Shock therapy, Reviving contemporary public domain

Msc 3 Studio Public Realm
AR3Am130

Instructors: Susanne Komossa and Nicola Marzot

ID: B1313355
Name: Jeroen Dijkgraaf

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/ Preface

The graduation project for the public Realm studio is part of the Public Building Department within the Faculty of Architecture at the Technical University of Delft. This essay is part of the theoretical background for this graduation design project which will take place on a location within the city centre of Rotterdam. In this essay there will be referred to this location, which is the Schiekadeblok located at the Delftsestraat.

This essay deals with the notion of shifting borders between the private and public realms and the loss of experience as a result. For the correct understanding of this essay and the significance terms of public space and public domain I quote Hajer & Reijndorp who gave a clear definition for these terms:

“Public space is in essence a space that is freely accessible for everyone. That is not to say that every public space is a public domain. Public domain entails additional requirements. [...] We define ‘public domain’ as those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs.” (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2002)
// Introduction

The street is dead and public life is evacuated. Although, that is only if we believe Koolhaas [1]. According to him, public space is a residue, a left over, mentally unstable. It is the junk space of our society. Koolhaas and other theorists describe the end of the public domain as we know it. The public space is no longer supporting the romantic image of public domain as a theatre: with boulevards, long avenues (with trees on both sides), squares and coffeehouses. Today, if we believe the theorists, the public space is dominated by the capsular society of Lieven De Cauter[2], the a-geographical city of Micheal Sorkin[3] and non-places of Marc Augé[4]. Dysnification, thematization, capsules, and enclaves are the disquieting terms they use to describe the state of contemporary public space. These changes can, according to David Harvey, in some way be related to expanding capitalism and globalisation. “The general effect for capitalist modernization is to be every much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, in social life.” [5]

With the speeding up of social life and the death of the street also came the city to its end. The public space and public domain connect the city within its whole, and without the city, public life and therefore private life can not exist anymore. There is no longer a difference.

But is the street really dead? Is public life indeed on its downfall? Does public space have any potential left? Yes according to Zukin when she explains that “Public spaces are important because they continually negotiate the boundaries and markers of human society” [6]. As one of the most important layers within the city, public spaces are providing room where differences can come together. Are the scenarios which theorist like Koolhaas bring up prophecies, a glance in an inevitable future, or is it already happening? By naming these processes they give us at least a change to see new potentials in the contemporary public space.

Due to the changes within society, and therefore the public space, borders are shifting within the realm of both the public and the private. Some see borders disappear, like Koolhaas, and others see new borders emerge together with new type of spaces. Manuel de Sola Morales noticed the emerge of the collective space due to the fact of bluring borders[7]. In order to understand the working of our location within the notion of shifting borders and to generate more interaction, we need to understand some fundamental issues that arise about the private, public and social fields of human life. These fundamental issues, seen in the light of the changes that occurred within public space, give a starting point for the search towards the meaning and potential of the contemporary public space.
The separation between public and private realms is not covering the delicate degradation that exists in our society today. It seems easy to describe the meaning of the private realm: a space that is surrounded by walls, fences and locks. In this case the description of the private realm also means something for the public realm. If the private is something that is closed off, then the public realm must be something that is characterized by complete openness and indeterminateness; public is the opposite of private. But this explanation is not covering the wide range of different types of areas and spaces that cannot clearly fit within both realms. More often the private realm is entering the public realm or vice versa. In this grey area where both realms are interwoven, Manuel de Sola Morales saw the emergence of the collective space [8]. A department store from the Bijenkorf is a good example of a collective space. From an economical point of view the store is clearly private, but for the civil use and meaning of the store, it is tending towards a public space. Also with other functions like stadiums, museums and theatres, the border between private and public becomes vaguer: privately owned but almost freely accessible for almost everybody.

On the one hand, and as Manuel de Sola Morales approached it, collective spaces are significant places within the urban life. They generate public life and therefore they can help to reactivate public space. If we look at our location, we see an area which is dominated by large offices which close themselves off. With a closed concrete façade on street level there is almost no interaction between inside and outside. The closed blocks affect the public space in a negative way. By turning parts of these private spaces on street level into collective spaces they can help to reactivate the public space next to it. But developments of blurring borders have a drawback when public spaces are replaced by collective spaces. The public space which is characterized by complete openness and indeterminateness is being replaced by spaces where use, behaviour and experience is regulated. Codes of conduct, prohibitive clauses and surveillance cameras are some of the more subtle interventions to control those spaces.

Edmonton Mall in Canada, one of the biggest malls in the world, is an extreme example of a regulated shopping mall. Designed with a fantasy urbanism (based on the Disneyland concept) it is the perfect world. Human density, public focus and without external weather conditions, traffic or poor people it is the city without its negative aspects. The owner of the mall shows people a simulated world in which they want to be. Under the common interest in buying and consuming, malls can be seen as public domain because they are used by different social groups and people are faced with diverse nationalities and religions. But while borders between private and public become vague, other borders emerge, this...
time on the entrance of the shopping mall. Not all people can enter this world and a part of our society is excluded. Everything is put in hands of small elite who stimulate and manipulate.

Public domain is important because, it is the place where “an exchange is possible and also actually occurs between different social groups” [9]. Public space and as some claim collective space, form the spatial base where public domain can occur. If we look in a broader context to the public domain, it is the sphere where society is formed. It is the sphere where we encounter “the proverbial ‘other’ and where we must relate to ‘other’ behaviour, other ideas and other preferences.” [10] This sphere, or public realm, is about expanding one’s mental horizon. It is in the confrontation with other opinions that we develop our own ideas. In this light, the explanation of private and public as open and closed spaces is not adequate. Philosopher Hannah Arendt often wrote about the philosophical meaning of private and public and in her work she give an extra meaning to the public and private space.


In the human Condition, Hanna Arendt divides society not in two, but in three domains: the political, the private and the social. The political domain is based on the principal of equality. Inhabitants have the right to vote, and everybody is equal for the law. This is not only to protect the inhabitants but also to protect the republic. The private domain is related to privacy and everything that relates to whatever happens within the protecting walls of the inhabitant’s house, it is the principal of exclusivity. In this domain individuals can choose how they want to live, who they meet, who they love. It is much about the exploring of full uniqueness of the individual without any restrictions from the public. There is no real objectivity and that is why the laws of privacy need to be protected. Our community forms the third domain: the social domain is in-between the political and private domain. When stepping over the threshold in the direction of the public world we most likely step into the world of the social domain where the motto ‘like attracts like’ is ruling. This is the principle of discrimination. People form groups or take distance from each other. According to Arendt, our society would not exist without any form of discrimination because it has its foundations on this principle. Without discrimination and free gathering, group forming would not be possible. The boundaries between those three realms can not become vague as these are the main values of our society.

So in the view of Arendt the public domain is divided in two sub-domains, the political and the social domain. But we also need to make a division within the private domain. In this case we distinguish also two sub-domains: the individual domain and privately-owned companies. Dividing the terms of public and private in this way gives us the room to investigate the bluring borders between the realms of public and private. “Public spaces do
not allow complete and unrestricted freedom, however, if participants are to appear in coherent positions with respect to each other, their contributions must be recognizable by other participants as “relevant to the issue or object under consideration” [11] If participants of the public space brought their full uniqueness into the public, the space itself would splinter apart as each member became lost in her own isolated realm. Thus, public participation requires self-restraint. This is why Arendt contrasted the public with the private, in which the individuals can explore their full uniqueness. In fact, she argued that “a life spent entirely in public, without access to the private becomes...Shallow” [12], which is why there is a separation between the public and the private domain. The collective space however, is in most cases cooperation between the social and the privately-owned companies, this cooperation can work out as the individual domain is not invaded.

There is a delicate balance between the public and the private realms. There can be an exchange between the both realms but not on all the sub domains. Zukin was right when she said: “Public spaces are important because they continually negotiate the boundaries and markers of human society,” [6] the boundaries of our public, private and individual life.

// Part 1 - Public / private - the crisis of public space

With growing tensions within society the need for public space and indirect public domain become more and more important. We need a space were differences can come together, but while the need for public space is growing its existence is threatened. If we believe the doom scenarios that many theorists describe, it is here where we find public life on its downfall. Public space and adjacent public life is splintering; this is the crisis of the public space. For most cities these dangers are noticed on a larger scale, however, in Rotterdam this splintering of public spaces is very much visible within the city centre itself.

After the bombing of the city centre in World War II, development plans were made to rebuild the city centre. This new plan was in conflict with the original urban strategies and in line with the new image of modern Rotterdam. The two most important aspects of this plan were: changes in the urban fabric (Moving the centre to the west) and the implementing of division of functions, according to the CIAM thinking. This division of functions has lead to a geographical clustering of economic and cultural activity within the contemporary centre. Companies cluster in on specific area to generate internal externalities, as a result of the exchange of knowledge and labour, however in most cases this leads to a mono-functional experience in the cluster itself. Within Rotterdam every cluster of functions has its own experience through changes within: scale, architecture, façade, functions, type of user and the usage of the street. Because of the small size of the clusters itself and the proximity of the clusters, here is a rapid change of experience while moving through the city. On the one
hand, this is the quality of Rotterdam, but within most of the clusters the experience is limited. This is the fragmentation of experience. This fragmentation of limited experiences is threatening the existence of public domain as most of the clusters are tuned inwards and due to their mono-functional character they do not attract a wide range of social groups. The strong clustering within the centre give a unique quality towards the experience of Rotterdam, but it has lead to the decline of public domain within the clusters itself.

This archipelago of enclaves or clusters is strongly depending on the mobility network. Travelling between enclaves, from work to living to leisure, became more and more important. Public transport within this network has a high potential for public domain, however the individual domain is more and more entering the public space. People talking through their mobile phone discussing their whole personal life (while everybody else can clearly hear the conversation), People reading, working or sleeping with their walkman on. People close themselves off. Making their own personal space within these collective spaces of public transport. The mobility network itself is characterized as what Marc Augé describe as "non-places"[14]. These non-places are most of the time transit spaces which are designed to deal with enormous amounts of travellers. There is almost no interaction, only the quick process of flowing travellers. The changes of these mobility networks and the emergence of the enclaves are, according to Lieven de Cauter leading to the capsular society [15]. Lieven de Cauter describes these capsules as a closed-off environment, which minimizes communication with the 'outside'. Capsules are: transportation (car, train, airplane and of course the space capsule) but also the virtual capsule: screen (television, computer). In architecture and urbanism the capsules are: enclaves, gated community, mall’s (Edmonton Mall), the theme park. “Capsules are simulation machines, they generate simulated openness” [16] Because of these capsules and the lack of experience, individuals are moving through the public space but hold themselves aloof. There is an increase of individuality within the public space. People are participating, but at the same time they close off for each other, there is no interaction.

While the city is dominated by capsules, enclaves and an increase of individuality within the public space, the remaining public space seems to be narrowed down to a safety issue. The “ID-plicht”, Surveillance cameras, an unsafe feeling when someone with a certain appearance stands behind you or mindless violence are all examples that can be related to this move towards a public space that is characterized by safety issue’s: empty, guarded, screened by cameras and constant control. Public spaces become zero-friction spaces, spaces where dangers and irritations of urban life are excluded. Most of the time these spaces have a clear function, which is generally shopping. The shopping cluster has a benefit to control the public space and to focus only on the common experience of buying and
shopping. The “Koopgoot” is a clear example of a zero friction space within Rotterdam. This thematized and controlled world creates a pseudo-world that is presented as a substitute for the democratic urban domain. “These exclusions of the dangers and irritations of urban life goes hand in hand with the eradication of the unexpected and the spontaneous, which are just as characteristic a feature of urban life” [17] This will lead in the end to exclusion of certain users and behaviour and eventually certain groups. The city is being stripped of its sting, without friction and differences arising from encounters between different social groups there can no longer be a negotiation about the boundaries and markers of our society.

// Part 2 Potential of public space

If we read the theories concerning the city and its public space, the image is arising of an empty and hollow place without real or intensive experiences. The only experience within the city is limited within the fragments of the city. Handing over public space to commercial and profit-seeking organisations has only lead to a narrowing down of experiences and Zero friction spaces, non-places and transit spaces are all examples of this. Due to this lack of experience, public man comes into a slumber state focused only on himself. There is no real future for the street in these theories; it has only a function as moving ground for capsules. In the Public domain we become aware of the proverbial other, but contemporary public spaces are in a lot of cases not capable of activating this experience. Due to the slumber state the conscientisation does not happen. In a way we need to revive public space and hence, public life: shock therapy.

“Public domain experiences occur at the boundary between friction and freedom, balancing the tension between a confrontation with the unfamiliar and the liberating experience of a different approach. Enabling these experiences to occur requires a rekindling of the lost relationship between social and physical space, between form and meaning.”[18] Urban and architectural design can contribute to intensify experiences and opening up public man to relate himself to others. Streets, sidewalks, building volumes, facades, corners, mean nothing by themselves. These elements are abstractions. But together they interact and increase or decrease the experience of public man. Architecture forms the transition between the architectural space and the natural space, the individual space and the public space, the individual domain and the public domain. It is a connection of two spheres in which there should be harmony. Dom Hans van de Laan had a beautiful sentence to describe this harmony [19]. The façade has an important role in this transition; it marks the transition you make from the public sphere into the individual sphere or visa versa when you step over the threshold. When stepping over the threshold towards the public realm you step most of the time on the street. The streets, and especially the sidewalks, are, according to Jane Jacobs, the vital organs of the city. “Impersonal streets make anonymous
people” [20] According to Jacobs there is a clear relation between the sidewalk and the public identity of people, a good street creates a web of public trust and respect.

As architecture is the transition between two realms, the sidewalk is connecting all the different individual domains. It is the place to meet other people, the place where you can experience public domain. But with increasing individualisation on the sidewalks (people in their capsules) we need to reconnect public man with the environment of the city. These days areas are often mono-functional, there is no room for the unpredictable and spontaneity, there is no rich diversity of experiences. To reconnect public man with the environment he needs to become aware of the environment around him and other people, we need more friction." We do not only touch the city with our eyes, we also unconsciously project our bodies on to the various levels, recesses, balconies and openings of the surrounding urban space, and our bodies feel either welcomed or rejected.” [21] This friction, if we interpret this quote of Juhani Pallasmaa, can happen through activating our senses (It is about the experience of the space around us through our senses). While architects emphasise the visual (as this sense is the most common form of communication for architecture) we use all our senses at all time. Another sense that is critical to our experience of space is proprioception (the ‘six’ sense), which is the sense of knowing where our body is (sometimes stroke victims loose this sense and cannot identify their limbs as their own).

Experience of architecture / urban settings that are designed to activate more than only the visual sense have a stronger sensual impact and thus the transition between yourself and your environment will be much stronger. In this context even the smallest detail of the city (texture of an object for example) can have an impact on the people using the space. If we become more aware of the city we also become more aware of the ‘other’ that is using the same city.

While relating this to Rotterdam, and more specifically to our site, I notice that my experience was limited inside this business cluster. The huge buildings are turned inwards and you notice this transition in the closed concrete facade on the ground floor. People walking on the sidewalk, using it as a transition space for individuals, are turned inwards and there is no interaction. Inside the cluster it is quiet; sometimes you hear a tram, train or car in the distance, but there is not much going on. The materials and collars that where used are cold looking. I feel myself rejected by this environment. I protect myself and turn inwards, put my headphone on and walk away.

It is these places we need more friction, let people become aware, we need a diversity of experiences within the clusters. For instance, a small teahouse next to these huge buildings. The sudden change in function, charisma and atmosphere can bring people out of the slumber state. This making aware is the shock therapy.
Is the street dead, dying or alive and kicking? With developments of privatising public space (transforming it to collective space) it seems that public space and hence public domain become less and less important. Seen from the viewpoint of Hannah Arendt, the emergence of collective space as a cooperation between the social-domain and the privately-owned company doesn’t necessarily mean that public domain can not emerge here, but in many cases a collective space will lead to a decrease of experience in favour of the privately-owned profit-seeking company. For the places that are not transformed into collective spaces we need a clear border between private and public, between the individual and the social domain and more importantly, we need a diversity of experiences.
Notes


[8] Ibid. p 2

“The morphological, urban, architectural and civil wealth of a city is that of its collective spaces, that of all the places where the collective life develops, it is represented and is remembered. And, perhaps, these are more and more, every day, spaces that are neither public nor private, but both things simultaneously. Public spaces absorbed by particular uses, or private spaces that acquire a collective use.”


[10] Ibid. p12


[12] Ibid. p71


[16] Ibid. part 8.


[18] Website of Maarten Hajer,
http://www.maartenhajer.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=8

[19] D. Hans van der laan, De architectonische ruimte. p1
“The ground being too hard for our bare feet we make ourselves sandals of softer material than the ground, but rougher than our feet. Were they as hard as the ground or as soft as our feet they would give us no advantage, but being just hard enough to stand u to wear and yet just soft enough to be comfortable they bring about a harmony between our tender feet and the rough ground”


[21] Juhani Pallasmaa, Inhabiting space and time. p3
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