

Hyper-sculptures and Non-Spaces: Silence Three Commentaries about the Privatization of the Public Sphere

Isotopy

One of the most radical recent changes within urban spaces is their isotopic tendency. If we consider the example of the city of the Ecole des Beaux Arts—or also that of the Athens Charter, for those who prefer—then both create an order by establishing differences. Almost all transformative influences in the contemporary city, on the other hand, have isotopic tendencies. This means that they tend to seek to establish an overall homogeneity. This applies in particular to what used to be “urban public life.”

This development has a number of consequences, one of which is paradoxical. The social norm regarding the public use of the city disintegrates into a wide range of different, typecast, and socially segmented forms of usage and their associated spaces. However, these usage cultures are becoming increasingly separate from their traditional locations, or are disappearing from them altogether and can occur at any time in any place. From this point of view, the likelihood of a particular event happening or not tends to be increasingly equal anywhere in the city. Consequently, cities have lost their familiar structure to a certain extent—their division into a (public) urban foreground, a collective middle ground, and a private background. Art events, booths that sell French fries, demonstrations, festivals, or flea markets can emerge anywhere at any time—as can drug markets and slums.

Cities react nervously to these issues. Hence, nearly every urban concept aimed towards “upgrading the city” or the creation of public art demands local relevance. However, what is unique about a certain area nowadays, apart from its coordinates and its geometry? And if we can identify specific features, will they still be there in five years time? Of course, architecture acts as a stabilizing influence on an area, but does the latter still have its original significance, or the same meaning as in the last half a century, or ten years ago? And does it still fulfill its intended function? Perhaps the street five blocks away has become the new hotspot recently? Will it remain so?

In a society where people set up movie theaters in warehouses, establish hotels in town halls, open hip discos in old office towers, stage theater performances in swimming pools, live in their own office, or emigrate into the Internet, it is hard to tell what is really happening where and with whom. It has also become almost impossible to predict events, even for the architecture or art that attempts to do so. The spatial organization of public life has become an oil slick that can scarcely be contained. If the “public” has become diffuse, then the “private” must also have lost its contours.

Tattoo on the Tarmac

One of the most exciting phenomena in this type of modern city is its “skin”, its surface, especially the ground. In parallel to the isotopic transformation, the ground has lost certain important attributes as a stage for urban life, but has gained others. The dynamics of shifting focal points and constant new pressures, which appropriate or vacate places and surfaces unpredictably, leaves its imprint in public spaces. The aggregate of

the wide range of appropriations, resulting from the disintegration of the designation of function of public spaces (which allocated public activities to specific locations or districts), leads to a form of “overdetermination” of certain sites. They are overloaded with purposes, functions, demands, and significances from a number of sources, or else they deteriorate because nobody takes responsibility for them. Remarkably enough, this does not lead to these urban terrains being left unclaimed. On the contrary, they are subject to constant attempts to clarify them territorially, and to regulate, occupy, or even seize them, and to adjust their boundaries. This pressure makes the surface area a means of expression, as it were a continuous, sensitive skin that is printed and has tattoos, as a visual record of the urban ways of life that have been part of a particular location, earlier or at this moment.

Those who view this skeptically should bear in mind everything that has been screwed into, painted onto, highlighted against, stuck onto, marked out, added to, distinguished from streets, squares, or parks, in order to get an idea of who is appropriating what—regardless of the public notices. It is this overloaded, frenzied, and unlimited skin that probably says more about the shift in the meaning of “public” than all the physical changes.

Regardless of what form of public expression it represents, this overloading deprives the urban space of many qualities that were vital for the traditional public life of the “polis” in ancient times: sedateness, ambiguity, indeterminacy. Now, of course, art and architecture can consciously represent these new characteristics, but in most cases their redundancy is stronger than this targeted intentionality: the works are scattered around randomly, like the new fourth free commuter newspaper stand competing with the three others at the tram station. This is not a metaphor: there is a competition between media at undefined locations. All our cities are full of well-intentioned architectures and serious works of art, of “attempts at clarification,” which have lost the battle for the attention or status that they had strived for so consciously.

Demarcation Lines

Urban space and its surface had therefore become an unregulated and frenzied form of mass media. In order to have a direct impact, this display screen also requires a further clarification that actually goes against the spirit of the times: the reinforcement of the demarcation line between “private” and “non-private” space. Non-private does not mean at all the same as public in the traditional sense, but instead “not under private control.” On the other hand, private also no longer necessarily refers to the traditional space occupied by families or offices. Private represents all spaces in which a large or small social life takes place with minimal control—in other words, this “privacy” is often a particular form of publicness.

This “private space” could therefore be described more accurately as “privatized publicness.” It starts at the boundary between social life and the field of vision of non-state “control,” reaching from there into the traditionally private spheres of life. Many of these places also have an economic or sociological purpose. So to a certain extent, it is about a privately appropriated, communal public sphere: shopping centers, arcades, event venues, sports arenas, as well as holiday clubs, hotel complexes, or gated communities, etc. However, control is not only targeted towards economic optimization, which in many cases is not its main objective at all. Often there is a combination of different objectives: security, hygiene, service support, immission control, sociological perimeters, etc. Hence control refers to all systematic spatial parameters for the purposes of cohabitation, which display a certain density and intentionality and are not organized by the state. It would therefore be inaccurate to dismiss these spaces as “commercial spaces,” because they are equally about communication, comprehensibility, relations, encounters, and replacing coincidence with predictability.

The so-called public (non-private) space, on the other hand, is primarily that which is not controlled privately in the aforementioned sense. This space has in fact even become hyper-public, with an unclear structure, but clearly delineated by means of control. As regards security, although the state sometimes invests in close

surveillance, it only contributes marginally to creating a feeling of public security, often only ensuring data protection or criminal prosecution. The threshold between these two forms of publicness is a far more relevant transition phenomenon in the present-day city than that between the public and the traditionally private, such as the home or a business, because this threshold divides the city into open and closed public spheres. If this system of gated communities encroaches on the city center, it will highlight this duality of the public sphere. In fact in the present-day city, there are no longer any “semi-public” spaces in between these two spheres. There are virtually no unaccounted for or transitional areas.

Of course, there are still many cities where there are public spaces, but these are increasingly subject to fluctuating uses. The spaces are occupied by an unstable interplay of forces, by a wide range of competing interests, intentions, purposes, initiatives, movements, and functions. That is why they have become diffused, intangible, and volatile. Boris Groys calls them “uncertain spaces,” and he views them as a basic contradiction to the understanding of art and space in the west, which require a clear, stable context. In a certain sense, some of these former public spaces have even taken on a highly political and mercurial character, while others have become “controlled areas” or “closed communities.” On the whole, present-day urban open spaces are basically the setting for constantly changing scenarios, which happen or are staged, fail, ebb away, or explode. In any case, they no longer constitute or represent a polis, but as it were politics without a polis.

The most significant field in which supremacy over public space is contested is that of the media. In all spheres of society, esthetic and other forms of communication have long been harmonized and their boundaries blurred. Nowhere else have the various media forces been locked in battle so clearly and fiercely as in the open city. When communication, marketing, art, or corporate identity lay claim to the hyper-public space, it basically leads to a straightforward representational competition between the state and private enterprises. It is then no longer about private control of the space, but about the private occupation of the public and infusing it with meaning. To a certain extent this offensive has an esthetic character.

This development is neither totally new nor particularly surprising. What is remarkable is the extent and pace of change. Imagine the urban marketing restrictions of the 2006 Soccer World Cup in nineteen-sixties’ society, or the plastic cow installations of inner-city shop owners, whose inglorious origins lie in Zürich. Of course even art, a wide range of art, is now permissible, but the art space of the city is to a certain extent faced by a hegemonic threat. This is also due to the changes in urban architecture itself.

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