Workshop 1 - Public Space and Neighbourhood Quality

Formal Modification Strategies for the Construction of Public Spaces in Urban Regeneration Projects of European Cities

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Formal modification strategies for the construction of Public Spaces in urban regeneration projects of European cities

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The construction or reconstruction of outdoor public spaces is a key aspect of many urban regeneration projects in suburban or derelict areas of various European cities. This paper reports the analysis of the strategies that have been used in three urban regeneration projects in Denmark, France and Scotland in order to highlight common patterns and recent trends.

The problem of meaning

Before starting to illustrate the three case studies, it is first necessary to clarify that we use the word “public space” to describe an open air public places between buildings that are characterized by proximity, diversity and accessibility.1

In the contemporary society we have a large number of places that are “public” and full of people 2 but not all this kind of places is what our urban culture teach us a “public place” is. When we speak about public spaces, the meaning we give the words we use is central. This problem forces us to give an exact definition about the word we use and the field we are exploring before starting with the empirical analysis.

A public space lay in the imaginary of people like a synonym of city and city life. It happens because the public space was born together with the first shape of modern city, in the Greece of the IV century B.C. following the Aristotelic concept of social life. In Aristotle philosophy the distinction between human beings and animals lay in the

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1 This definition is due to Sharon Zukin: “the defining characteristics of urban public space are proximity, diversity and accessibility” (Quoted in Hajer and Reijndorp 2002, p. 89)

2 Today we can define as public space a number of places such as railway stations or airports’ Hajer and Reijndorp explain us that they are neither public spaces and “non places” as Marc Augé want them to be, because of an extreme functionalisation of the behaviour people are forced to have in them (Hajer and Reijndorp 2002, p.93)
ability that people have to establish relationships. The designed place for relationship was the agora, that was a unique single place where to express the *bios politicos* side of a human being. Hanna Arendt recalled that the meaning of the public life in the Greek culture is expressed in the word “private”, whose meaning comes from the word “deprivation”. People, like women and slaves, that could live only a private life were deprived of the possibility to become *bios politicos*, city inhabitants, real human beings.

The heritage of Greek culture, absorbed and diffused by Roman Empire, give us the philosophical basis of the perception of the urban space in Europeans cities where public space is a central element for the life of a citizen.

In medieval times public spaces become structuring elements of the city form. Most of the cities where Europeans still live are part of the network of towns founded between 1050 and 1350 B.C. It means that all Europeans has as a common historical heritage: the way of living expressed in a city structure made by a net of streets and squares, where the public realm was the core, the *raison d’être* of the city itself.

As a matter of fact the medieval town was composed by a net of public spaces whose drawing was defined by the shape of the buildings, which had a direct relationship with streets and squares. The open air spaces of the city were near the dwellings and they were used as market places, as workshop areas, or just as traffic places. Different social classes used to live close each other, sometimes even in different floors of the same buildings. The city was a compact organism where one can find a direct relationship between dwellings activities and functions.

Even if the city shape changed along the history, the role played by the public spaces as the location where several different activities take place was still the same. The traditional organisation of the city radically changed only in the XX century with the birth of the Modern Movement.

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3 “Who is not able to participate to city life, or doesn’t need to, it is rather an animal or a god than a human being”. *Aristotle*, Politics

4 Women and slave were not allowed to go to the agorà. Nevertheless as a component of the city form the agorà is the first kind of planned open air space of history.


After World War II the theories of the functional city, disseminated through the work of CIAM\(^7\), were influential in the planning and rebuilding of European cities. As later documented by Le Corbusier, CIAM IV laid out a 95-point program\(^8\) for planning and construction of rational cities, addressing topics such as high-rise residential blocks, strict zoning, the separation of residential areas and transportation arteries, and the preservation of historic districts and buildings. The key underlying concept was the creation of independent zones for the four 'functions': living, working, recreation, and circulation.

The functional separation changed the conformation of the city, transforming the urban realm from a compact organism to a puzzle of zones. Streets and buildings were realized as separated elements and activities were putted far from inhabited areas. Public urban space between buildings disappeared and the streets became traffic corridors, left empty by people. This kind of city planning kills the European public space culture because activities are separated from the streets whose draw is independent and far from inhabited areas. To summarize, new neighbourhoods were not supported by efficient outdoor space for people.

This very fast trip along the history of European city highlight how the lack of public spaces and city life of our suburbs is due to a urban drawing that doesn’t conceive space for people.

For this reason many urban regeneration project are based on the construction of a net of public spaces. From a physical point of view it means to set a new relationship between dwellings and open air spaces where to locate activities in order to stimulate urban life.

As Jean-Pierre Charbonneau\(^9\) says, public spaces are important for the city life because of the spatial continuity they can ensure. What is really important is not a single beautiful square, but the presence of a net of urban spaces as a structuring support of the urban form.

The following case studies are presented to show some urban design strategies used to reach this goal in three different European countries such as Denmark, France and United Kingdoms.

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\(^7\) Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne

\(^8\) The so-called Athens Charter was the result of the CIAM of 1933

Varbergparken, Haderslev, Denmark

The strategic project for the regeneration of the Neighbourhood of Varbergparken, has been made by the Jan Gehl Architects Firm in 2005.

The strategy of intervention is divided in four parts: the transformation of the streets system, the reconfiguration of buildings shape, a new green space layout, a new design for the environment system.

1- A picture of the of Varbergparken

The neighbourhood of Varbergparken is a norh-est suburb of the city of Haderslev in Denmark. It is composed by high rise urban bloc separated by big green areas, with few urban activities inside a small shopping centre.
The main problem of this suburb is the socio spatial segregation of the inhabitants caused by its physical layout and location. As a matter of fact Varberparken stay apart from the city centre and completely closed to rest of the city. There is just one entrance to reach the neighbourhood which is surrounded by high traffic roads.

The social composition of the people living in the blocs is a mix of elderly persons and poor or unemployed immigrants, that can’t even meet each other because there is no public space to go. The only open air space they have nearby are the big parking (the orange areas in the image 3) in front of the blocs and the big undifferentiated green spaces.

1-The actual shape of Varbergparken
As a matter of fact, the Gehl Architect’s regeneration strategy focuses on the physical aspects. They judged that the isolation is the main problem to solve, and for this reason the first step they foresee is the transformation of the street system.

2- The existing streets system

3- The transformation of the streets system
As we can see in the images, the general configuration of the neighbourhood has completely changed. The key idea is that the street system is no more conceived separated from the dwellings. Instead to be drawn as two different elements, they are now part of a unique organic urban system achieved by two main strategies.

The first one is the provided connection between the inner streets and the streets around the area. In image we can see that people have just one way to go into the neighbourhood, whereas in the proposed asset one can go through the area from all the surrounding streets. The idea is to let the urban space be crossable. From the two different level of streets we had before (high traffic roads outside - local streets inside) now we have one organic street system, that go from outside to inside. This new organisation of the infrastructures links at the same time the neighbourhood to the rest of the city and the different part of the neighbourhood between each other.

The second core strategy for regenerating the area is the proposed correspondence between the new streets and the dwellings. The new infrastructural system is deeply linked to the shape of buildings by the construction of a number of new dwellings along the streets. This new configuration allows the decompositions of the neighbourhood in four smaller urban realm, that are all unified by the two main streets crossing in a central square. As we can see in image 4, the new buildings (hatched with red) are built in order to run parallel to the streets to create a proper set design for the new created public space.

4- The new main streets crossing in a central square
The chronology for the project’s realisation show that the construction of the new streets system is followed by the construction of the new dwellings. Along the new main streets a large number of different activities are foreseen. The final aim is to create a new urban form based on a structure of interconnected public spaces.
**Transition, Boulogne sur Mer, France**

The regeneration project for Transition is the result of a competition won by Castro-Denisoff atelier in 2002. Between 1956 and 1960 were built 24 high rise buildings, more than one thousand flat. In the early Eighties a first renovation of the buildings has been made, but it concerned just the façade and the heating systems.

The projects made by the Atelier leaded by Roland Castro, partially started in 2004, foresee a transformation of the neighbourhood based on the change of the physical asset.

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6- A picture of Transition

As we see from the picture (6) and the plan (7) even if the neighbourhood is not so far from the surrounding city it remains isolated from it. The reason is that on the north side the big high traffic roads doesn’t permit any direct communication and in the south part the wide green spaces broke the urbanized space. Even the buildings have a problem of isolation: the distance between dwellings is big and become bigger because of a massive presence of parking places.
To solve this problem the project foresee to redraw the infrastructural system in order to create a compact city form structured by a net of public spaces.

7-The actual shape of Transition

8-The new neighbourhood
The instruments the project uses to reach this goal are the creation of two Boulevards (rue Sandetti and rue Detroit, image 8) the re-shaping of the existing dwellings (*remodelage*) and the construction of new built up areas in the undefined green spaces.

The existing rue Sandetti and rue Detroit are extended in order to create a direct connection between the inner streets and the surrounding roads. Along this new roads the project foresee a mix of different activities trying to create two urban boulevards. All the other existing streets of the neighbourhood are reshaped to have a direct connection both with the new boulevards and to the surrounding streets. In this way the new street system will be a net of public spaces linked to the urban space of the existing city.

A new shape is given to the existing dwelling to run parallel to the new streets system. The new built up areas are composed by small courtyard buildings with private gardens, whose main façade lay directly on the streets.

As we can see on image 8 the project build new urban realm on all the big green spaces in order to create a compact city form. In the west part of the plan we can see that instead of the wide green space two new city blocks are created. They are both drawn along the two side of the new Sandetti road, in order to create a direct relationship between the street system and the dwelling where people live. The project wants this net of roads to be a proper public space system. As a matter of facts it brings directly to the main central square where will be placed a large number of new activities.

9- New street system (red) linked to the central pedestrian square (green)
Western Harbour, Edinburgh, Scotland

Robert Adam Architects were brought by invitation in 2002 to do a masterplan for an area of 45 hectares at Western Harbour of Edinburgh. The site is a large trapezoidal land-fill area adjacent to the historic fishing village of Newhaven. Whilst the harbour was previously Edinburgh’s main port, the extensive dock area is now largely redundant due to industrial decline and has become increasingly dislocated from the traditional city fabric.
In comparison to the previous case study here there is a completely different situation. We don’t have an existing neighbourhood reality. The challenge here is to create a new urban realm in a waste land that has to be connected and easily reachable from the city. Robert Adam Architects have designed the scheme according to the principles of Traditional Urbanism, where the buildings are directly connected to the streets.

![Image of Western Harbour masterplan](image)

11- The masterplan for the Western Harbour

The public space is the core element of the drawing, that propose a net of mixed use streets shaped by the form of the buildings.

As we see in the image 12, the streets are planned in order to create a thick net to give a structure to the neighbourhood form and to establish an easy connection to the existing city. Concerning the streets and urban spaces the projects gives indications about shapes, typologies and dimension. The space is defined by interconnected character areas. Urban
spaces are well defined and enclosed and are located within a varied network of easily negotiable streets and passageways. The central square is proposed to be shaped having a deep relationship with the surrounding buildings.

The masterplan places emphasis on the creation of desirable places. Buildings groups within are of mixed scale and use, encouraging pedestrian street life throughout the whole day.

Green spaces are conceived as components of the public space structure. As a matter of fact the shape of the masterplan is given by the form of the central park. This wide green area is not an isolated natural element, but is part of a green net made by all the small green areas between the buildings. As we observe the urban structure (image11) we notice that it is composed by a sort of open urban block with green courtyards. This natural elements creates a net that run parallel to the net of the traditional public spaces, offering a double kind of public realm to the future inhabitants.
Using traditional planning methods, the masterplan ensure the reconnection of the site to the City of Edinburgh. The aim expressed by Adam Architects is the creation of a neighbourhood with a specific identity, having the potential to renew the urban life of the area.

13-The new square enclosed by buildings
Conclusions

The presented urban projects for construction and transformation of neighbourhoods are very different one to each other, because they deal with different problems and uses different methods to solve them.

In the project of the Danish suburb of Varbergparken the main element is the transformation of the streets system and the construction of new dwellings. More than this, the project for Boulogne sur Mer foresee demolitions and restyling of the existing dwellings to create a new relation between buildings and public spaces. In the case of the Western harbour of Edinburgh the project deal with an abandoned area completely disconnected from the existing city. In this case the architect uses traditional planning methods to create a compact neighbourhood with a huge green net.

Despite the use of different architectural languages all this project underpin the urban renewal on a complete physical modification in order to create an integrated city.

The integration is obtained by two main urban strategy: the physical integration and the integration of the urban activities.

With the expression “physical integration” we want to expressed two main ideas. The first one is to create a spatial cohesion between the neighbourhood and the rest of the city. This goal is reached in all the projects increasing the streets connections between the inner road and the streets around the neighbourhood. The second idea is to create a coherent neighbourhood streets system whose lay out follows the shape of the buildings.

Along this enclosed urban spaces all the projects foresee different kinds of activities, in order to create a functional integration on public streets.

As we have seen, the public spaces is used in all the three regeneration strategies as a connecting net, where the spaces is used for many different reason. As a matter of fact in the new city forms the streets can be used as places for recreation, as place for activities or as just traffic net. The proposed way of living is a urban realm where all the human activities such as living, working or moving can be done sharing the same space.

All this project want to give “urbanity” to derelict areas, intending this word with the meaning Roland Castro gives: a specific relation between buildings, streets and activities, able to create a living urban space. If this relation is not the right one, the city become just
an addition of dwelling and high rise traffic roads\textsuperscript{10}. The urban regeneration strategies expressed in the projects we have analysed, can help to solve at least three core problems of derelict areas. The first is the socio spatial segregation, helped by the increasing number of the streets connections with the rest of the city. The second is the physical isolation of many places and the third is the presence of empty unused spaces and fractures of the urban net. This two problems are both due to the city zoning and the consequent separation of residential areas and transportation arteries. As we can see from the plans of the projects, a neighbourhood with a net of connecting public spaces enclosed by building doesn’t have any place apart. Empty and apparently useless spaces become part of an integrated urban system, where there is physical continuity between public spaces, buildings and activities. As Jan Gehl suggests us, the problems of derelict areas can be helped by a planning inspired by a “people oriented philosophy”\textsuperscript{11}. For derelict neighbourhoods, it means to give the inhabitants the public spaces where they can participate to some public life\textsuperscript{12} and so become \textit{bios politicos}, real human beings.

\textsuperscript{10} Roland Castro, Sophie Denissof, \textit{(Re )Modeler, Métamorphoser}, Le Moniteur, Parigi 2005, p.23
\textsuperscript{11} Jan Gehl, Life between buildings, The Danish Architectural Press, Copenhagen 2006
\textsuperscript{12} Jan Gehl: \textit{(In)visible Cities. Spaces of Hope, Spaces of Citizenship}, Centre of Contemporary Culture, Barcelona, 25-27 July 2003