INBETWEEN SPACES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION – NEW PUBLIC REALM AND THE NETWORK SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT: In the emerging network society, the continuous homogenisation of the city leads to an anesthetization of the public realm due to the expulsion of every possible element of friction and conflict that we assume to be essential in the concept of vital urbanity and public domain. Interactions and exchange are instead suppressed in the "new public spaces": places oriented towards consumption and where rules of personal conduct are enforced, denying the presence of spontaneity of uses and the multiculturalism of urban interaction, essential characteristics of the public domain. This latter can be defined as a social space where interaction occurs and where instability and conflicts are conditions of the existence of a public sphere. Therefore we recognise potential public places as the luminal spaces of the fragmented city, in between freedom and friction.

KEYWORDS: public realm, network society-city, conflict, homogenisation, interaction, luminal space

The innumerable transformations that have affected the urban environment for some decades are now leading to an apparently chaotic situation that seems to have changed several certainties. This global phenomenon also affects the perception that people have about cities and, consequently, the way they live in cities and those places that represent the very essence of the urban environment, which is to say the public space.

Starting from this observation, an interesting field of research is opened, exploring and investigating the new potential possibilities for the recognition and the generation of the public domain in the contemporary network city. Particularly relevant in this field is the capability to understand which characteristics of the physical urban environment allow and encourage the presence and even the emergence of a proper public domain and where, in the contemporary city, it is possible to find spaces that present those characteristics.

In order to pursue this scope, it is relevant to underline the importance of the physical dimension in the process of social interaction, this latter recognised as a very specific feature of the urban environment.

It is also crucial to consider the role of the process of collective appropriation that invest the physical spaces, and how this process affects and contributes to the creation of a collective urban identity, which becomes central in the construction of the democratic process, and a proper quality of the urban environment [polis].

The objective is explicitly attempting to propose a different perspective about the way to look at the urban dimension of conflicts and frictions that involves the contemporary city. Instead of following the customary thought process that categorises all possible elements of friction among different domains in the urban environment (social, economical, political etc.) as negative features of instability in the urban 'order', they are regarded as basic elements that can define a public domain.

Confrontation and exchange among domains, and the relative possibility of conflict, are seen as the essence of public domain and consequently of public space, the primary civic loci of public debate.

1 FRAGMENTATION

Moving inside the general frame of networks' theory, the most interesting aspect is the recognition of the city as a fragmented entity, composed by a multiplicity of different domains. Each domain can be seen as a specific network that connects several homogeneous urban fragments among them. The city is therefore

composed by heterogeneous networks that can be interrelated or not. In fact, looking at the contemporary society, it can be noticed that people from different backgrounds spontaneously develop spatial strategies that allow them to meet people they want to meet (usually people from their same domains) and to avoid people they want to avoid (often people from different backgrounds).

*Mobility leads to an increasingly disentangling between human activity patterns and the physical city. Each individual, group or organisation may increasingly create his own virtual city, which has no set physical and administrative borders (domain), but it is rather a specific changeable combination of activity places connected by transport networks, between definite socio-economic and behavioural constrains. (*Bertolini and Dijst, 2003*)*

The fragmented condition of the contemporary city can be explained mentioning two ongoing specific phenomena of the networks society: the acceleration of communication exchanges and flows, and the consequent mutation of the traditional concept of proximity in relation to what Castells calls the 'Information Age'.

[...] *Two emergent social forms of time and space characterise the network society, while coexisting with prior forms of time and space. These are timeless times and the space of flows.* [...] *Timeless time is defined by the use of new information/communication technologies in a relentless effort to annihilate time* [...] *Space of flows refers to the technological and organisational possibility of organising the simultaneity of social practices without geographical contiguity.* [...] *However the space of flows does include a territorial dimension, as it requires a technological infrastructure that operates from certain locations, and as it connects functions and people located in specific places.* [...] (Castells, 1996)

The relationship between the social dimension of the city (the city as intensity and diversity of social and economic interaction, the civitas) and the physical dimension of the city (the city as density of built structures, the urb) is fundamentally changing. Spatial coincidence between the two dimensions -acceptable assumption for the cities of the pre-industrial past- is increasingly questionable for the cities of today. (De Matteis, 1988)

Continuous acceleration, increased possibility to travel faster and further, and contact of different cultural domains. Evidently this phenomenon manifests itself differently if dissimilar social groups and urban places are taken into account, leading to the establishment of different speeds and accessibility degrees to the city depending on diverse social groups, encouraging or denying access to various places of the urban domain.

[...] *Valuable locales and people will be found everywhere. But switched-off territories and people will also be found everywhere, albeit in different proportions. The planet is being fragmented into clearly distinct spaces, defined by different time regimes.* (Castells, quoted in Graham, S., 2001)

Talking about the mutation of the proximity concept, modern technologies encourage instantaneous communication between remote distances, modifying the meaning and perception of contiguity and distance and consequently the way people conceive social interaction and public dimension of specific places in the city. Furthermore, the spread of new media and the transformation involved in diffusion of knowledge determine a multiplying and a consequent distinction and plurality of cultures and identities, which leads to the lack of a dominant culture.

2 HOMOGENEOUS WEBS

A fragmented urban space and the personal, dynamic metropolis that each person builds upon it, are the practical (visible or invisible) evidence of a social process: the creation of internally homogeneous webs, like thematic grids in which individuals live, each of them implying different meanings, different rules, different knowledge, and different actions.

Those homogeneous grids of relations between physical and virtual places, between people and actions-events overlap each other on the urban surface, but rarely are truly integrated, so their protagonists rarely meet (or they may not be able meet at all). Each actor, instead, moves in this web of relationships, following precise roles and codified lifestyles, recognizing himself in certain kind of models, in specific status symbols, in particular languages, places and products.

Urban dwellers 'surf' – both physically and virtually – among these forms and centres in order to

perform specific combinations of activities and following specific individual lifestyles and personal traits (as dependent on, for example, differences in sex, age, wealth, culture).(Bertolini and Dijst, 2003)

You are 'your' network: the groups you are part of, the image you give, the products you like, the events and experiences you participate in – your importance is the number of contacts your network has.

The fragmentation phenomenon and the establishing of parallel networks are directly related to the way people experience the city. The modality in which information flows leads to a personal representation and perception of the city and directly influences people in the behaviour of living it. This implies that controlling the flows of communications and information also means controlling the perception of the city, and potentially imposing an order and a control on it.

3   ESCAPING CONFLICT: PRIVATIZATION AND EXCLUSION

Differently from the virtual networks, in which a certain '*openness*' is granted by the possibility of co-construction of the models by the individuals, the places of the physical networks – in the institutional city – do not involve a conscious participation of individuals in their creation. The places of physical networks in contemporary cities are rather increasingly privatised, highly regulated and very often consumption-oriented: *large urban control zones* (Graham and Simon, 2001), that provide safe and secure environments where people, especially middle class consumers attracted there from the 'dangerous' public street system, can interact.

In the name of comfort, safety and profit, political activity is replaced in these spaces by highly commodified spectacle designed to sell (Mitchell, 1995)

The image, the products, and the events that they propose are strictly defined, created to respond to precise lifestyle requirements that the individual chooses in his *cité à la carte* (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001), to reassure and create a serene loneliness. Far from defining if such behaviours are naturally chosen, urged by a generalised expansion of personal world borders – and of the same concept of difference – or induced from economical and social powers that find space for consumption markets in the emergent importance of the private sphere, we can affirm that people no longer accept hazards in their daily lives. They increasingly choose places where well defined codes of behaviour establish the modalities and often the measure in which interaction between different people or groups happens; they increasingly escape conflict.

If the modern city can best be understood as a collection of landscapes, and if the citizen is constantly occupied in keeping his own small network intact with as little friction with other groups as possible, then that does seem to mean the death of any form of public domain (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001).

Therefore increasingly the traditional role of public space '*a space in which a collectivity becomes present to itself and recognises itself through a shared interpretative repertoire'* (Arendt, 1958) is substituted by the *collective space* (GUST, 1999), a privatised one that accomplish the role of meeting and interaction, but through an *abstraction of public behaviour from the total life of the city* (Sorkin, 1992). That happens inside a highly regulated dimension in which the unpredictable and unexpected are suppressed, together with any real cultural communication.

On the other hand, the traditional public space of the cities, now decentralised and disconnected, loses meaning, importance and critical mass, becoming a marginal space, a *space of fear;* or, in alternative, it reconfigures itself through processes of thematisation, thus re-founding its meaning in the selective networks.

In a more mobile society old public spaces are marginalised within local limits, therefore losing their main function of social aggregation. The result is the migration of activities towards places that have an increased connectivity and a re-polarisation of the public space around new mobility environments (Danielle Wiley, 2008).

4   ANESTHETISATION OF PUBLIC REALM

The result of this is the anesthetisation of the public realm - the sphere where *'we encounter the 'other' and where we must relate to the 'other' behaviour, ideas and preferences'* (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001) - through the duty to conform to the pre-established roles, and the exclusion of the subjects and groups that are not able to achieve this conformity or would rather prefer to express a different culture.

What is different is, to begin, what is excluded (Lefebvre, quoted in Moertenboeck and Mooshammer,

2008).

In fact, even if those new highly regulated places look like 'new public spaces' in the context of personal networks, they are not. They may be places of meeting, but do not allow the exchange of ideas and debate, and contradiction and conflict are excluded, with the result of a criminalisation of difference in a context of a diffused state of fear and insecurity and a virtualisation of the democratic life.

Having defined the present situation of the state of the urban public domain in the contemporary city, and the fact that it can no longer really be considered as public space, the interest of the research moves towards new parameters and characteristics that can identify new places belonging to the public realm.

The analysis will focus on the opportunities that the network city offers to social interaction, looking at the necessity and the still relevant importance of real contact in the process of exchanging knowledge. The research will also inquire about the possibility of defining specific characteristics, identifiable in the physical urban context, that seem to allow and encourage the spontaneous emergence of a real public domain.

5   CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

The ascribing of concepts such as conflict and diversity to negative categories is relatively recent attitude. In fact, historically, those two characteristics have always been part of the definition of the urban environment as milieu of democratic dialectics, and seen even as adding value as sources of development and vitality.   We can read in Jane Jacobs' s words '*Cities take advantage because of their diversity. Diversity in concentration facilitates hazards, serendipitous contacts among people'.* (Jacobs, 1963)

It is paradoxical that in the very moment when everyone can potentially reach every different place or being, in contact with numerous cultural realities, cities instead deny their original attitude and become places of avoidance.

We assume instead that conflict and friction are essential for vital urbanity and public realm. *Conflict, division and instability do not ruin the democratic public sphere: they are rather the conditions of its existence* (GUST, 1999). Those kinds of interactions, indeed, lead to the possibility of encounters and serendipitous contacts, basic elements for exchanges among different urban domains – exchanges of behaviours, ideas, and knowledge that are grounded in the idea of urbanism, of cities as places of innovation.

Therefore we look at public places as '*sites of spontaneous social interactions, as the communicative devices of the society* [...] *How people are, or are not, able to express themselves, and communicate with each other, outside their homes and off their electronic circuits, that is, in public spaces, is an essential area of study for urbanism. I call it the sociability place in the individualised metropolis'* (Castells, 2003).

Conflict is a force of negotiation that allows space to be, rather than a container for conflict, a possible form for articulating conflicts and for conflictual practice. The latter presumes indeed the possibility to create new original synthesis that do not suppress differences or exclude minorities, but have an inclusive character based on the acknowledgment of others.

6   CONTACT

To value the physical dimension of the knowledge exchange process through contact is not a minor issue in order to attribute a positive quality to the concept of conflict and the potential relevance of friction. It is possible to understand face to face contact as an instrument to achieve a constructive dialectic inside society and to build positive effects of cosmopolitanism and diversity through the combination and encounter of individual resources and cultures.

Here, face to face contact is assumed as a communication technology. It possesses important characteristics such as high frequency, rapid feedback, visual and body language cues, instantaneity, and simultaneity that define a multidimensional communication able to convey complex messages and tacit knowledge, fundamental for example in the creative process. Moreover, investing in formal screening procedures, physical contact incentivises relations and moral behaviour, thus allowing possibilities for social interactions and the loss of anonymity.

[...] '*Being close enough literally to each other allows visual contact and emotional closeness, the bases for building human relationships'* (Storper&Venables, 2004)

In this sense we can understand face to face contact among heterogeneous groups as a possibility of

resistance to anonymity and individualism and consequently, if translated in the practice of the public space, as a factor to counteract the loss of sense of place and the tendencies to the urban dynamics of avoidance and segregation.

7 SEARCHING FEATURES IN LIMINAL SPACES

The selective accessibility of public spaces has been pushed so far as to be restricted almost entirely to a very specific and homogeneous sector of population (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001).

What happens outside the homogeneous networks, beyond the restricted borders of their *pseudo* public spaces? People who do not conform to mainstream networks do not have a formal place in the city where they can express themselves as social beings. This leads to the condition of invisibility of entire sectors of the urban population: they are not represented in the urban life of the city and are consequently excluded by public and democratic life.

Clearly this does not automatically mean that those 'invisible' people renounce claims to a public life: this is an essential part of being a 'social animal' as man is, so usually this formal invisibility tends to be predominantly on an official level. Scratching the glossy surface of the reality that media tend to broadcast, it is possible to discover parallel networks to the ones of the official city, networks that define informal public spaces that can be recognised as such because they contain those characteristics that have been considered as necessary and sufficient conditions for being categorised as belonging to the public domain.

It is towards those places that we now direct our attention, not in the intent to recognise them as accomplished public spaces, but rather to detect there which features they possess that can encourage a public domain.

A methodical reading of those places is not easy because of the variety of features of the places in themselves, therefore our analysis proceeds by empirical observation.

It is remarkable that those features are not imposed top-down and pre-defined by a univocal social will, but rather they appear spontaneously while they are missing in institutionalised public spaces. Being generated by the flows themselves, their rules are continuously negotiated. Those spaces then become 'interference' places among very different scales – transcalarity is at least potential - and generate new forms of sociality among the heterogeneous multiplicity of domains: they seem to be able to articulate many different contributes into a comprehensive public sphere.

The entrance of the station of an important infrastructural line is a common example. People use it as a meeting point, while pitchmen set their stalls trying to catch the most favourable place relative to the flux of people intent to reach the transport line. Homeless come in search of a place to spend the night, street musicians improvise a little show, while daily commuters try to make their way back home. Each person slows down the space-time condition of their personal network, according to the actual time-space conditions of the interface, increasing the possibility of reciprocal encounters.

In a similar way gas stations, where people with different origins and destinations stop and meet after travelling independently along the freeways, become devices in the mobility network of an enlarged urban environment. The repetition of these stopovers in a specific urban daily system can even originate durable interactions. Thinking of a more usual public space, urban parks, daily crossed by several diverse individuals that can gather attracted by some planned or spontaneous event, are also examples of the capacity of public spaces to encourage and generate spontaneous encounters that also lead to friction and conflictive practices in the appropriation of space.

Figure 1 The entrance of a metro station used as a memorial
(Source: flickr)

Generally speaking, those 'interference' places do not appear to have a representative role in the urban: they are marginal or accessory spaces to large urban complexes, leftovers in important infrastructural networks, or simply points of viscosity generated by the flows. It is not only a matter of physical emptiness: they do not possess any univocal code, they are semantically empty. This emptiness can also be the result of an excess of codes that are simultaneously conflicting and cooperating and that can be identified only taking a position and being involved as participant.

Figure 2 Leftover space for nomad amusement park
(Source: flickr)

An empty urban field, appropriated as a location by nomadic communities, irregular immigrants or simply people unable to find a better accommodation than a tent, perfectly represents the essence of a public space where any code is predominant and that, because of the particular situation, a constant dynamic of negotiation has to be carried out. On the other hand, a train station or an airport, because of the excess of significant codes, are exactly those semantic-less places that allow the emergence of different codes and spontaneous exchanges through a continuous confrontation.

Sometimes those places do not possess a recognised economic value that can attract the property market and the control of dominant economic powers. They exist in "waiting mode", until someone takes possession of them, recognising their potential value to become places that can express their necessity as social spaces.

It is a common phenomenon to use large, empty, former industrial sites, as the location of cultural intermediation centres rather than leisure oriented self-organized activities able to attract transversal groups and to interfere in the status quo of the place. Informal markets develop spontaneously in leftover spaces resulting from availability in a specific moment, to the supply and demand of specific groups. They can then spontaneously evolve defining a regular time span that leads to attracting new people, consequently becoming recognisable places open to social interaction.

Figure 3 Liminal space for informal market
(Source: flickr)

The 'waiting mode' status of these places does not consequently imply that every empty residual space in the city is necessary a public space. The places described till now seem to possess something in common: they are all places interested in and crossed by the network of urban flows. As we mentioned, the continuous movement of people and information in the network highlights some of the places that are potential spaces for interaction and exchange between different scale levels of the networks themselves. Liminal spaces included in between mobility infrastructures and already engaged or 'institutionalised' spaces, work as interfaces between different domains.

Wide accessory spaces to the monofunctional 'big urban boxes' are crossed by very diverse fluxes that can find in those secondary spaces the possibility to practise a great variety of smaller scale functions not included in the recognisable activities of the institutionalised spaces. From nomadic sexual practises to political collective claims, a wide range of social [inter]actions can be materialised here.

The close relationship with the urban networks and fluxes implies that those places are characterised by a high degree of accessibility: they are open and available to all social domains, therefore they potentially have an high level of heterogeneous co-presence, making possible a spontaneous exchange, a fundamental

requirement for public space.

Frequently those spaces are attract activities that have a limited life: they are not sites for permanent use, but they are differently 'colonised' by several groups for disparate activities, which implies that they contain in themselves a particular attitude of flexibility and adaptability to different necessities due to the fact that they do not express a pre-conceived code or a strict spatial configuration. This dynamic state is not only a spatial condition, but also a temporal one: events can be singular or repeat themselves with rhythmic succession (daily, weekly, or seasonally).

Heterogeneous co-presence and self-organised time sequences for instance, characterise the phenomenon of free-access beaches. Free from the habitual social status symbols, disparate groups move from the elementary physical contiguity to social interaction, and the way people place themselves in this flexible space changes configuration following cyclic frequencies of vastly differing practices.

Figure 4 Space-time interferences on a free beach
(Photo by the authors)

8   CONCLUSIONS

The review presented here is intended to be a reflection on the mutations of the concept of public realm in the network city/society. Even if not exhaustive on the issue of the possibilities of social interactions in public space, it attempts to put forward some reflections that may not be seen as conclusions, but as new starting points for further research paths.

A preliminary evaluation about the pauperisation of the actual urban public realm leads us to re-focus on what the characteristics of the public sphere ought to be. Therefore the starting point considering the social interaction as central in the urban dimension encourages a change of perspective about conflict and friction as disruptive elements for the urban condition. We include, in the search for a new definition of public domain, phenomena and places that haven't yet been taken into account, where conflict and friction come to be materialised. From the numerous examples that can be recognised in the contemporary urban environment, it is possible to observe a request for places where people can freely express themselves, places for interactions that do not necessarily need strict control about behaviours, codes, or spatial requirements, but that instead encourages the transversal participation of a multiplicity of actors.

The phenomenon of spontaneity, self-organisation and immanent negotiation that often characterise the places of this emergent public domain lead to some reflections about the real contribution that disciplines

such as urbanism can have in this filed. In particular, it would be interesting to understand how it can contribute to the constitution of the new urban society if the forces that drive it are essentially non-spatial. Learning from those places, a possible future approach might be to consider the possibility of leaving free space for spontaneous and 'non-driven' interaction, with the objective being to balance the equilibrium of powers that, more or less directly, guide the public realm in the present city.

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