

# ABOUT THE COMMONS AND THE PUBLIC

**For many architects, the very idea of public space raises lots of fantasies about an urban life in common. However, in practice, these spaces are not used collectively and, when such thing happens, use exceeds the possibility that architectural design can control it. By discussing the notions of commons and public space, this text shows us the difficulty of understanding these two concepts as synonyms.**

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How do you explain the architect's hopeful and optimistic idea of designing public spaces for communication and human exchange that, when realized, end up abandoned in most cases? What is capitalism's paradox in current society, which stimulates individualism but insists on designing, offering and sharing public spaces? Which is the polarity between common space and public space? Is it really a polarity? To talk about the public, isn't it mere ideology?

These questions obviously suppose that there are such abandoned, misused or used to some other extent public spaces, and that advanced capitalism promotes and exacerbates individualism. However, it is good to point out that hope and optimism are in the very nature of the modern being and, in particular, of the modern architect.

To be clear, we are speaking about that which we address as modern and concrete 'public space': it's in the city and is constituted by streets, squares, avenues, boulevards and parks. Although it could be defined as that which is the remnant of private property, the very notion of POPS –Privately Owned Public Spaces– defies the assumption and draws a 'grey' area between the public and the private regarding profit (Schlack, 2015). In any case –and beyond the suspicion of its inexistence or that it's just a desire of modern and liberal society– the architect is the one who materializes public space.

When referring to only a part of the public, which also identifies a group as proprietaries and beneficiaries of a good which is common to them and that by its own conditions is separated and individualized from everybody, the communal or common is the notion that sets public space into crisis. When addressing the notion of the commons in architecture, I'll need a digression in other fields. Slavoj Žižek said:

When we talk about some superior common good, it's always defined by those which are our secret priorities... Every time something is proposed in the name of common good, and we say we should overcome our self-interest and work for it, we will always discover that in a hidden manner we're already letting ourselves be ruled by our selfishness (2014:8-9).

Beyond stark egoism being the guiding notion behind the common good, the author also states that the common appeals to the ownership of an identified group, limited and private. The public, however, seemingly belongs to all. Here is where –in my opinion– begins the discussion of a mistake transferred from the territory of politics, because the so-called community of goods or commons, that somehow turns into public good, has its origin in the appropriation resulting of the separation from a totality:

When a social organism is confused with a specific territorial extension or becomes a part of it, it acquires a unique and exclusive character, hard to reach

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otherwise. Certain types of associations can only perform all its sociological form when the space in which they develop leaves no room for another. In other cases, many associations of the same sociological nature can occupy the same space, because they are, so to speak, mutually permeable; as they do not have any close relationship with the space; there can be no spatial collisions between them (Simmel, 1977: 646-647).

Thus, the quality of Villa Frei's communitary space could be celebrated, however, it can be convened that its neighbors constitute a group that carefully takes care of their territory, identifies with it, fights for its preservation, and clearly differentiates it from the rest of the nearby neighborhoods (Gertosio, 2015).

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Only the anonymous can be open or public, and it's there where the multitude deploys. In another study, Simmel situates the problem in historical terms:

The nineteenth century fused both [French and English liberal cultures] in shaping the economic principles [...] In terms of intellectual history, the doctrine of freedom and equality is the foundation of free competition; while the doctrine of differentiated personality is the basis of the division of labor. Eighteenth-century liberalism put the individual on his own feet: in the nineteenth, he was allowed to go as far as they would carry him (Simmel 2002: 291).

However, this unique and exclusive character to which Simmel referred to, not only narrates the story of capitalism but affects the idea of the city, site par excellence of modern life, that assembles many people and that can only be understood when it is detached from any intimacy or property relationship; then that 'many people' becomes a 'multitude', a term that Hardt and Negri define as a manifestation or legitimate expression against capitalist oppression (2002:162). By extension, the vindication of the public is only possible when it gives place to the subject 'multitude'. If this is so, there's no possibility for architectural intervention because the multitude is spontaneous and could not be contained within or at any precinct.

Hardt and Negri specially attended to the distinction between mass and multitude. To them, the mass is dominated and the multitude is free. This distinction, particularly subtle, curiously doesn't mention the work of Elias Canetti who, with the crisp image of the European dictatorships of the 30s and 40s, describes in *Mass and Power* the properties of the mass, which is no different from the notion of multitude:

Within the mass, equality reigns. It is an absolute and unarguable equality and it is never shaded by doubt by itself...[but]...the mass needs a direction. It's in movement and it moves towards something. The direction, which is common to every component, intensifies the feeling of equality (Canetti, 1981:23).

Canetti makes populism's features present and, without even mentioning the term 'multitude', includes its attributes in those of the masses, as if the differentiation were nothing but an ideological and political stratagem. On the other hand, the warning regarding the enthusiasm over the multitude or majority was issued in parallel to the writing of the *Communist Manifesto*, but from liberalism's principles:

The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority; the people,

consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power (Mill, 1972:21)

The connections between these definitions and ideas look to research some of the aspects that are at the core of the idea of the subject of the common, and that could be the object of a project only if it is constituted as finite, exclusive and identified. Therefore, public space would have the multitude as its subject, but lacking of a program.

Hence, in architecture, to generically speak of the public seems pointless, because it is unpredictable and amorphous (and nothing is more contrary to the architectural discipline than these two conditions). It is only an anecdote that Gottfried Semper designed the barricades of Dresden's revolt in May 1849, because architecture takes its form –the one we know– since the appearance of The Prince in the fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

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Richard Sennett pointed out that in physical terms “the environment drives people to conceive the public domain as meaningless” (Sennett, 2011:26-28). In other words, the street would allow the use of the constitutional right of free circulation, but it would no longer be a place of gathering, sociability or pause, but rather the terrain of exhibition, of the wandering of Baudelaire's dandy, corresponding to the society where all that is solid melts and lacks meaning. Manfredo Tafuri said:

(...) the nervous life [of the metropolis] corresponds to the continuous and overwhelming materialization, constantly 'innovated', from the exchange value into use value, corresponds to the necessary moment of realization of exchange value; the intellect abstracts again the substance of exchange value from the 'appearance' of use value, extracts again money from the process and, in this way, derives into commodity as such, that is, produces commodities once again (Tafuri, 1972:84).

There's no pause or human communication if not through this frantic traffic of the commodity. And the enthusiasm or willingness of architecture is insufficient to escape this fate. From that historically given moment, the confinement to privacy constituted the survival of the city's inhabitant that, from smaller things, then appropriated larger spaces: those of the community. So, since:

(...) the decline of their, once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the art of being happy from 'small things', within their four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog, cat and flower pots, extending to these things the utmost care and tenderness that, in a world where rapid industrialization constantly eliminates yesterday's things to produce today's objects, may even seem like the last and purely human corner of the world. This expansion of the private, the charm, as it were, of a whole nation, does not constitute a public sphere but, on the contrary, it means that this sphere has almost completely receded, so that greatness has given way everywhere to charm; although the public sphere can be big, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to accommodate the inappropriate. (Fernandois, 2001:326).

Then, do people communicate in these spaces of grandeur, the street, the parks, or in some not-private place? And in those places, is architecture a device that facilitates communication? These questions go after a hidden reality behind the idea of the project and that menaces its own existence. In public spaces we observe that they are devoted to individual realization: aerobic sports are exercised in solitude, people are needed but there is no communication except for casual banalities. There, there is no communication but only circulation, monetary and of people.

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<sup>1</sup> This character will be crucial in the modern conception of architecture and architects. See: AA. vv. *Il potere e lo spazio. La scena del principe*. (Firenze: Electa Editrice, 1980).

For example, the scene of cyclists going through the city –in addition to reduce contamination produced by internal combustion vehicles– is an example of a healthy physical exercise done with a device that impedes communication. And so, one by one, we see that urban activities in the so-called public space are individual, except those when the multitude, angry or overjoyed, takes the streets without plan or program.

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The individual-multitude polarity has a limit when many individualities coincide within the same space. For example, in a community of neighbors, the identity of a place results when there's a limit to its scope, establishing clear rules of belonging; there's an identity only when it's distinct; there's otherness only by way of looking at the other as a stranger. This intermediate form semi-public or semi-private is what the architect generally deals with when he designs a neighborhood or an urban complex, where the main task is to identify conducts, habits and aspirations of determined social group.

However, public spaces are those which do not involve segregation and are not aimed at a determined group, but rather to an undifferentiated collective. Here is where the State –who takes care of the public– should establish rigid control for its preservation; otherwise, those who are left outside of the system take this space, or it's finally abandoned.

In conclusion, commons have exclusive limits, while the public or public goods are different in nature. In general, the former are administered or regulated by a particular social group and act on behalf of themselves; the latter are, by law, administered and regulated by the State, although they are subject to regulations that restrict the principle of freedom. But far from these restrictions, and beyond distinguishing young people and drunks from the rest of civilians, in theory, public space remains for all.

Stavros Stavrides stressed that the system of the common could be a network of passages that connect different places of openness (De Angelis & Stavrides, 2010). That is, a system of infinite commons would be structured by a neutral and articulating network; this would be the public space: corridors where nothing would happen but transit or lonely exposure (the current function of streets and squares, as all the rest would occur in community or common spaces). The problem is that speaking of 'everyone' is but a representation and that this 'everyone' can be against the interest (or in favor of disinterest) of the majority. This is, I think, the aporia of public space. **ARQ**

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