City and Public Space: Urban Transgressions, Revolution and Prosperity

Claudio Acioly Jr[1] and Anamika Madhuraj[2]

The existence of public space and its accessibility has become synonymous with quality of life in cities in the increasingly urbanized world. Moving away from its architectural, formalist, urbanistic abstraction, public spaces have grown to be regarded as an indicator of urban politics and a fundamental element in the construction of prosperous, sustainable and inclusive cities. The ordinary citizen, without necessarily being involved in the professional debate, starts to demand quality public spaces where he can move around safely, manifest himself culturally and politically, meet friends, and celebrate urbanity in its fullness. Indeed, today, public spaces are much more than streets where strangers merely brush shoulders and circulate in organised passivity. Every kerb or footpath is a reminder that cities can sustain creative pursuits. By wandering about in the space of the city according to their own sense of time, inhabitants are able to contribute to a sense of place. As de Certeau (1984, p. 93) once said, 'embodied everyday practices such as walking recover meaning and belonging in the world.'

Understanding the ever-present transformational power of public spaces, UN-Habitat's global public space programme, operational since 2012, promotes sustainable urban spaces and advocates that up to 50% of urban land be allotted to public use- with up to 30% dedicated for sidewalks and about 20% for green and open spaces (UN-Habitat, 2017a). Public spaces

---

[1] Claudio Acioly Jr is an architect and urban planner with more than 30 years of experience, working in more than 25 countries as a specialist in housing policies, urbanization of informal settlements, urban planning and management, as well as providing technical advice to governments and non-governmental organizations. He is also a specialist in training technical staff of local and national governments, universities and NGOs. He is presently the head of capacity development unit (CDU) at the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat). He was also the head of the Housing Policy Section of UN-Habitat and coordinator of the United Nations Housing Rights Program. He was a consultant to the World Bank, UNDP, UNECE, and bilateral agencies, and was associated with the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS, Netherlands) where he coordinated housing programs, urban land policies, urban renewal and favela urbanization. Claudio is an associate professor in the Latin American and Caribbean Program of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (USA) and coordinates training courses and professional updating in urbanization and regularization of informal settlements and informal urban land markets. Acioly is also the author of several books and articles, having publications in several countries.

[2] Anamika Madhuraj, one of Acioly's mentee, is presently a member of his CDU team at UN-Habitat. As a recent Political Science and Geography graduate from King's College, London, her research interests include studying structural urban poverty and urban policy formulation. She was also educated at National University of Singapore and London School of Economics. She has previously worked with the Indian Parliament, Ministry of Education in Colombia and different local NGOs in India.

are places that are publicly owned, accessible and enjoyed by all, including but not limited to open streets, squares, open spaces and public facilities, that maintain its spatial, historical, environmental, social and economic attributes (Charter of Public Space, 2013). Additionally, the Project for Public Spaces[3] organization also argues that a successful public space fulfils four measurable attributes: (1) sociability, (2) use and activities, (3) accessibility and connectivity, and (4) comfort and image.

It is also to be expected, then, that the discipline and profession that has the design and creation of public space as one of its inherent attributions will gain prominence in the coming decades. The first decade of the 21st century has provided us with a significant production of research, studies, plans, and projects that underline the importance of public space and its role in urban revitalization, production of quality life and identity of cities[4].Consequently, the urban configuration, its spatiality and quality, its functioning and performance as an urban structure and its capacity to provide quality of life and universal accessibility to inhabitants is now studied and worked in its multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral set.

However, the process of urban design itself, in its aim to prioritize big investors and maximize consumption, compromises local needs and discourages activities that don't produce a dividend, such as free seating, public toilets or area for people to simply socialise and exercise their right to the urban. For instance, the research carried out by UN-Habitat for the Urban Prosperity Index of 23 Colombian cities (UN-Habitat, 2016) reveal that these cities suffer from a serious deficiency of public space. Although they perform better in other dimensions of prosperity such as infrastructure and road connectivity, such a deficiency is significantly affecting performance and well-being in these cities.

With opportunities for association minimized by design, a new paradigm that recognises the failure of market-led development to initiate and preserve public spaces should evolve. There is potential for actions springing from sidewalks to reclaim the city by moving past the privileged actions of commerce encouraged by cities. Urbanism and urban design must overcome their functional aesthetic formalism in the 21st century, understand its own

---

[3] The Project for Public Spaces www.pps.org

[4] UN-Habitat has promoted many studies, pilot projects and guidelines and recommendations emphasizing the importance and role of public space in the process of urban development and sustainability of cities. Some partnerships with non-governmental organizations have promoted the international debate, with meetings and seminars. The 'Project for Public Spaces www.pps.org 'The Future of Places', Buenos Aires (2014) and Stockholm (2015), www.futureofplaces.com conferences

potential as a place-making activity and incorporate attributes of quality of life to transcend the placelessness often experienced in cities. As a practical discipline, it will have to develop appropriate methodologies and techniques to produce urban spaces and environments centered on citizenship that contribute to urban development and the sustainability of cities by facilitating meeting places for social, cultural and economic interactions.

This means that vocational education and training institutions also have their share of responsibilities. It is essential to create a new generation of urban planners who incorporate this vision and enable this transformation globally with the aid of a new discipline that is both valued and scrutinized according to its capacity to produce urban spaces centered on the human scale that favor urban mobility, collective social welfare, greater equality of opportunity and connectivity (Gehl, 2014). This will spearhead an urbanism that empowers citizens by offering solutions that aggregate, congregate and strengthen social interaction in space and place, in the neighbourhood and in the city as a whole.

There is also no way of exempting government structures from their responsibilities of formulating and executing public policies that promote quality urban planning and generate the production, implementation, financing, management and maintenance of public spaces. It is healthy to note that not only large Brazilian cities like Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, Fortaleza, but also intermediate cities are valuing this dimension in their plans

Figure 1 Forum of Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre © Joel Vargas/PMPA

and organization of their urban structures (World Bank Group, 2015). Moreover, we now also have a global charter of principles endorsed by UN-Habitat- the New Urban Agenda (NUA)- where public space is an included and integral element (Charter of Public Space, 2013). The NUA ensures that legislation for protecting adequate quantity and good quality public space is adopted by cities (New Urban Agenda, 2017).

However, the creation of public space is not an end goal that we reach when state inscribes it into law. Instead, we must follow this evolution and revolution of concepts and practices at

all levels if we want to generate urban prosperity and social well-being, thus strengthening the role of cities in sustainable development. A step towards uniting these struggles is to adopt the notion of the right to the city 'as both a working slogan and a political ideal' (Harvey 2003, p.54).

Right to the city can be regarded as a passionate plea for the 'transformed and renewed right to urban life' (Lefebvre 1996, pp.172-3). Two concepts are crucial in achieving this: appropriation and participation. As the demands of consumption are prioritised, other social needs like play and intimacy are neglected in the city. Appropriation involves holding the inalienable right to play in, work in, live in and use the urban space. Indeed, everyday use of cities provide clues to an alternative production of space while remaining both 'appropriating and confrontational' (Ameel and Tani 2012, p.26). Meanwhile, participation emphasises the right for all inhabitants to collectively make decisions concerning the production of their urban space (Lefebvre 1996, p.145).

Ocupa tu Calle – 'occupy your street' in Spanish – is a public space micro-intervention strategy developed by Lima Cómo Vamos, a citizen urban observatory organisation in Metropolitan Lima and Callao. In 2016-2017, UN-Habitat funded and completed 21 such micro-interventions, in consultation with local stakeholders and residents, that converted disused spaces into vibrant public spaces- including 'parklets', marketplaces, gardens, playgrounds, pedestrianisation projects etc- benefitting more than 380,000 people across Lima (UN-Habitat 2017a, pp.34-35).

Instead of thinking of cities as orderly, uniform and predictable; walking, running, skateboarding etc indicate that cities can be conceived as a series of playful micro-spaces, building an effective and low-risk means for people to dialectically engage with the everyday while resisting, critiquing, reclaiming and transforming it through improvisational tactics.

Figure 2 Congress Square Park, then and now © Project for Public Spaces

The case of the reclaiming of the Congress Square Park at the heart of Portland is a particularly striking story of collective placemaking. Although this park had been on the decline for years and marked to be sold off for private development, a grassroot campaign- Friends of Congress Square Park- brought back recognition and attachment to the square. Featuring free community events, classes, local arts and businesses and cultural performances, today, this park is a central part of the urban and social life of Portland's residents. This community driven project resulted in the preservation and transformation of the park (Project for Public Spaces, 2015).

Are we talking in this paper about an urbanistic transformation similar to that which began in the late 1960s with the process of urban revitalization of the degraded urban centers and ancient port areas of European and North American cities? Would it be a new urban renaissance as promoted by Richard Rodgers in leading the working group to respond to the decline of British cities and their economic, social and territorial impasses?[5] (Urban Task Force, 2005). The revitalization of the former port areas of Baltimore, Boston, New York, London, Barcelona, Rotterdam and Hamburg, just to name a few, already indicated that one of their reasons for success was closely linked to the provision of quality public spaces, well designed and adapted to the needs and demands of citizens,

Figure 3: Challenging the desolation in downtown Rotterdam, 1966 © Ary Groeneveld

recreating vitality of use and local symbolic value while blending residential, commercial and entertainment functions. The drawing of excellence, in terms of well-connected and densified public space, as promoted by the British working group, encourages the attraction of the population that seeks to live and use spaces that had been abandoned and depreciated until

---

[5] *'Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance'* (2005). An independent report by members of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rodgers of Riverside. In 1998 the UK Deputy Prime Minister set up a working group to identify the causes of urban decline and to propose a vision for cities based on the principles of excellence in urban and architectural design, social welfare and environmental an executive, fiscal and legal framework.

then. Today we have learned lessons from the experience of these cities with regard to the role of public space, the prosperity of urban life and the quality of urban design.

UN-Habitat launched in 2012 the urban prosperity index, which incorporates a series of spatial indicators, one of which is the availability and accessibility of the public space (UN-Habitat, 2012)[6] .In other words, cities, in order to be prosperous, must have sufficient public space that is accessible to their residents so that they can generate wealth and well-being for their population. Public space, with its various urban and architectural attributes, becomes a fundamental element in the construction and consolidation of sustainable cities in this new millennium. Data collected by UN-Habitat in several cities around the world show a positive correlation, and prosperous cities have one attribute in common: connected public spaces and streets occupying a significant part of the built and urbanized spaces of cities. Based on this correlation between expansive street grids and prosperity, UN-Habitat and WLSP is working on a pilot project in Jianghan district (Wuhan Province, China) to improve the urban land dedicated to streets, which presently remains well below the recommended 30-35 percent in Jianghan (UN-Habitat 2017a, pp.30-32).

Figure 4: Sabarmati Riverfront ©The Economic Times (2015)

Another worthy example is the Sabarmati Riverfront project in Ahmedabad city of India that opened over 200 ha of private riverbed land to the public by redeveloping the area through networks of promenades and parks. On either side of the river, continuous walkways, extending over 11.5 km, are installed to assist pedestrians and cyclists. The large open parks support leisure activities, nourish the green

---

[6] UN-Habitat (2012). 'The State of the World Cities Report 2012-2013'. UN-Habitat: Earthscan. This publication defined the City Prosperity Index (CPI) with its five corners: (1) Productivity Index, (2) Index of Infrastructure Development, (3) Quality of Life Index, (4) Index of Equity and Social Inclusion and (5) Environmental Sustainability Index. The CPI has evolved since then and currently includes in its measurement a sixth index, the Index of Governance and Legislation. The CPI consists of 30 basic indicators, among which are variables for the measurement of the quality of urban space such as the amount of urban land destined for streets and streets, number of intersections among them, residential density, diversity of use public transport coverage and economic agglomeration in the urban space.

network of the city and the reconnect it with the river. Indeed, the project ensures access to the water by public for recreation. Additionally, location of public washrooms and plazas also further indicates how this public space project prioritizes play over drawing a revenue (Paneria et al., 2017).

Urbanism that generates prosperity and well-being for the population must incorporate social, economic, political, environmental and technological methods, variables and themes, looking at the psycho-social beyond the physical-spatial. Indeed, UN-Habitat's experiences of using the video game Minecraft as a tool for community participation to design public spaces validates this view. Through the 'Building the Public City' project in Johannesburg, UN-Habitat is responding to the challenges of inadequate safety, poor civic participation in public space design and lack of trust by the public in local government officials. Teaming up with Rosebank College and Wits University students, UN-Habitat enabled residents to use Minecraft to crowdsource and co-create design ideas to improve the Eland Park in Braamfontein. The designs in Minecraft from the participants were transformed into detailed 3D models that people could view in real-life by using smartphones and even walk the digital objects out on the street as if they were physically present (UN-Habitat 2017a, p.32).

Figure 5 Photo from UN Habitat workshop in Johannesburg © UN-Habitat

Indeed, innovative and revolutionary urbanism is the generator of urban prosperity. In March 2017, UN-Habitat and Plan International organised a participatory process where 50 girls from Hanoi used Minecraft to reimagine their public spaces from a safety perspective, enabling the girls to express themselves in a visual way and contribute alternative designs to influence the policy agenda (UN-Habitat 2017a, p.20). This method of mainstreaming gender equality in urban planning, thereby making cities more inclusive, counter unsafe and unfriendly neighbourhoods and improve women's participation in urban governance by

attuning them to the creative potential of the city. Citizen participation is vital and useful, not as an ad nauseam civic input procedure, but as a method of 'sensitizing oneself to the barely perceptible shifts in the psychological contours of the city, of becoming attentive to the ways in which one's experience is conditioned by the space through which one drifts' (Debord, 1958).

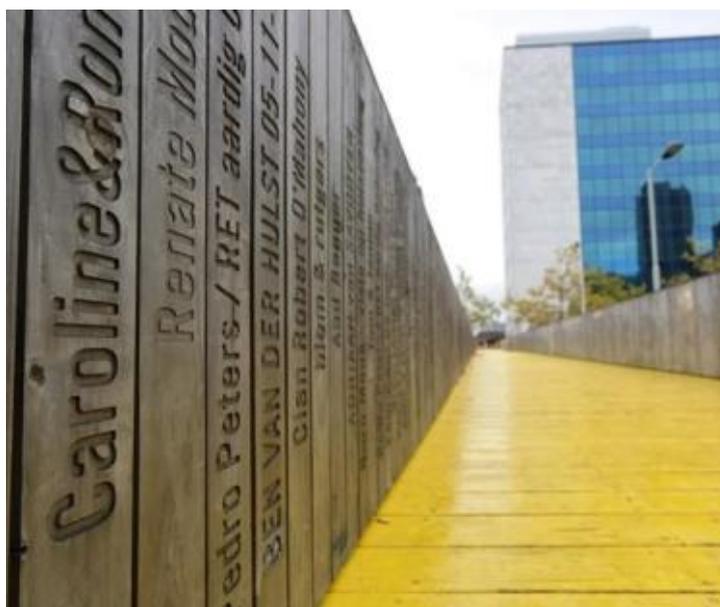The completion of the Luchtingel pedestrian walkway in Rotterdam in 2015 is a brilliant example that demonstrates how urban dwellers directly participate in the production of their public space. ZUS studio that designed this walkway to connect 3 isolated areas within the city also initiated a public campaign for crowdfunding to support the construction. Residents could get their names etched on the wooden planks used for the walkway if they pledged 25 euros (Wouter, 2016). With over 8000 contributions, this project

Figure 6 The Luchtingel pedestrian walkway © Wouter

shows a novel way of producing the city where residents collectively exercise their will to reshape the landscape of their public space, one where ownership of the city is physically moved to the hands of the people.

In 2016, UN-Habitat produced the spatial plan for a new camp, Kalobeyei Settlement, near Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where tension between the host and refugee communities is prevalent, with the aim of providing education, health and public facilities for both host and refugee inhabitants. Unlike a traditional camp, Kalobeyei Settlement has been designed to move beyond temporary relief, ensuring the gradual transition from humanitarian support to long-term sustainable development for the communities. Here, public space is a key element for peaceful coexistence and integration of the communities (UN-Habitat 2017a, pp.38). Indeed, any revolutionary space should advance against the force of homogeneity (Lefebvre 1996, p.109). And refugees have started describing public space as a 'place of mixity' – space where people from different ethnic groups and nationalities can mix (UN-Habitat 2017a, pp.39). Instead of demarcating right to belong to the city on the basis of national

identity,Kakuma Camp has become a strategic site for the reconceptualization and enactment of a new form of citizenship that brings together both the urban dweller and the citizen.

Figure 7 Swings at Kaloboeyei © UN-Habitat

Ultimately, the valorization of public space in cities, their design, quality, accessibility and appropriation by inhabitants can be considered as one of the most important transformations introduced in the practice of urban planning and management at the beginning of this century. The result is that public space is currently one of the most important variables in assessing and monitoring the quality of life and urban prosperity. The international debate that is taking place unequivocally underlines the importance of public space in the strengthening of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially indicator 11.7.1 (average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities) (UN-Habitat, 2017b).

In conclusion, the right to the city is not a method of set procedures, but a mentality that indicates the right to transform oneself by transforming the city (Harvey 2008, p.22). Our collective goal to achieve universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible public spaces, in particular for women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities by 2030 (UN-Habitat, 2017b) suggests the possibility of a better city, an embryonic form of an alternative everyday. As Lefebvre (1996, p.195) asserts, 'the right to the city does not abolish confrontations and struggles. On the contrary!' It produces a city where the public interest is collectively and perpetually redefined and realised through struggle in the public space.

Right to the city is, in the end, the yearning for a reality that is yet to be realised. Nevertheless, it is still a yearning for radical change that is indispensable for provoking action. Ultimately, through the design and implementation of accessible and democratic public space where citizenship can take a certain degree of control over the built-up space, we are moving towards an urbanistic revolution.

References List

Ameel, L. and Tani, S (2012). Parkour: Creating loose spaces in *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*. Vol. 94, No. 1, pp. 17-30

Charter of Public Space (2013)- approved in Rome, Italy, during the final session of the '2013 Biennial of Public Space' http://www.biennalespaziopubblico.it/wpcontent/uploads/2013/11/CHARTER-OF-PUBLIC-SPACE_June-2013_pdf-.pdf

Debord, G (1958) *Theory of the Dérive*, (Knabb, K, Trans).

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life.* Berkeley: University of California Press

Gehl, J (2014). *Cities for People.* Buenos Aires: Ediciones Infinito

Harvey, D (2003) *The New Imperialism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D (2008) 'The Right to the City' in *New Left Review* 53 (2). pp.23-40.

Lefebvre H. (1996) *Writings on Cities.* (E. Kofman & E. Lebas, Trans.) Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

New Urban Agenda (2017). United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador. Available at: http://habitat3.org/wpcontent/uploads/NUA-English.pdf

Paneria, A., Mehta, V., and Bhatt, B. (2017). *Waterfront Development: A Case Study of Sabarmati Riverfront.* Surat: India. Also see http://sabarmatiriverfront.com/river-promenade

Project for Public Spaces (2015) *Portland Celebrates Placemaking in Congress Square Park.* https://www.pps.org/article/portland-celebrates-placemaking-in-congress-square-park

The Economic Times (2015). *The transformation of Sabarmati from a parched riverbed with puddles of industrial effluents to a bustling riverfront.* Available at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/the-transformation-of-sabarmati-from-a-parched-riverbed-with-puddles-of-industrial-effluents-to-a-bustling-swanky-riverfront/articleshow/45998310.cms

UN-Habitat (2012). *The State of the World Cities Report 2012-2013.*

UN-Habitat (2016). *The City Prosperity Initiative.* Available at: *https://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02-old/CPI%20brochure.compressed.pdf*

UN-Habitat (2017a). *Global Public Space Programme: Annual report 2017.* UN-Habitat Press

UN-Habitat (2017b). *SDG 11.7 Public space.* *https://unhabitat.org/un-habitat-for-the-sustainable-development-goals/11-7-public-space/*

Rogers, R. (2005). *'Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance: Launch of the Urban Task Force Report'.* United Kingdom.

World Bank Group (2015) *Metropolitan Governance in Brazil: Inputs for an Agenda and Strategy.*

Wouter, S. (2016). Public Space in the Making: A Rotterdam Experiment in Streetnotes Vol 25, 379-389.