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THE FULL TO EMPTY

METHODOLOGY AND STRATEGY FOR THE EVALUATION OF OBSOLETE URBAN SPACES

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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This work refers to the evaluation of obsolete urban spaces and has a dual purpose: first theoretical, the comprehension of concepts relating to urban spaces temporally transient; and by a practical side, of application of an evaluation methodology.

The question guiding this thesis is then: What are the characteristics of urban spaces in process of transformation and obsolescence, and what is its potential in the processes of urban regeneration, as a contribution to urban design?

1. Theoretical approximation to the subject

From a theoretical viewpoint, this work focuses on an epistemological problem: given the passage of time implied in urban spaces and its transformation and permanence, it is proposed the study of a set of concepts trying to contribute to, a more or less stable definition of the instability factors in the contemporary urbanity.

It is essentially an epistemological question that arises from the concept of 'Urban Void', and interest us clarify it. As such, other related concepts should also be the subject of theoretical study in order to assist us in that understanding.

The definition of **city** constructs and reconstructs itself through various concepts that, ever, was not consensual, and today is no exception.

When we talk about the city we refer to the social construction and to the recovery of different spaces, public and private, that pretend to be spaces of contact, symbolic places and of social relationships. But the city is also composed of a physical reality, given by various landscapes and organized spaces that are part of urban life. As such, the city can be broadly defined as an open, complex and changing system, whose evolution is reflected in the 'modernization process'¹.

Understanding the 'modernization process' is important because it is in the transition from one stage to another, and as these 'urban revolution' takes hold, that the different urban spaces lose or gain importance, which translates in what we actually

¹ François Ascher, *Novos Princípios para o Urbanismo seguido de Novos Compromissos Urbanos. Um Léxico*, Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2010.

call as 'Urban Voids', and here we consider as obsolete urban spaces, which boosted the study of this dissertation.

Speaking in the city, it is inevitable to talk in **public space**. Public space is an indicator of the quality of the city², and as such, it is intended that this is a democratic space calling for citizenship, including rights of centrality and mobility that promote it. These spaces are indicators of social quality of the city, intending to be spaces that promote the collective character of its use, as well as the values of dignity, equality and differentiation.

Space and society are closely related and their relationship is based on a bilateral process³: the space is modified by people while they are influenced by it. As such, the quality of public space is evaluated by the intensity and quality of social relations that it provides⁴, since it is designed assuming a public domain. The public space reflects one determined society, one determined city, in a determined time.

Having as a starting point the idea that *"new forms of public life require new spaces"*⁵ the resurgence of public space is, for some, the answer to the idea that this is in decline, reflected by the transformation process in the public domain, which becomes increasingly dense, diverse and democratic.

The privatization process of public space is a relatively new concept, and is characterized by the transfer of activities undertaken in the public domain to the private domain, making more evident the dissolution between what is public and what is private⁶.

These privatized public spaces may tend to become spaces which lack a fundamental characteristic to the public space - the diversity - increasing the individualization process, and endangering civil rights already conquered⁷.

² Jordi Borja, Zaida Muxi, *El Espacio Público: Ciudad y Ciudadanía*. Barcelona: Electa, 2003.

³ Mathew Carmona [et al], *Public Places - Urban Spaces. The dimension of Urban Design*. Oxford: Architectural Press, 2003

⁴ Jordi Borja, op. cit

⁵ Mathew Carmona [et al], op. cit

⁶ Catálogo de la exposición *Revolving Doors*, Fundación Telefónica. Madrid, 2004 cit in Jorge Benavides Solís, *Diccionario Urbano Conceptual y Transdisciplinar*. Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2009.

⁷ Jordi Borja, Zaida Muxi, *El Espacio Público: Ciudad y Ciudadanía*. Barcelona: Electa, 2003.

In response to safety concerns of public space emerges the notion of '*agorofobia urbana*', in a post-industrial context, expressed as the "*fear of public space*"⁸.

In this process of change it is interesting to study the concept of **urban landscape**, since it is a highly dynamic environment, where interact relationships of varied natures that are maintained or change over time and are also responsible for the shaping of the city and the urban environment/experience.

The urban landscape is due to several transformations and is now subject of regeneration processes⁹ and as such it is essential to understand its dimensions. Each landscape is associated with an urban environment and image, so that we can decompose that image into three components (identity, structure and meaning) that are subject of study when we want to understand how the change process works in this field.

Implying the existence of an observer, it is still necessary to deepen the way it perceives the landscape - through the understanding of concepts such as sensation and perception.

The current city is built on the heritage of the modern movement that is based on the functionalist model, which ran an industrial model applied to the city.

While remaining the dynamics that are present throughout the all modernization process (individualization, rationalization and social differentiation), they are widening over time, bringing with them **new concepts**, ideas and ways of thinking about the city and urban design and where the idea of uncertainty becomes an increasingly present and evident notion.

As such, it is difficult to say what should be the new urbanism, but it is understood that this has to read today's society, too complex, and work with heterogeneous city, assuming it, and with problems different from the past, in particular contexts of uncertainty associated with these new territories.

⁸ Jordi Borja, Zaida Muxi, *El Espacio Público: Ciudad y Ciudadanía*. Barcelona: Electa, 2003.

⁹ Pedro Brandão- *A identidade dos lugares e a sua representação colectiva*. Lisboa: DGOTDU, 2008.

The passage of **time**, a key element of this changing process, may be experienced in the urban environment through progressive and irreversible changes. They are particularly important in the study of the transformations of identity and permanence of different urban spaces.

New concepts arise in these transitions taking place over time and we are particularly interested in the study of those who have, in the urban space, a transience character associated.

The term 'Urban Void' is one of those concepts and, largely, was the attempt of understanding the universe that it wants to set, which served as a lever for this dissertation.

It is an ambiguous concept, putting the question if the original term still has the capacity to define what it wants, since it seems that, nowadays, it is a 'construct' of juxtaposed ideas. However there is a consensus on their condition of temporal transition space, with the ability to create - "*opportunities predictable although no deadline*"¹⁰ - the necessary transformation dynamics to transform the "voids" into opportunities.

Another concept - ***Terrain Vague*** - like the 'urban voids', also aims to define these 'new' spaces of urban territory that result from the changing process in question. They are also spaces with a transience character associated, however the *terrain vague* term proves to be richer, because it takes advantage of the double sense of the word *vague* - vague. As such, it is implicit one character of uncertainty associated with an expectant condition, as well as the notion of empty space, with the condition of obsolete and unproductive.

Perhaps it was more efficient to consider these spaces as ***Urban Vague*** and not as 'voids', taking advantage of the double meaning of the word 'vague', since it is more appropriate and rigorous to define the implicit spaces.

¹⁰ Nuno Portas, "Do vazio ao cheio". *Cadernos de Urbanismo* nº2

Also under the theoretical research, it was considered relevant to understand another relatively new concept - the **Non-Places**. This concept aims to represent the 'places' contemporaries, which can be characterized by movement, communication and consumption, as opposed to the idea of the anthropological place¹¹.

We can affirm that, to date, the relationships established in these non-places are different from those established in the 'places' of the past. However the cognitive interpretation that every individual makes of the space, remains very own and personal, regardless of time and changes associated with them (space and individual).

Although, public spaces are not only those who are thought as it, but all the others with the ability to become public places. Therefore, we are interested in considering in the city not only the unoccupied and unused spaces, but all those who still are active structures in the city, but that in the context of a determined urban fabric, don't have the most effective and/or efficient role.

Obsolete urban spaces is the terminology with which we intend to classify urban spaces and buildings that have already entered in a obsolescence process, by defining three basic types of study: the unoccupied urban spaces, the unused urban spaces and the underutilized urban spaces.

For each type it is also important to understand and determine the different dimensions that reflect this obsolescence process, pointing five distinct dimensions, which may occur separately or simultaneously.

These classifications are relatively temporary, since different handicaps arises, the elements to be considered may change, which of course translates into re-evaluations of these conditions of obsolescence.

The interest in the study of these spaces is related to the strong sense of opportunity associated with them, while enhancers of the change of the current urban fabric, becoming key-elements to regeneration projects and urban renewal, pointing out the consolidated tissue and allowing the intervention.

¹¹ Marc Augé, *Não-Lugares. Introdução a uma antropologia da sobremodernidade*. Lisboa: 90º Editora, 2005

Within this concept of strategic management, the process of conformation, permanence and transformation is important in the study of these spaces, since it results over time, with physical and symbolic implications.

Of the evaluation of these transformation dynamics is then possible to classify them as stable, re-meanings, in rupture or deleted spaces, since they reflect the passage of time in space, which conforms through possible juxtapositions of urban landscapes and creating, possibly, new identities and meanings associated.

2. Application

The case study results of these reflections about the passage of time in space, and its transformation and permanence in order to identify, analyze and classify the obsolete urban spaces existing in Ajuda, Lisbon.

As such, we classified the different urban areas to study from its current use and occupation, as unoccupied, unused and underutilized urban spaces.

Applying the concept of 'lifecycle' to urban spaces, we determine a classification throughout the type of urban obsolescence that characterizes them. Regardless of the type of space, this case study is based on an evaluation methodology of their obsolescence process, determining the causes of transformation and permanence over time. From this will, it was tried to establish a methodology capable of evaluate these obsolete urban spaces that exist in the city.

It was considered conclusive that none of the concepts touched upon previously, consider these spaces in its fullness, or at least with the desired clarity leaving, apparently out, a class of spaces we consider also fit in the concept of temporary/transition spaces - the underutilized urban spaces.

The study is conducted from the stage at which these spaces go into decline, determined by an obsolescence process, and the evaluation methodology is important

because it helps us understand how these spaces can serve as tools for intervention strategies and as a basis for that draw a new urbanism.

The aim of the practical plan was to create tools of evaluation of the obsolete urban spaces and evaluate each of these components in detail.

This part of the work was, in large part, supported on the observation of the spaces in study, and as such the perception of the urban images was an important factor in the analysis and identification of the uses and appropriations of spaces, as well as in their classification and strategic assessment.

As a reflex of this study, the types of urban spaces in analyses were organized in three categories, previously describes. The evaluation processes of obsolescence can be determined in five dimensions: the physical/structural obsolescence, functional obsolescence, local obsolescence, legal obsolescence and image obsolescence.

The degree of obsolescence, their 'curability' and its economic viability, as the elasticity and resilience of these spaces to resist or not to change, forced to have always in mind three fundamental questions to the understanding and systematization of the evaluation methodology which has mainly taken by the understanding of their formation process:

1. What are the reasons that led to the formation of these spaces and their permanence in the urban territory?
2. What are the relationships that these spaces establish with the existing urban fabric?
3. What is its impact on urban dynamics?

As such, these three questions were related and their responses were organized into four categories of spaces, according to their permanence and transformation where, once again, the 'time' is the key element of the landscape transformations.

In the formulation of strategies and possibilities, all the factors discussed above are of great importance because they determine and clarify the strategic objectives in which we must act.

Conclusions

This work don't want to be a closed study, too much objective, but a study of complex and mutable universes, leaving open the understanding of how the uncertainty factors will translate into a new way to design and what are the implications that must be take into account: in this **new urbanism** that is drawn, it must be considered a set of principles that articulate *"the long and short term through multiple advances and retreats, the large and small scale, the more general interests and the interests of most individuals."*¹²

In order to apply this work, is possible to synthesize the obtain results, at the intersection of the theoretical with the practical case, concluding:

1. The concept of city changes over time, reflecting on the emerging areas. As such, the change factor - time - accompanied us throughout this dissertation, as a central element of the study of formation and transformation of urban spaces, with the characteristics defined in a plan of 'life cycle'.
2. Also the concept of public space is changing in the contemporary urban, assuming that this is the representative element of the city, from the physical and symbolic point of view. There is agreement that over time there is always a common factor to public space, which is the fact that it is a social tool and therefore the idea associated with its crisis or 'death' is not justified since it is only a reflection of change.
3. The public space has as characteristics its general, collective and common space character, regardless of time and the associated changes. In time, the set of changes is always responsible for changing the city and its public spaces, in a number of dimensions of the urban identity.

¹² François Ascher, *Novos Princípios para o Urbanismo seguido de Novos Compromissos Urbanos. Um Léxico*, Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2010.

4. The urban landscape is also a dynamic environment that encompasses the physical conformation of the city and the relationships that interact in it, of various kinds. The dimensions, arising from its reading - environmental/natural and sociocultural - intervening in urban space (Nature and Man), are those that have implications for their transformations introducing them in obsolescence processes. However, are also these spaces - now obsolete - that are the protagonists of change of the urban landscape through its reactivation in the life cycle of the city.

5. The progressive and irreversible changes have a preponderant role in the formation of obsolete urban spaces and in the transformations of identity that this entails. These are changes that often lead to or precede the appearance of urban areas obsolete.

6. The use of the concept 'obsolete urban space' is more correct than 'urban voids' or *terrain vague*:

- Than 'urban voids' because the original term has no ability to define all the meanings that are proposed and investigated as a case study;
- Of *terrain vague* that, although a more complete end and that defines the spaces that wants to define, does not consider others spaces with a transitory nature that seem essential to us to consider when we are analyzing processes of change in urban space.