

Sous les pavés, les pavés!

“We need a new city element to replace the archaic block or gridiron system. The structure of this new settlement unit should permit, not only a general solution of all the different parts of the city and their relation to each other, but also free and unhindered urban growth.”

The New City : Principles of Planning by Ludwig Hilbersheimer, 1944

Sous les paves, la plage! Under the pavement, the beach! This famous statement by the Situationists evoked the dormant opportunities ever present and parallel to the current order of the city. It was a call to imagine and activate the city in new, different and subversive ways. The drive, or drifting, was seen as a technique for opposing the existing order, a subversive action undermining the authority of the regime embedded in the city. However carefully public space was planned and designed, there were always openings that could be exploited and used in non-prescribed ways. Since the Situationists, this way of refusing and opposing the ideology of discipline underpinning all public spaces can be traced in various urban subcultures: from punk, street art, skateboarding, and parkour all the way to movements such as Right to the City and Occupy.

Urban public spaces have always been a key arena for the political: this is demonstrated in the phrase “Bread and Circuses,” in the medieval street theaters heckling the king to hunger marches, Kristallnacht, public executions or standing in front of a tank. The capacity of the public arena to produce powerful images has always had the potential to send shock waves through the system, and those in power have at the same time always tried to mold public space in their interest, such as in the agoras of Athens, the Colosseum, the exercise fields of Nürnberg or Haussmann’s boulevards. At the heart of public space, as we know, there is this flow of movements and counter movements — from the conceived over the

perceived to the lived and back — where we are given a glimpse into the immediate present. So what can we learn from the contemporary design of public spaces, what are they a reaction to, and in what ways are they a translation of the current political ideology into physical space?

### Scrolling down public spaces

A constructive way of beginning to understand the contemporary square is of course to compare it with its forerunners. The layout, the ideal and the very ideology of the new public space becomes tangible when comparing, say, the modernist Årsta Torg in Stockholm with similar places in the city's new neighborhoods such as Västra Kungsholmen. The former is located in a suburb of Stockholm and the latter in a new, very desirable area of the city. Årsta Torg was constructed when Stockholm had seen nothing of the wealth that has since benefitted (a small part of) the city's inhabitants, (mainly those who dwell in the inner-city). The square offers a wide range of social services, shops and banks, although to a lesser extent today than when it opened in 1953, but you will still find a cinema, library, and several services directed to citizens. In Västra Kungsholmen you will find a shopping mall, sushi restaurants, cafés and a bank. Apart from a few day-care centers for toddlers, there are no public services provided – all services are directed to consumers.

“Article 95 Private interest will be subordinated to the collective interest. Left to himself, a man is soon crushed by difficulties of every kind which he must overcome. If, conversely, he is subjected to too many collective constraints, his personality is stifled by them. Individual rights and collective rights must therefore support and reinforce one another, and all of their infinitely constructive aspects must be joined together. Individual rights have nothing to do with vulgar private interests. Such interests, which heap advantages upon a minority while relegating the rest of the social mass to a mediocre existence, require strict limitations. In every instance, private interests must be subordinated to the collective interest,

so that each individual will have access to the fundamental joys, the well-being of the home, and the beauty of the city.”

La Charte d’Athènes by Le Corbusier, 1933

Now this difference is, of course, not only the result of the public sector no longer being able to afford what it once could. The municipality, having used the last two decades to sell out whatever has been possible to sell out, is indeed not as rich as it was during the social democratic heydays of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Instead, one has to depend on private contractors (which more or less means three or four large building companies) to have anything built at all, and thus only projects that are likely to provide a quick profit get explored. Libraries, or other public services, have no place within this schema. Another important aspect of the situation reflected in our two examples of public spaces is that we are in fact talking about two different societies. Whereas Stockholm was governed by the logic of industrialization before, it is now steered by the same post-industrial attention economy as the rest of the West. “What it wants to sell is service and what it wants to buy is stocks. This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product...” as Gilles Deleuze so eloquently put it. Thus, the square in Årsta could be formed with a limited variety of possible individuals in mind, all of whom with relatively similar lifestyles. The dwellers (gentrifiers) of Västra Kungsholmen are a less predictable bunch, and will probably change occupations and partners with a much greater frequency than the people that moved to Årsta some seventy years ago. What needs, then, should a square fulfill today when we know that the square will not be flooded with people at roughly the same time each day?

This lack of daily, massive, easily predictable movements of people marks a crucial change in the identity and purpose of the square. It used to be a hub, connected to other hubs through subways and bus stations, that monitored and facilitated certain routines, i.e. people traveling between

work, grocery shopping and home. The square was also the place for inhabitants to gather information. Today, we no longer live like that. We gather information from other sources, and that has enriched our abilities to collect and select data on our own. Information is ubiquitous, but it is also becoming more and more private.

Information has always had a strange relationship to place. New ways of collecting data and communicating seem to pose a threat to existing power structures. In her seminal *When Old Technologies Were New*, Carolyn Marvin shows how the telephone could be used to sidestep many control systems. For instance, it short-circuited the idea that guarding the front door is sufficient to control what information and propositions enter the house, something that was much discussed in the bad old days. “Traditional courtship protected traditional young women from inappropriate advances by placing insurmountable obstacles in path of all but the most devoted swains. Electrical communication threatened to shortcut the useful insulation of these custom barriers,” writes Marvin. By challenging borders of different sorts, media thus reshapes our idea of a place, alongside its role, location, and distance from other places. In an equally important book with an appropriate name, *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz describes how television has torn down the secrecy a subject could once depend on while going to various places. When Meyrowitz was writing in the 1980s, through the television screen we could know what was going on in other places, and thus we would appear as subjects with multiple personalities, instead of coherent individuals, at every separate place. Not only does media change the circumstances for the individual subject, “[b]y bringing many different types of people to the same ‘place,’ electronic media has fostered a blurring of many formerly distinct roles,” writes Meyrowitz. He concludes that “[e]lectronic media affect us, then, not preliminary through their content, but by changing the ‘situational geography’ of social life.” Although the square can physically remain the same, it would therefore be naïve to think that it would be the

same in the age of the smart phone as it was in the age of the horse and carriage.

Media has long since borrowed metaphors from the physical world to describe what one can do (or is supposed to do). There are chat rooms, market places, portals, forums, etc. The metaphor helps us navigate and understand what to anticipate at the location, but it has pretty much been a one-way street. Of course, media has never been a separate entity. Public discussions that are held to be as important to the health of a democracy as the square have always occurred in the private or semi-private sphere of the newspaper (and now also the blog). But as we spend more time in online forums, which obviously also makes the need for a physical space to meet less relevant, we must start to ask when this behavior also influences how we relate to the physical world – i.e. the question is not if the net replaces the square, but how behavior patterns on the net makes us relate to the square. Do we need metaphors from the digital realm to better understand our built environment?

The question does not arise entirely out of the blue. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* from 1999, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin described how new media always needs to resemble old media in order to be understood as a media at all. They pointed to, among other things, the fact that online news media tried to look like newspapers. What was more intriguing with their line of thought was that they also showed how old media tried to look like new media in order to remain relevant and up-to-date, like for instance when news program started looking like web pages with multiple active windows. “Television and World Wide Web,” write the authors, “are engaged in an unacknowledged competition in which each now seeks to remediate the other.” But there is more to this than meets the eye: the competition is also economic where the struggle is about which media will “dominate the American and the world market.” As the web has changed more into a space than a media, it

is time to ask if the logic Bolter and Grusin described is transferable to this situation.

In 2009, the High Line, the old elevated railway on New York's west side that was abandoned in the 1980's, opened the first section of what now has been transformed into a public park. Two other parts have opened since and now the full stretch is a public space. The High Line is not a public square, but to call it a park would perhaps also be stretching it a bit. In fact, a stretch, covered with greenery, is actually a more apt description of the place. The description on its website is telling: "It repurposes a piece of industrial infrastructure as a public green space."

Rebeca Solnit has written about the idea of losing oneself in the city in the same way you could in the forest. But there is no getting lost on the High Line, no strolling or psychogeography. The stretch is fully designed and its use is obvious: one walks from one point to another. This is not necessarily such a bad thing. The limits of the layout left for few other options. The interesting thing with the High Line is that it turns the strolling of the city flaneur into the scrolling of the computer screen, which seems to mark a change in how public squares are presently being designed. These new public spaces in Stockholm – Liljeholmskajen, Hornsbergs Strandpark, Norra Djurgårdsstaden – are all stretched so that they form something in between a boardwalk and a square.

#### Autumn 2015 in the Stockholm Royal Seaport

The Stockholm Royal Seaport (Norra Djurgårdsstaden) is a new neighborhood with ten thousand new homes and thirty thousand new workplaces planned to be finished by 2025. As yet another expansion on a former industrial site close to the water, it is constructed on the sparse land that comprises the city of Stockholm. The neighborhood's square lacks clear definition, not because it is not yet finished, but because it turns into a small park-like corridor that stretches to the far end of the

block, terminating at a small creek. Like the High Line, the space is park-like, every lot is highly designed and the walking paths are determinate. Make no mistake, this is the way you scroll yourself through the square-like surface, and very much like on your computer screen, there are enough commercial sites for you to browse through while accessing both coffee shops and Facebook through the free Wi-Fi spots. There are no threatening, undesigned spots. Everything has its (transformable) meaning. No longer lost in an empty space where content must be produced by the inhabitants, the prosumers dwell in multiple spaces, sharing experiences and information. No need to share space with anyone who doesn't belong – it is a community. Meanwhile, the modernist square lays fallow. The ideology that created it is long since in regress, and while receding it leaves its former tools and means uncared for. The public square has transformed into a vacant lot: nobody really knows what to make of it. Meanwhile, pop-up stores, coffee shops and other vendors make use of the space. Perhaps one day there will be an organization like the Friends of the High Line that will discover these old squares and transform them into super-designed spaces where everything has its exact, but transformable meaning.

“The instant city is an urban intervention in a rural town. A zeppelin floats into town, hooks into the center and bombards the town with art, events, temporary structures, media infrastructure such as billboards, projectors and screens, and other stimulations, then eventually drifts off after installing a wide range of communications infrastructure that hooks the town into the new urban network. The intention being intensive and deliberate cultural urbanization.”

Instant City, Archigram, 1968

At the end of 2014, the American multinational e-commerce company Amazon announced 270 million active customer accounts. When speaking at the O'Reilly Velocity Conference in 2011, Jon Jenkis revealed that

Amazon updates the code running their site every 11.6 seconds on average. Changing their business models at almost incomprehensible speeds, although with the tiniest tweaking, has deep implications for how these businesses think about shifting markets and risk. If traditional business models are modeled on a relatively static world, the business models used by the digital titans are instead built on the fact that stuff fails. The world is chaos, but by deploying self-organizing and self-healing systems, the system architecture allows for parallel processes that allow for high scalability. This of course also influences the organization of the workforce and the philosophy at Amazon: innovation is understood as bottom up, problems are best solved by those closest to it, embrace chaos, discard loyalty and obedience, creativity must flow from everywhere.

This short and very generalized description could at the same time be read as an instruction manual for some of the more popular and influential urban theories that have come to dominate the field of city planning and architecture over the last thirty years: from the concept of the creative city launched in the late 1980's, through peacemaking, smart cities, re-programming the city and pop-up architecture, all the way to the other side of the spectrum with *baugemeinschaften*, guerrilla gardening and activist architecture. It all advances the complete opposite of modernist ideals, such as understanding the new city as a whole, as a body with organs all part of an overarching form – the reading of the modernist dream city as purely an aesthetic, spatial experience. We see this clearly in Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, the *High Rise City* by Ludwig Hilbersheimer and in Oscar Niemeyer's *Brasilia*, just to mention the most obvious examples. These projects are all based on the idea that the traditional city structure represented an uncontrollable, socially unjust, degenerated sickness. Impossible to cure, it needed amputation. So after the collapse of modernism, instead of trying to systematize and control urban growth, the new urban theories started to celebrate the raw dynamism of cities. Retroactive manifestos of Manhattanism, translated into complex ecologies of overlapping deregulated markets, multi-connected grids

allowing for free flow, these theories paved the way for the fragmented, smooth, individualized and interchangeable contemporary city that today has come to be the ideal for politicians, architects and urban planners world-wide.

Coming back to the Situationists and their critique of the city and the society of spectacle, they pointed out how authentic social life had been colonized by commodification, and now only appeared as representation – a development degrading the possibility of critical thought. Guy Debora saw the strategy of *détournement* as a way to disrupt this regime of spectacle, to create rifts through which an alternative perspective became possible, an opening towards a radical reordering of society. Underneath the pavement, the beach. Perhaps they were right, but they also underestimated the impact of the capitalist and modern revolution on every aspects of society, how deep the systems of control ran below. Underneath the pavement, the pavement.

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