condition of interwoven transversalities, demonstrates both an excess of conditions that tend to disassociate people from the specific features of localities (as a genuine field of common experience), and also homogeneous forms of programmed consumption and the weakening of systems of political representation: actions that impose social discipline and affect the sense of primacy of the urban public space.

In this condition, flows and networks have taken prominence over localities, from the spatial point of view, causing urban micro-geographies to become increasingly disconnected from their specific relations and connecting them to networks of standardised content. Public life and the spatial conditions in which it occurs have been reshaped and are weakening and fading away, losing intensity and power in the face of decisions linked to the domain of privatisation.

For Delgado, the anti-city of the present leads to urbanization that is subjected to urban ideologies characterized by themed spaces that deny functional and human diversification (the “creative world-class city” promoted by “place entrepreneurs”). For Low, the public space – as a field of everyday practices – faces struggles between global and local forces that tend to reshape specific landscapes and identities.

The contemporary city, synthesised as an object of monetary value of part-time consumption (Muñoz, 2008), is establishing itself as a city of segregation in which “... The seduction of the surroundings and instantaneity reinforce the regime of enforced liberties in which we occupy the city. In this light, ... this characteristic resort of the globalised city involves an elementary principle of urban space: segregation” (Orellana, 2011).

What kind of cohesion is possible in the productively restructured city of recent decades, with a new connection between the state and the urban space, the predominance of financial capital whose necessary condition is the production of space as merchandise, through which new meanings of urbanity are constructed? In these conditions, the meaning of urbanity becomes transformed amidst the preponderance of excluding spatial rationales – in which a ‘splintering urbanism’ (Graham and Marvin, 2001) updates forms of segregation both horizontally and vertically, which are materialised in landscapes of polarisation. The question then arises of how much it is possible to advocate a more or less structured view of human experience and its urban identity, and in what kind of public spaces.

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3 These three models relate to arroyo’s thinking concerning the discontinuity of the urb, the fragility of civitas and challenges towards the polis (ARROYO, J., 2014), together with Pardo’s observation “... what is happening is that the paradigm by which the city was constructed in its earlier configuration was already an antiquated paradigm and of no use for the city to face its challenges of the future and yet there is no doubt that establishment of the new paradigm which will finally equip the city for and agile and effective survival in the world which will be completely transformed is not yet complete” (Pardo, J. L., 2011, p. 357). Authors’ translation.

4 Orellana suggests that the rationale of power requires de-territorialisation and destruction of the locale. He considers we are faced with an ‘other place’ that condenses the contemporary city and demonstrates the ultimate rationale of the biopolitical urban space, whose characteristics allow observation of a principle of segregation (ORELLANA, 2011, p. 54-56)

5 As a phenomenon introduced by experience and practice between the social and spatial, resulting from manifestation and expression between participants in the space.
In a context of increasingly hybrid, flexible and multi-layered public spaces (hybrid not just in production, but also in reception and continuous development), what kind of public space can be produced/recognized in conditions in which urban form (its meanings and references) is a product of the sterilisation of multiple identities? To what extent might ‘intensity’ and ‘density’ provide conceptual keys for understanding the (re)signification of public space?

Some incomplete notes on alienation and spatial conditions

The contemporary city responds to parameters from a period of transition being formed by new textualities and morphologies operating in a different sociocultural context, forming micro-geographies of dense everyday life and new possibilities of use and appropriation, enabling spatial conditions that go beyond the content of “particular” cultures and their territorial specificities (Augé, 2010). We find ourselves in conditions of interactions that are ubiquitous, or not, driving meanings, content and subjectivities and resulting in spaces (and times) that are constantly enlarged, reshaped and broken, and which question the scale of the (re)production of the urban space.

The dissolution of collective experiences can be noted in this setting – becoming increasingly superficial and unstable – as demonstrated by urban development subject to the demands of different urban-development ideologies. A set of practices that overflows beyond their own fields and boundaries, combining into new spatial patterns, leads to the replication of territories of social representations, urban places, as accidental, contaminated, contingent, hybrid, crossbred, relative and syncretic.

Space and place are inexorably linked to the organisation of life as a condition and product of the establishment of real relationships which are indispensable to it, corresponding to the term “man inhabits places”. Heidegger sees dwelling and building as different terms, but which evoke correlations, in that “building” is dwelling through the intimate relationship established between a being and the place of dwelling (Heidegger, 2013). In Heidegger’s view, “dwelling” is the basic character of being-in-the-world⁵, characterising a place that is both concrete and symbolic.

This relationship between place and space, together with the one between place and man who stays there, is where the essence of things (in assumed contexts) resides as places: which possess a symbolic centrality manifest between the different spatial and temporal scales, established in the ties of reference, identity and memory and erected in the relationships between man and his surroundings (Arroyo, 2002). From this point of view, we are now experiencing what Heidegger termed “crisis in dwelling” – in which man always needs to find the essence of dwelling again –, recognised in the proliferation of non-places or places of flow, which drive rootlessness as the only way of living.

Muñoz argues that new forms of “dwelling” in the construction of urban landscapes result in the production of a city disconnected from the being-in-the-world, of a city of ‘territoriants’⁶ (Muñoz, 2009). This crisis of dwelling – of the rootlessness of the inhabitant, the territoriant for Muñoz – produces a space that is alien to

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⁵ Sloterdijk considers the being-in-the-world as developing in overlapping spheres (by means of three figures: Bubbles, Globes and Foam) in which man constructs symbolic systems around himself as an antidote (or immunological cultural systems) protecting him from the impacts of reality. Spheres are considered as symbolic and in imaginary systems which are occasionally destroyed and reconstructed, and which when they explode need to be remade to maintain the cohesion of the world. The temporal arc of Sloterdijk’s approach is quite broad in his investigation of the contemporary processes of inclusion/exclusion together with the construction and deconstruction of identities, places and spaces, territorial and spatial conditions, State violence and other issues. His Spheres series of reflection on space leads to consideration about the diversity of worlds which comprise reality based on Heidegger’s definition of the world. (SLOTERDIJK, P., 2009)

⁶ Muñoz considers the population involved in the temporal use of space as divided between inhabitants – who occupy places – and territoriants – who occupy territories. Territoriants are occupants or residents of the place, while the same time uses of other places and visitors of others. They are part-time inhabitants. “The Territoriant is therefore defined as a territoriant between places rather than an inhabitant of a place and is the prototype of the occupant of the post-industrial city. Which is why territoriants belong to the new city, formed of fragments of the territory in which they live, work, consume or visit. [...]Territoriants occupy a variable geographies in cities whose geographies are also variable.” (MUÑOZ, F., 2008, p. 26-27).
the social relationships responsible for sharing and establishing collective memories which signify places and make them visible.

The contemporary enigma of accelerated movements and economic, identity, sociocultural and political positioning lead to merchandise elevated in seductive forms of the image as the key principle of organisation, relations and social practice. The dimensions of life in this city – in its objective expression and subjective arrangement – are strongly reduced, encapsulated by the production of themed spaces of public life which occur according to predetermined rules of the dominant processes of the city’s constitution. The public space here is subject to a rationale of alienating spaces that prevent the construction of a social fabric through the experience of and with the other (which is an aspect that relates to evidence of the crisis envisioned by Heidegger).

Who then would be the “agent-actor-promoter” of the public space today, in which on the one hand the changes in the space-time relationship can be seen potentially to alter the contextualisation and localisation of objects, subjects and their representations, and on the other hand there is a restless passage of diachronic action (marked by the temporal condition, the here and now) to synchronic action (marked by the spatial, relational condition of simultaneity)? Sloterdijk identifies it as a “transducer”, faced with the characteristics of a contemporary dwelling of being-in-the-world determined by the collapses and interruptions in the usual comfortable pattern of being-in-the-world.

For Muñoz, this animal symbolicum is today the “territoriant” (Muñoz, 2008). For Sartori, the Homo Videns: a man bathed in banality and ambivalence, who rejoices in the instantaneous ecstasy of a pre-programmed culture and its defining meaninglessness, and who takes comfort in the consumption and desire of/in the landscape. But what landscape? The landscape of the territoriant? Besse (2006) believes so:

“So before the institution of any visual experience, before any spectacle, and giving the spectacle its true dimension, the landscape is expression, and more precisely, expression of existence [...] on the one hand it is the refusal to erase the humanity of being human, reducing it to rootedness in the place that would be the home of origin. Because [...] man having a relationship with the earth does not mean that he is enclosed in a place, but on the contrary that his freedom consists of passing through places towards the distance”.

In the context of contemporary urban life, the cultural incorporation and simultaneous experiences of different urbanities that form the reality of our collective spaces re-qualify the space and the urban landscape as the locus of disputes both of the consolidation of multiple identities and the reclamation of the public visibility of difference. But these new forms of social relations give preference to the private sphere and to technological mediation, to an excess of information, which disassociate the individual from space as a real experience, and to increased physical, economic and informational mobility that places more value on flow than on permanence, in anticipation of a virtual world of falsified experimentation, distracted and disconnected from the living space.

In this setting of the city as the strategic element of reproduction of capital (not just financial), hegemonic processes and entrepreneurship of its production affect the domestication of landscapes, reshaping forms of consumption and financialisation of culture. A culture of different types of consumption can be seen, the culture of simultaneity and rapid consumption that materialises as public spaces of leisure – spaces that give form to a cartography made of places and moments characterised by multiplicity and flexibility, which have their own rationales and purposes.

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7 (BESSE, J. M., 2006, p. 92-93, our emphasis)
8 “we are in another place in which the contemporary city is condensed, meaning that it demonstrates the ultimate rationale of the biopolitical urban space [...] neoliberal capitalism therefore destroys contemporary cities, producing effects of de-territorialisation embodied in an elite of global individuals equipped to circulate [...] quickly, rootlessly and immediately.” (ORELLANA, op. cit, p. 51)
9 Multiplex spaces, for Muñoz (2008). For Han, spaces characterised as the product not of a disciplinary society (Foucault), but instead a ‘society of income’ (HAN, 2012).
Indeed, the generalisations of forms of programmed consumption, the decline in the traditional roles of the state, weakening of systems of political representation and in general the converging action of methods of discipline and social control lead to a significant decline in the meaning of the primacy of the public space: as a privileged setting for encounter, interaction of differences, the possibility of experience and co-presence, dispersal and diversity, of social interactions (in the plural) (Delgado, 1999), dismantling the foundations which were once historically understood as city and democracy.

This process of conversion of the public space into stereotypes of consumption, its reconfiguration according to market criteria, is not just an effect but also a way of producing new spatial conditions of desirable appearances aligned with prospects of becoming a global trend for improving the city. This association of structures of the production of urban space in fact promotes the dissolution of the urban (as a space of complex socio-spatial relations) and the production of pseudo public spaces which represent the primordial place of existence, and presupposes a field of indetermination, that is to say a place where social groups would be in a constant process of definition and interaction, in a constant process of contesting the common space.

These versions of urban life, in which social capital is subject to the private rationales of contemporary society (linked to consumption), are (re-)signifying the ideal of the public space and promoting changes in the distinctive features of the public and the private. An “optical effect” of an “abstract” public space can now be seen, which was originally taken as material and whose understanding is now reduced to free forms between constructive volumes – immobilised in modes of “streets and plazas” – ; created with “sufficient neutrality” to receive and reproduce fragmentary information which glorifies the content of practices and discussion in public and erases collective opinions and perceptions (Delgado, 2013; Augé, 2010), which become the product merely of assimilated information, representing the containerisation of urban space (Muñoz, 2009).

Could it be that new possibilities of interaction with the contemporary space of the city dominated by these rationales imply new relationships between the public and the private, new conditions of display and visibility and restructuring of the public domain in a public space similar to the relationship with the other, with man; or a relationship with the other, with the object? From our point of view, this dissolution of the urban environment creates a public space that is no longer the physical counterpart of a civil society understood as a subject of the city, and leads to the impoverishment of symbolic systems, social polarization and retraction of collective forms of life, or even the reduction of ‘public’ value10, which for Augé establishes “blind spots” or spatial conditions that promote alienation among the city and its citizens.

But the prominence of this “tranquilising” public space (Delgado, 2013) – founded on the homogenisation of perceived and experienced spaces – seems in turn to trigger or at least reveal movements resistant to tactics of rationalising the urban space. Unlike the forces which by and large challenge them, these emergent spatial conditions – we suggest here – are not established by prioritising the tangibility (concreteness) of their expression and, although taking form in sections of space that are not predetermined, retain their contingent aspect both as an escape strategy and for the creation of possibilities in face of the prevailing mechanisms of control of the urban space, finding the key to other possibilities of interaction in the free practices of earlier programmes and consumption (Lefebvre, 1974; 1978).

We therefore wish to emphasise that this ‘crisis’ of the public space is not just economic, or resulting from the ideological manipulation and control of society and the individual, but also from the transformation of individual, new perceptions of images and the body, changes in ethical beliefs and the weakening principles of authority. This crisis of representation, of the constitution and destitution of political subjects – in the

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10 “Conflict, division and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere existence. The threat arises with efforts to supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation. When the exclusions governing the constitution of political public space are naturalized and contests erased by declaring particular forms of space inherently, eternally, or self-evident public, public space is appropriated. Although it is equated with political space, public space is given a prepolitical source of political meaning and becomes a weapon against, rather than a means of, political struggle”. (DEUTSCHE, R., 2006, p. 289)
definition of new socio-spatial landscapes and ‘construction of new’ public spaces, in which objectivities and subjectivities intersect – potentially makes each of their different dimensions into a field of tension, of forces which, as we mentioned in the previous paragraph, can establish and rearrange (reinvent) labyrinths, doors and bridges, boundaries and openings, limits and thresholds.

Labyrinths, doors and thresholds of ‘in-between’ spaces that question the pragmatic division of (public and private) domains, and give sensibility to spatial conditions of different densities and intensities. Density\(^{11}\) which associates and values the recurrence of individual or collective narratives about the particular space, time, events, characteristic etc., and in this “concentration” of references connects spaces and times recognised as memorable, as vectors of unpredicted experiences that challenge the space that is proposed, planned and programmed.

Intensity\(^{12}\), is considered here as the manifestation given by the coming together and interaction of means which enable and aggregate meanings perceived and assimilated by the participants and the space. Intensity is therefore taken as a scale of emphasis rather than volume; of interactions and not mere coexistence; of the creative moment and not the prearranged one; of what is significant and acquires meaning through contrast, and not what is homogenous or regular. As Sennet puts it: “Emphasis is an act that veers toward exaggeration. The italicized word, for instance, serves as a marker that it is important. Emphasis is a concentration of meaning” (Sennet, 1992, p.117, original emphasis). Intensity is thus also considered as the strategy of emphasising a particular meaning, which also means that the effective means which (aggregated or reinforced) give sensibility to intense spaces are not neutral and have politico-cultural content that determines them.

This contrast conveyed by intensity explains its potential for being noticed, being felt by someone who is “outside” and “inside”. It also explains how some intense processes can – through mobilised and articulated content – drive the reproduction of other intensities which even in specific conditions can charge symbols of these other experiences and communicate them, produce them and subvert them in other forms of intensity.

Authors such as Massey et al. (2005), Mumford (1937) and Certeau (1984) agree that intensity – the novelty, (re)creation, and vibration that it can create – contains one of the most distinctive aspects of the life of different urban spaces. From the viewpoint formulated here, intensity is related to creations that suspend meanings, spaces and times to introduce other political possibilities for these fragments, those in-between zones which become relatively autonomous for a while and configure other possibilities of the (space of the) public.

In relation to the urban, to the public spaces enabled in these ‘in-between zones’, consideration of the difference between the complementary concepts of density and intensity should not be based on a tradition of epistemological dichotomy. There is a fine line of distinction between density and intensity, which is necessary to avoid impoverishing the scope of both concepts as instruments that operate in different ways on some of the variables which are similar and demonstrate different processes developing in the city. Although it is an important element in recognition of the public space, density in itself is not predicated on individual and/or collective actions that create social ties and an urbanity of difference, interaction and communication. We might ask if density per se is neutral. Contrastingly, if intensity is necessarily a dimension of “inter-action”, might non-intense spaces then be considered as “spaces of non-action” among others?

\(^{11}\)When density is considered there is a quantitative condition expressed by the actual nature of the concept, which makes it a flexible instrument between different fields of knowledge. In terms of studies of the urban space – in the meaning suggested by this study – the key to understanding the effects of urban densities (in their various forms) requires the use of other theoretical instruments that can recognise quantitative and evaluative aspects of the phenomena being studied.

\(^{12}\)In the official definition of intensity we find that – as the quality of something intense – it is what “is manifest or felt in abundance”, “which exceeds the usual measures”. So, even though density and intensity have quantitative relationships as their basis, urban intensity (all the intensity of urban spaces) is a manifestation that is felt qualitatively, containing with in it that qualitative-evaluative condition: “is manifest or felt”.
The public space can and should continue to be an experience that provides support to awareness of the common good, as a place of political formation and human recognition. Organisation of the public space presupposes dynamics of inclusion, particularly in the provision of ways for ensuring that humans can participate in urban life as capable social subjects. In an era of increasing withdrawal of the State, cities are becoming ecological systems of surplus which can produce a politics of the strongest, in which the public space is reduced to games of appropriating the common good. In this context the public space becomes synonymous with collective privatism and social antagonism, rather than social agonism and civic formation.

The “in-between zones” provide part of a hypothesis – still developing\(^{13}\) – for overcoming the dichotomies such as public and private, seeking to recognise updated forms of producing the urban space and their corresponding content, in an attempt at avoiding the politics of polarity and deeper understanding of other instances of reality:

> “These ‘in-between spaces’ provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself”. (Bhabha, 1998, p.20).

We have doubts here about intensity as a possible operative concept in tracing instances of occurrence of the in-between zones, that “other” possibility for spaces of the public domain. Their content is difficult to grasp because it is formulated at the limits of the identities which pass through, interact and are updated in those liminal fields, which also raises the question of the limits of their representation. This is where intensity appears as a way of exploration: since in addition to being felt by someone who is “outside”, it can be “suggested” based on (individual and/or communal) experiences: enabling the recognition of aspects of situated interactions, relations in public recognised by their participants – which are now being enhanced by the model of production in which the urban space is becoming immersed.

In this case content will be revealed, meanings acquire substance and become expressive of a nonconventional production which is not always visible and, therefore, overcome the artificiality of images that nowadays seek to become the constitutive principle of organisation and relations of social practice. Rather than airing the conceptual approach to urban space, this strategy allows us – we believe – to resume elements of our (individual and communal) urban experience as the raw material of a reality which goes beyond its prevailing acceptance.

Different approaches are needed to cover consideration of the new landscapes and configurations of the contemporary public space which, as representatives of the being-in-the-world of new rationales and dynamics of shaping the city, form the basis of representative elements of a dynamic of the (re)production of the urban space at a time of ‘crisis’ – which will enable us to test the relationship of society and culture with this same urban space. In a city that is looking for new ways, since each era, each historical period and each society develops its own forms of spatial organisation and socio-spatial processes by inducing urbanities and spatial conditions, this is a way of reconsidering the territories of the uncertain, the delayed, doubt and vanishing points, as attempts that contrast with hasty classifications or obsolete dualities. It involves thinking slowly through the practice of diversion (in Benjamin’s terms of connecting thought with diversion), without a straight line of results, objective data, categories and taxonomies.

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\(^{13}\) However, we have put forward the hypothesis that in recognising the dynamics of “intense urban spaces” – in the meaning suggested here – we include opportunities for returning to conditions of interchange and communication, together with the dimension of debate and controversy which they allow, as a way of dictating other contemporary forms of spaces of the public domain.

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