Chapter 6

Public Space – Freedom, Equality, Fraternity

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Introduction

According to Plato, the awareness of group life and the polis, when undertaken with rigor and ethics, allow for the establishment of a perfect social order. The philosopher describes in The Republic what, for many of us in the West, can be considered the first "informed city," although not exactly a democratic city. Kallipolis is an ideal city with a physical organization that reflects its vision of a just and harmonious society, where each individual plays a specific role according to their abilities and aptitudes, and where territorial division ensures efficiency and order. We all know from historical experience and the development of societies that this "utopia" is far from being a constructed and lived reality. However, we can imagine that its rigidly hierarchical structure, even if defined with the purpose of correcting injustices in the management of the Greek polis, would hinder change and spontaneous citizen participation.

In Greek civilization, the concept of city is based on the unity of people of the same species in a given place. The polis has a strongly ethnic and localized character, which is expressed in its resistance to physical growth and in the difficulty for a resident foreigner to acquire citizenship status. Instead, in Roman culture, the idea of city contemplates urban expansion and the influx of people different in religion or ethnicity. Civitas designates the community of citizens who inhabit the city, diverse people who agree to live under the same law, and urbs is its physical territory. Establishing a distinction between polis as a well-defined territory that allows for rich and shared social relations, and urbs as a space of exchange and growth where the law allows for the coexistence of differences, Maximo Cacciari (2009), in *The City*, observes that the development of the European city was sustained by the Roman concept, but throughout this process, the nostalgia for the polis, the "city home", remained.

It is thus between these two paradigms that the European city evolves. If, on the one hand, settlement has always been understood as the persistence of the site, on the other hand, the city has always been seen as a hub of population concentration with a vocation to grow. However, the more the city expands, the more it dissolves, disintegrating and fragmenting. The centre is no longer necessarily the main point of reference, and certainly not the only one, and the internal logic of the organization of spaces changes. In *The reign of the urban and the death of the city*, Françoise Choay (2006) observed the disappearance of the traditional city, replaced by what she generically refers to as «the urban», where interaction among individuals multiplies and relocates, and where the old solidarity between urbs and civitas dissolves.

Throughout this paper, we will try to understand the evolution of the European city, consider the characteristics of the contemporary city, and look for viable responses in the field of urban design, particularly in terms of public space, to recover the connection between the citizen and the city within the framework of relationships that currently characterise the contemporary world. We address public space as a significant void that must accommodate a vast program of multiple uses aggregated by the qualified presence of Urban Design. Thus, the methodology is based on the issues of the Urban Project, understood as a relationship between the scale of the territory and the scale of architecture, exploring the potential of the notion of "open form", which promotes an expanded capacity for interaction and change, and seeks integrate indeterminacy, transience, and the user's subjective appropriation, within a coherent and consistent formal system based on a topological conception and composition of fragments.

Today, the design of cities must consider parameters that ponder ecological, landscape and environmental issues, and simultaneously consider the apparently spontaneous appropriation processes that occur in the most diverse

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cultures. Reflecting on today's urban space requires the search for new freedoms, new languages, and new metaphors.

The evolution of the European city

In *The City and the Architect*, Leonardo Benevolo (1984) points to the medieval city as the closest period in which one can grasp the full meaning of urban invention, a practice that, according to the author, would be systematized and dispersed from the Renaissance onwards, when a new definition emerges deriving from the assertion of the autonomy of art, in which the city is the set of formal qualities of the environment that an artist alone is able to imagine and design. In *History of the City*, Benevolo (2005) explains that, in the medieval city, there is a common public space that spreads throughout it and in which all public and private buildings participate, with their eventual internal spaces, and that squares are not independent enclosures, but wide areas closely linked to the converging streets, that lend themselves to various uses. However, this author emphasizes that the balance between public and private spaces is not achieved spontaneously or arbitrarily; it depends on the compromise between public law and private interests, and their points of contact - projections onto the street, exterior stairs, porticoes - are meticulously regulated by municipal statutes. A similar opinion is held by Françoise Choay (1996) in *The Rule and the Model*, who attributes to edicts, particularly in the 14th and 15th centuries, the merit of achieving a balance, never again found, between individual initiative and the consensus of the collective, and between the forces of tradition and the power of innovation.

Françoise Choay (1996) also points to the 15th century as the moment when an autonomous discursive formation emerges for the organization of built space, founded on the idea that the structure of a construction depends on a set of rational decisions possessing their own logic, which marks a break with tradition. Bernardo Secchi (2000), in *First Lesson in Urbanism*, characterizes the medieval approach to city design by fragmentation and "paratactic approximation", differing from the modern approach initiated with the Renaissance, where, we infer, what we can designate as "syntactic articulation" develops. In this new urban language, Secchi identifies distinctive elements such as the "layout", which qualifies the perspectival void, and the strategic positioning of complex and elaborate buildings. According to this author, between the Renaissance and the 19th century, the city was built through the arrangement and composition of large blocks of prefabricated material, which were refined over time. However, until the 17th century, the modern city did not produce a large amount of urban fabric, with the medieval city remaining as the backdrop.

In *Theories and History of Architecture*, Manfredo Tafuri (1968) notes that Brunelleschi's "urban revolution" is carried out from architectural objects, apparently with the awareness that the rigor of their construction alone would introduce a new code of reading. The great lesson of this humanism would be the consideration of the pre-existing city as a structure available to change its overall meaning when the continuous narrative of Romanesque-Gothic undergoes the introduction of compact architectural objects. Thus, the projects of Brunelleschi and Alberti would be conceived as architecture on a city scale, which would explain why these authors did not feel the need to codify urban utopias. In *Architecture and Utopia*, Tafuri (1976) analyses the dissolution of the humanist city and alerts us to the new dimension of the open urban structure of cities from the 19th century onwards. In the "universe of precision" of technological reality, those who abandoned the traditional conception of architecture as a stable structure that formalizes permanent values and consolidates urban morphology only had to regard the city as a specific place of technological production and reduce architecture to a mere link in the production chain. The author describes the development of the bourgeois metropolis as the creation of a space of absolute alienation, starting from the destruction of the planning and construction schemes of the Baroque city.

Bernardo Secchi (2000) highlights the figure of continuity as pivotal in the modern era. According to him, it relates to the bourgeois conception of land alienation and the continuous, isotropic, and divisible nature of their city, identifying with the idea of freedom and infinite possibility of circulation and subdivision of the real. In its history, it would have taken on other figures. Thus, the figure of continuity, emerging in the 16th century, would become the capture of the infinite in the 17th century, regularity and transparency in the 18th century, and articulation and hierarchy in the 19th century, when it achieves the most complete and coherent representations in the unification of the urban space of the great European capitals. Secchi also highlights the figure of the fragment, which runs through the history of the city and opposes the figure of continuity. While the figure of continuity seeks liberation from any contingent character and pursues the image of regular, isotropic, and universal urban space, stripped of any contingent character, the fragment refers to a topological conception and the importance of the specificity of places. The figure of continuity is associated with a synthetic idea of the city project, while the figure of the fragment is identified with the idea of a procedural policy of construction and modification, made up of subtractive and cumulative additions, which manage to give new meaning to the entire urban complex.

It can be said that the contemporary city, especially one with a long historical pedigree, is an accumulation of parts. Throughout its development, urban interventions inspired by the figure of continuity have not managed to overcome circumstantial contingencies or eradicate traces of the past to constitute a regular, isotropic, and universal urban space. The European city is thus a repository of materials from the past: some are details of unrealized projects (potentially inspired by the figure of continuity), while others are parts of the city that initially

constituted themselves as fragments. In 1978 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter (1983) advocated in *Collage City* that cities should be seen as collages of different architectural styles, historical layers, and cultural influences, rather than unified compositions, but 20 years later Françoise Choay (2006) concluded that the European city will only survive in the form of fragments immersed in the tide of the urban.

A world of fragments

If the figure of the fragment has always accompanied the history of the city, it is with the dilation and dispersion of the late 20th century that it takes centre stage. In *The Neo-Baroque Era*, Omar Calabrese (1999) makes a distinction between detail and fragment, according to which the former has defined outlines, delineated by a conscious cutting action that allows for the reconstruction of the whole, while in the latter, the boundaries are distinguished as an interruption signalled by irregular contours, which require a reconstruction of the whole through trial and error. According to Calabrese, while the detail, being the object of a precise and conscious delineation, needs the evocation of the whole to define itself, the fragment explains itself, thus opposing detail and fragment as deliberate and accidental, as flat geometry and fractal geometry. The notion of the fragment is essential for understanding the contemporary city. While this figure has always accompanied the history of the city, it is with the expansion and dispersion of the late 20th century that it takes centre stage.

Giandomenico Amendola (2000), in *The Postmodern City*, recalls that the city has always been organized into parts, and that it has always managed access to these parts as a criterion for selection and discrimination, however, as Secchi (2000) points out, in the contemporary city there is a tendency towards a continuous destruction of positional values, a progressive standardization and democratization of urban space, the replacement of traditional places of sociability by others in the process of being functionally and formally defined, in which there is often a certain nostalgia for the characteristics of the past. The commuting movements between home and work that mark time in the modern industrial city have also been progressively replaced by a dispersion of movements between variable points, carried out by heterogeneous individuals and at different times.

As Françoise Choay (2006) reminds us, the compression of time in physical movements and in the acquisition and communication of information eliminates some of the spatial restrictions and servitudes to which human settlements were subjected. Paul Virilio (1996) notes, in *Politics of the Very Worst*, that while in the 19th century in Europe the central issue was the relationship between city and countryside and in the following century that between centre and periphery, in the 21st century the problem lies in the dichotomy between sedentary and nomadic, between those who are sedentary because of a job and those who are no longer located and who move from one precarious job to another. Employment has become ephemeral, volatile, generating fast and inconstant dynamics in space and time. Distance seems irrelevant, because the worker has adapted electronically, replacing the criteria of connection and accessibility with those of distance and absence. This perception of a new world and a new space has changed the relationship between man and the city and man and architecture.

According to Virilio, the city should be the place of paths and trajectories, the place of proximity between people and the organization of contact. The increase in the speed at which we can establish contact and the attempt to democratize this speed characterize contemporary society. Commuting in cities, their organization, proximity, overlap and flows, change the individual's relationship with space and time, and the acceleration that has taken place in this process, particularly with the widespread use of the internet, has dramatically altered our relationship with the world. Our view of the world is no longer objective but tele objective; it distorts distant and close planes, making our relationship with the world one where the faraway and the nearby are seen on the same plane.

Bernardo Secchi (2000) stated that the contemporary city is the place of non-contemporaneity because it denies linear time, the ordered succession along the line of progress as imagined by modern culture. Indeed, the weakening of the central places' attractiveness, the obsolescence of urban sectors, and the growth of the periphery are phenomena that characterize the territory of the contemporary city. We enter the realm of the urban as described by Françoise Choay (2006), or, from a more constructive perspective, into that of the horizontal city. As Paola Viganò (2018) explains, this horizontality is a configuration whose dynamics are contextualized based on limited and close information. It is defined by opposition to vertical centre-periphery relations and is characterized by a territorial complementarity in which dependency relations fade away, giving rise to large polycentric and acentric urban configurations that are not guided by a comprehensive vision, nor even by a global awareness.

But the contemporary city does not have identical characteristics everywhere. As Indovina (2022) points out, in Europe, territorial metropolises are almost always modest in size, with the "advantage of size" and without the "disadvantage of concentration of size" and are based on the existence of an old and extremely rich urban network. This brings us back to the notion put forward by André Corboz (1983), of land as a palimpsest, because of the accumulation of marks left by its occupation, which supports the idea that the foundation of planning can no longer be the city, but this territorial background to which it must be subordinated. Secchi (2000) also argues that the project of the contemporary city is primarily linked to a soil design project, capable of constructing a perspective for the dispersed, fragmented, and heterogeneous city. This involves permeating and interconnecting the city's parts, utilizing materials, and creating situations where a new urban aesthetic and the social practices of our time

can be recognized. It's easy to see in Secchi`s words an analogy to the work of early modern architects such as Alberti or Brunelleschi.

The contemporary city thus resembles the medieval city as a place where people mingle, and activities diversify. Its fragments are the materials of an open system, susceptible to connection and composition, and their heterogeneity does not prevent the construction of a horizon of meaning and a unitary form. However, as Secchi warns, the condition of dispersion, mixing of people and diversification of activities means that contemporary territories and cities cannot be solved by projects that seek the same level of definition at all points. The contemporary city calls for doubt and experimentation; it requires more open projects and more articulated and stratified mechanisms than those imagined for the modern city. For Secchi, this city project should be conceived as a "document" upon which an agreement can be reached between administration and citizens. Here, there is a clear reference to the management of the medieval city as discussed by Benevolo and Choay.

The open form and public space

Rem Koolhaas (2010), in his text *Advancement versus Apocalypse*, observes that the hybrid condition is the condition of the moment. However, in his opinion, it is not necessary to repudiate modernity or announce its end, because we already know its defects and vices, and we are more perspicacious towards its alternatives. In line with this idea, it seems to us that it is possible to reinterpret concepts developed during the modern era and apply them to contemporary circumstances.

The notion of open form was used in 1915 by Heinrich Wölfflin (1952) in *Fundamental Concepts of Art History* to distinguish the closed forms of the Renaissance from the open forms of the Baroque, but, in *Principles of Modern Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz (2005) uses the same expression to characterize the urban space of the Modern Movement, which, according to him, stems from the desire to include each work in a more complete world, moving away from the tradition of the closed systems of the past, that the author associates with styles, in which each form is related to the others and its meaning depends on these relationships. For Norberg-Schulz, this implies that the open form seeks to establish an interactive relationship between the characters of "here" and "there", and that although the identity of the place is not suppressed, it must not be allowed to close itself off as a self-sufficient world.

The open form of the Modern Movement had already been criticized in 1975 by Panerai, Castex, and Depaule (2004), who censured the weakening it caused in the relationship between buildings and the exterior space, or by Rowe and Koetter (2004), who pointed out in 1978 the replacement of the closed blocks of the traditional city by the open form of the Modern Movement as causing a reversal in the relationship between figure and ground in city design. However, more recent theorists such as Marti Aris (2005) or Montaner (2008) have questioned this accusation of urban dissolution, recalling that modern architecture systematically designed open space, although not denying the distancing that occurred between buildings.

Despite everything, as Secchi (2000) points out, what causes strangeness and disorientation in the peripheries of the modern city is mainly the absence of a significant experience of open space, which, because it is so extensive, seems to have lost a clear status. The author also recalls that much of modern urbanism's efforts were directed towards a formal and functional definition of the constituent elements of open space, increasingly precise, eliminating the indeterminacy of the open space of the ancient city and its formal availability for multiple interpretations.

This question takes us back to the differentiation between modern and traditional urban spaces that Alan Colquhoun (2009) made in 1977, distinguishing the notions of form and figure, the former designating a configuration with natural meaning or without meaning, and the latter referring to a configuration whose meaning is given by culture. In 2000, Marti Aris (2005) crossed this distinction with the notion of abstraction in architecture. According to him, the abstract procedure reduces the architectural task to the syntactic aspect and the figurative elaboration gives greater weight to the semantic aspect. This argument is interesting because it allows us to deduce that form, defined syntactically but without meaning, or with natural meaning, can acquire or densify it through the relationship it establishes with the context or through user appropriation.

The notion of Open Form was formulated with a different meaning by Oskar and Zofia Hansen, at the 1959 CIAM in Oterloo, to illustrate the capacity of architectural form to integrate indeterminacy, transience and the subjective appropriation of the user, an idea that was also understood as a critique towards the spaces generated by the mainstream of the Modern Movement. For Hansen (1961), the architectural and urban proposals of the Modern Movement are based on closed forms, in the sense that they are determined a priori and do not contemplate change: "It seems to me that Brasilia-Capital will be antique before it is completed, for it, too, is based on the Closed Form". The openness of form that Oskar Hansen advocates has to do with the possibility of accommodating subsequent developments. The architect's definition should leave room for the individual expression of the users and constitute a passe-partout (in Hansen's own words) that frames the changes taking place in that space.

This figure of the passe-partout could perhaps also be applied to the soil design project strategy that Secchi was talking about, a strategy capable of reading the marks and specificity of the territory, of incorporating the

appropriation of the population and the indeterminacy of their routes, of contemplating the obsolescence of urban materials and solutions to new ecological challenges, and of reconnecting the dispersed urbanity. The urban form that will characterize the public space is not determined a priori by this process because it does not require the use of models or types but is conditioned by the definition of a framework of references. Ultimately, it proposes a reading of the place and, simultaneously, of its urban condition. Speaking at a conference in Lisbon in 2013, entitled *The 'open work' in times of uncertainty*, Nuno Portas also defended the importance of the design of common spaces for collective use in urban design, stating that the city is drawn from the void, and that buildings are defined according to this. This notion of 'ground design' would allow us to design the city without having to determine the exact construction of the buildings, which can be more of a transitory nature.

Manuel de Solà-Morales (2010), in *The Impossible Project of Public Space*, argues that the urban physical quality lies in the correct understanding of the boundaries of a space. In his opinion, good public space has no fixed limits, or if it does, they are fluctuating and multiple, and its references to the urban whole are more important than its own identity, which, nevertheless, is reinforced by them. According to Solà-Morales, in the contemporary city, we can no longer view public spaces with reference to a notion of urban structure, whether functional or semantic. Instead, like the Greeks, we must read civilized space as a topological and tactical order. Public space, as a structure of different streets and squares, is the substance of interaction and redundancy that shared life brings, and the city, a blend of conflict and solidarity, stability and dynamism, connection and distance, appears in the material condition of public space. Here, we recognise the idea of a paratactic approach to the city, as discussed by Secchi, Choay, and Benevolo, regarding the design of the medieval city.

A new urban ecology

The need for a paradigm shift, which we see in the design of public space, extends to the way we view human occupation of the planet. As Jacinto Rodrigues (2011) observes, ecology, a new science with a conscience, must be a decisive factor in reversing the antagonism between civilisational "progress" and nature created by the old techno-scientific paradigm. Another paradigm is therefore needed, in which ecotechnology replaces exhausting technoscience and the technosphere gives way to a recyclable and renewable ecotechnosphere. In this sense, rather than sophisticated and heavy technological investments, what is needed are ingenious solutions that, based on scientific and rigorous observation, make it possible to convert apparently antagonistic situations into useful complementarities.

The diversification of space use within the same urban area is often cited today as a factor that favours sustainability. However, the current reality of urban territory has redefined the relationship between open space and built space, establishing itself as a new ecology. As Paola Viganò (2018) reminds us, the metabolism of the Horizontal Metropolis is different from that created by the traditional urban/rural dichotomy, but its qualities and potentialities have not yet been fully investigated and appreciated. Nevertheless, Michiel Dehaene (2018), in *Horizontal Metropolis: Issues and Challenges of a New Urban Ecology Statements*, sees opportunities in this situation, noting that the Horizontal Metropolis is full of distinct situations that are on the threshold of an urban mode of operation and can be easily reconfigured considering a new balance between collective investment and collective benefits.

For Mosen Mostafavi (2010) it is important to recognize that today we have a unique opportunity to reconsider the core of the disciplines that help us think about the phenomenon of the urban: urbanism and urban design. Ecological urbanism must be constituted as an alternative form of urbanism capable of simultaneously bringing together the benefits of both bottom-up and top-down planning approaches. The need for differentiation requires not assuming fixed rules, but promoting a set of flexible principles that can be adapted to the circumstances and conditions of a given location.

This is what Andrea Branzi (2010) does in his text *For a Post-Environmentalism: Seven Suggestions for a New Athens Charter*, where he proposes recommendations for the current, existing, and present city, a city that always needs to be reconfigured and replanned in the name of temporal balances that require a developing scenario, and that must constantly produce laws to positively manage its permanent crisis. Branzi's recommendations are based on the fluidity of the urban fabric, the adaptation of existing urban material, the reversibility of interventions and the porosity and blurring of boundaries. Although Mostafavi writes that Branzi advocates a non-typological or compositional approach to the city, his recommendations do not necessarily exclude the possibility of a design that regulates the production of urban material and establishes relationships between dispersed urbanity.

Discussion and Conclusion

As Massimo Cacciari said, the city in its history is the perennial experience of giving shape to contradiction and conflict. When we try to account for the development of this administration throughout history, despite the dramatic

transformation that urban territory and the organization of society have undergone in recent times, we come across constant, or at least recurring, values and figures that allow us to think that it is still possible to manage this balance. Fragment, open form, paratactic approach, soil design project, porosity of boundaries, on the one hand, and, on the other, the incorporation of the transience of uses and the participation and appropriation of citizens, are tools, among others, that give us the chance of hoping to achieve a meaningful horizon for the urban territory, of reuniting the urbs and the civitas, and, who knows, of achieving the lost polis. However, there is no doubt that changes are urgently needed in the organization of priorities as a society.

We already know that discontinuity, change, and indeterminacy are part of the present of our urban territory. This forces us to think about it in a more specific way and to manage it more closely. In a way, this situation recalls the administration of public space in the medieval city, which we've already talked about in this paper, whose model could now be considered in a more decentralised, participatory and informed way. Liberté, egalité, fraternité. However, there are now international issues that we absolutely cannot ignore, such as the ecological agenda. Mosen Mostafavi's suggestion of simultaneously combining the benefits of bottom-up and top-down approaches to urban planning may point the way. But new universal challenges are opening in the field of urban and architectural design, which underpins Branzi's call for a new Athens Charter and perhaps may bring forward a new vanguard.

Nowadays, the reference to ecology must be the shaping and catalysing element of new thinking and urban design, understanding ecology as a possible epistemological breakthrough. This approach will only be possible with the participation of an active and conscious citizenry, promoting a balanced relationship between man, nature, culture and technology in the landscape, territory and city. Education, training and planning strategies based on knowledge, analysis, reflection and critical thinking are needed; this (re)definition of space requires practical and competent action that promotes an ecologically sustainable alternative society. The current model based on fossil fuels, in contaminating growth, in quantitative production, generating increasing pollution, demands a transdisciplinary vocation capable of creating methodologies so that professional intervention is situated on an ecological, social, pedagogical, and cultural level; capable of contributing to a new vision of society. Only this complex and systemic approach can articulate and call for the proposition of a new paradigm.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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