

Street

A place to stay, a place to move

Matteo Meschiari
4259475
matteo.meschiari@gmail.com
Architecture of Interior Msc3
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Report 2

INTRODUCTION

“As the consequence of the annihilation of time, the public space is replaced by the public image”¹. *Paul Virilio*

The future of Amsterdam Zuid is expected to be a place of international allure characterised by movement. The crucial position of the area close to Schipol but also relatively close to Amsterdam itself makes it a potential location. Business men and students are right now prevailing in the users number and they are even predicted to increase. Yet, the expectations are directed to the improvement and implementation of space for another important user, the residents. Hence, If on one side travellers and outsiders constitute a more vacant moving component of the area, on the other hand the residents and why not part of the business man and students themselves will increase the static component of the area. People will not only work, study or travel but will leave in Amsterdam Zuid.

An important part of the development of the area is the station, which is cutting the area in two, let us say, district. The project is to enlarge its capacity, because of its relatively small dimension compared to the load of traffic, and improve the connection between the two side, namely Zuid plein and Mahlerplein. Initially, the solution was to move the station underground, leaving on surface the space for public life. Nevertheless, a cutting of the budget, due to the crisis, has brought to abandon the idea and to work on the existing structure. But in this new solution, it seems that the importance of the realization of a Place, a social place of life, it has been forgotten. If we look to the proposal of Benthem Crouwel all the studies are focused on movement, it seems an orchestration of people.

Yet, Amsterdam Zuid station actually it is not just a station but it is an important

¹ Paul Virilio, as quoted by Mika Määttänen in Paul Virilio, *Katoamisen estetiikka*, op. cit., 127.2. www.practicalecommerce.com

connection of the area and it has literally a central position that can make it an important public place. Let us think the character of the Atocha Station in Madrid which is a public space and station at the same time.

In a way the focusing and enforcing of the movement is bringing to an annihilation of time dedicated to stasis, as Virilio says. The public space is replaced by the image of the station and the static dimension of a public environment is considered secondarily important.

The critic is not directed to reduce, eliminate or alter the moving character. But it suggests an enhancement of its experience and it underlines the importance of a balanced between the static and moving component of a social public place.

REFLECTIONS

“Since railways came into existence, the necessity of not missing trains has taught us to take account of minutes, whereas among the ancient Romans, who not only had a more cursory acquaintance with astronomy but led less hurried lives, the notion of not only of minutes but even of fixed hours barely existed”².

This introductory sentence, it is not directed to a critic of the conception of time. What I want to stress, it is the reality that characterizes a station. In a station every minutes counts. Especially the Dutch reality of a station the time plays an important role. Whatever moment of the day is it, it is flattened to the minute. It was demonstrated, in the first part of the research seminar, the range of activities that characterise a station in the Netherland. They are all temporary activities, whether they involved eating or shopping people tend to leave for what is their real destination.

Yet, in the situation of Amsterdam Zuid there is not just the reality of a station. But there is another potential reality that is a public space, since its nature of

² Marcel Proust, op. cit., Volume 4: Sodom and Gomorrah, 258.

connecting element but also centric placement. Potentially even a public interior. At first, it may be easy to think of a difficult correlation of this two realities. It would be a difficult combination due to their different pace. However, there is a strict relation between the two that make it feasible and creating an even stronger situation.

“Walking is first and foremost a type of transportation, a way to get around, but it also provides an informal and uncomplicated possibility for being present in the public environment”³. In a social public space we can see people reading, talking, standing, watching, eating, sitting, joking and so on. The majority of actions it has a static character.



But in a public space the movement is also a fundamental and present element of its success. William Whyte writes “Passerby are users..too”⁴. They activate a range of opportunities and activities. It is in the encounter of these two dimension in which it lays the potential. It is a subtle but crucial element.

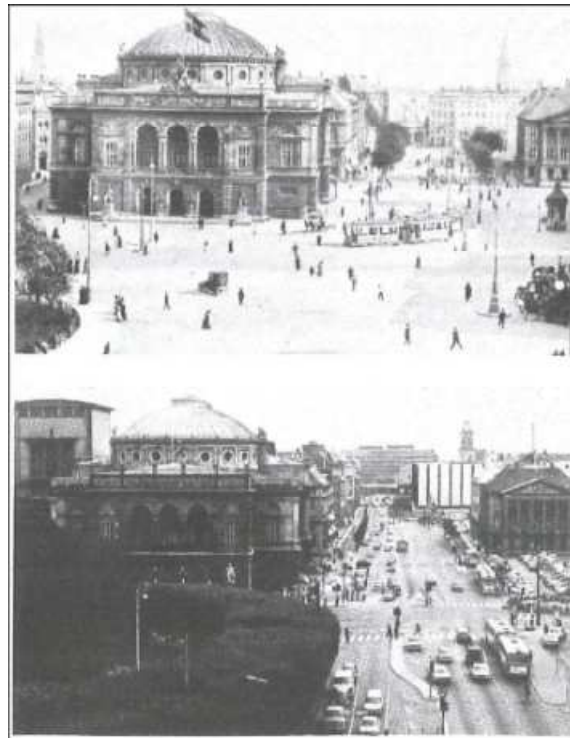
What I am thinking of it is not a square or plaza but a street. A street as a place to move or a place to stay. The idea starts from different findings but the most

³ Gehl, 2011:133

⁴ Whyte, 2001 :57

crucial it come from William Whyte's work⁵. In his research, about social life in small urban spaces, he found out how the street is a key space even for a plaza. "A key space for plaza it's the street, not the plaza itself"⁶.

Not a road but a street. There is a reason why I stress the term road. A road is substantially different from a street. As Louis Kahn said, a street is "a room for commonality... is a room for agreement"⁷.



A road is more a transitional space. The dimension of movement dominate over the static one. A road is the tunnel/station now present in Amsterdam Zuid and probably it will not change much if it will not be pay attention to the situation that is recreating. If the main users, that will be taken in consideration as conformer of the space, will be the moving of people of the station the road will dominate the space and few attention will be given to that aspects that could create social life. Only people that will need to pass or take a train will

⁵ Social life of Small Urban Spaces, 1980

⁶ Whyte, 2001:54

⁷ Kahn, 1972 IDCA International Design Conference Aspen

functionally use this space. People, like cars, drive in this road, filling up at the food-station when needed and processing on their way. What makes me think of a street is also the fact that the location has already a positive characteristic part of a good street, the pedestrian domain. In great part of the area pedestrians have the control of the space. A pedestrian priority street has an enormous potential. Jan Gehl shows how a road converted to a pedestrian-priority street has brought an increase of pedestrian traffic of 60% per cent and a sharp enhancement of 600% per cent of the staying activities⁸. Let us imagine if a practically only pedestrian will use the area.



A good reference it has been found in the case study of Atocha Station in Madrid, taken in consideration during the workshop of the studio. I personally visited it in 2011 and my group colleague visited it during a study trip in 2013. Although the completely different settings and culture in which the station is situated, good elements could be retrieved and generalised for inspirational thinking. The station represents an interesting reality that stays between the street, plaza and station. It is so successful that it has become a tourist destination. The social life

⁸ Gehl,2010:15

is clearly active. Atocha is an enormous station comprehending also bus station and metro service, but yet a consistent part is dedicated to its connection to the city and the more public-social space. A balance equilibrium between the movement and staticity is achieved. Attention it is given to the static component and its possibilities in relation to the movement. The different opportunities of sitting less or more related to the flow of people or the presence of something unexpected in the way of going (a tropical garden and turtles) are two examples. Of course, in Amsterdam Zuid the budget is relatively reduced due to the crisis. So it may be think that there is not the right budget to recreate a social and livable place. But as Whyte show in his documentary and book simple manufacturing element, like movable chairs⁹, can play an enormous influence in the quality of a social space. Often these elements are easily considered predictable and unexciting and in an architectural discussion they play a weak role. So, more attention should be dedicated to them. A qualitative element for a social place it can be cheaper than it is thinkable. Quality means opportunity for activities. As Jan Gehl shows in a graphic representation, the quality of a space intensify the optional activities and optional activities bring social activities. It is all strictly connected.

⁹ Whyte, 1980:36

CONCLUSION

The multiple nature of Amsterdam Zuid has brought me to critically look at it. At first, the pace of Amsterdam Station and its surrounding can be seen as a problem contrasting the reality of a public place. But researching on William Whyte's and Jan Gehl studies, showed me how actually that these two reality can be combined, resulting in an even more powerful relation. Movement in fact it is a crucial element in a public-social place. It is in the balance between moving and staying people that lays the potential for a successful place. If in Amsterdam Zuid the moving component is already present and it will increase in the upcoming years, the static one seems not considered as crucial element for the area. This brought me towards a project that allows people to move offering variable occasions to stop. The aim is to achieve more a sense of street, a place to move but also a place to stay.

REFERENCES

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