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The places of mobility, or the design of temporarily inhabited public spaces

Marco Albini

Mobility and time are distinctive traits of the contemporary world and the main motors of change. The urban landscape appears fragmented and discontinuous. Perception of it is simultaneously conditioned by movement and the predominant role played on the geography by the infrastructure network. Private and public functions and architectural spaces are losing their features as consecrated by tradition. The crisis of architecture is related to the broader cultural torment reflected in that loss of the centre which marks what is now an irreversible change in all areas of knowledge: centrality intended as a central point of reference, 'canonisation of unity, of regularity, of stability', passed down through the centuries. Today the loss of the centre not only marks the explosion of time co-ordinates but also the now acknowledged disintegration of spatial co-ordinates. The centre is no longer the highest concentration of presences, commingling of functions or existence of service facilities. It has become the weak pole in the central-peripheral dialectic, replaced by the relationship scale connected with the new chronology of communication flows according to a system of multiple connections which new urban networks establish between portions at varying distances from the original nucleus: time, the main actor on the urban scene, changes the spatial co-ordinates of original centrality and projects them into a 'network with no centre', where it seems that only relative centralities are able to claim recognisable differences.

The new centralities: the infrastructure nodes of the complex city

It is now well known that you can no longer speak of the form of a city as has been handed down to us from 19th Century culture. Architectural design seems to be following this destiny, attracted by forms of 'inhabiting' space which are extremely varied, time-oriented, and which it should be able to control by means of its instruments. The disappearance of open air public spaces is a phenomenon that is difficult to counter. Space for social aggregation has moved from urban squares and 'high streets', now mere commercial strips, to the internal galleries of large supermarkets, to stations and places of multimodal exchange: outdoor space is engulfed in an interior. There are places of accumulation of tensions, forces, activities, flows in the dispersed city that constitute significant design themes but which are abandoned to such a variety of specialized techniques that they are incapable of constituting urban facts. Further examination of the subject concerns *places of arrival* (stations, airports, automobile ports), places designated to simultaneously represent the arrival and departure of larger scales flows. They are of interest in terms of localization, of typology specificities, of structure of spaces and roles, of how they function. Together with *places of transit*, for which they constitute the points of destination, and with *places of interference* for which they introduce relationship capacities, the new *places of arrival* outline the picture of the contemporary system of connections, whose widespread development is altering the preceding urban conditions to a high degree.

Rhythms of use, threshold spaces: time oriented planning

A general look at things allows us to identify the nodes because they are complex structural systems which belong to the very vast notion of threshold spaces. The concept of a threshold becomes a category that is useful in formulating designs. Working on the basis of a logic of scalar interference, in my opinion, design must recover the complexity of relationships of architectural space, capable of interacting with the context on different scales: on an overall scale according to relationship structures and stable interactions between people; on a sector scale, by relating internal destinations to external destinations that gravitate on the nodal space interfered with; on an architectural scale interacting with social networks that correspond to systems of actors capable of guaranteeing the internal connection to the node itself. If the public space of a city is a container where systems of relationships between people exist, then an architectural design to transform physical space is an element which makes the manifestation of new relationships and the declaration of what is available possible and this increases the freedom of populations to choose and to use space. The design does not therefore claim to give a formal unifying logic (a new design of the city) and it would be difficult to simulate the effects and reliability of such a design, but more modestly it is intended as the conclusion of a methodological process centred on reconstructions of interrupted or unexpressed urban relationships. The form and articulation of

public space must succeed in communicating a declaration of its availability for multiscale use, a condition of freedom in the choice of routes, of the use of functions, a sensation of safety through the recognisability of places. It is not the function, variable in time, which stimulates use, but rather the condition of freedom of choice and of movement inside a space of availability. It seems to us that this is the most appropriate definition of architectural design which gets finally emancipated from functions as a premise and guarantee of the design result, and looks to the definition of relationships and flows to create the maximum availability and flexibility of use. The time oriented method, or chronotope analysis, understood as attention to time, tends to identify and represent the structure of inhabited spaces, which is to say the *structure of the rhythms and ways of use* compared with a similar 'physical structure of public space' within which these behaviour patterns occur and to recognise the elements for the potential transformation of space and relationships in the asynchronous and discontinuous character of the two structures. This is to say that architectural design is the rationalisation of the space in which relations are interrupted, through overcoming the 'threshold effect'. The threshold identifies the obstacle or the constraint on passing from one state to another, from one place to another. The term threshold therefore represents the expression of time, of movement and of interpersonal relations.