

Public space in the information society

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I. Spatial Change, Historical Change and Cultural Identity

The transformation of time and space is the material expression of historical structural change. In this sense, the information society is no exception. The information technology revolution, consolidated in the 1970s and disseminated throughout the planet in every sphere of activity over the last two decades of the past millennium, has involved and accompanied far-reaching changes in spatial processes and forms. However, these changes do not confirm the prophecies of futurologists, or simplistic extrapolations from the characteristics of technology. In particular, the prediction that cities could disappear because of the spatial diffusion brought about by telecommunications has been refuted by empirical observation.

The city is not disappearing and far from it. I insist on this point because of the media impact of such books as the recent *The Death of Distance*. According to this ideology, it is not only the death of distance we are faced with, but of everything with any kind of spatial specificity because we are now inhabiting a computerised universe and are living within an organisation of networks that are linked by telecommunication. This was also essentially the idea of Marshall McLuhan, the concept of the global village, where all culture is encompassed within a system of communication that goes beyond local specificities, particularities, identities, and so on. It is verging on the idea of a world government in which everything disappears for we are all brothers and sisters and, from now on, cultures will melt together into some kind of undifferentiated universe. This is a deep-rooted idea that has its present technological expression firmly entrenched in the old rationalist tradition, both liberal and enlightenment (citizens of the world), and Marxist (proletarians of the world). In other words, it is the idea of classes, and on the basis of classes, a view of humanity as an undifferentiated mass. The essential idea of rationalism, both liberal and Marxist, is to supersede cultures and therefore places. The present technological instrument seems to enable the realisation of this prophecy as the selfsame instrument that is at last able to free capitalism (and indeed it does) from its institutional ties and the different forms of state control. However, cultures, places and spaces, are much more resistant, and have much more density so are thus not so easily abolished. Indeed, they are more and more organised. It can be demonstrated empirically that people's experience is increasingly local. The mechanisms of political and social control are also increasingly local. In the book that Jordi Borja and I have just published, *Local y global (Local and Global, Taurus, 1997)*, we emphasise this, stressing that the global does not do away with the local but, on the contrary, creates the possibility for a much more active, much more decisive role for what is local. In strictly cultural terms the local, and places, are increasingly becoming the last ditches of identity. With the general dissolving of identities in the instrumental world of the space of flows (see my book, *La sociedad red (The Network Society) Alianza Editorial, 1997*), the space of places is taking shape as an expression of identity, of what I am, of what I experience, of what I know, and of how I organise my life around it.

II. The Dissociation between Space of Identity and Functional Space

The public re-launching of working-class residential spaces in many parts of the world, but very specifically in Barcelona, is contributing to this idea of consolidating the identity of what is local, and the identity of cultural expression. Yet there is a problem, which is that if we limit ourselves to this verification, which is the importance of the local, the importance of place, the identity of places, and if besides we reinforce, as we should, the expression of these identities through urban planning operations that highlight the significance of residential spaces, including

working-class areas, what can appear, and what is appearing, is the danger of an increasing dissociation between the space of instrumentality and the space of identity. On the one hand is the space of a global, cosmopolitan culture and, on the other, the space of what is local as a space that is so dominated that it essentially becomes the space of the neighbourhood's identity, of the identity of a specific place and it therefore not only loses its connection with the instrumental space, but also communication between each of the identities. If each identity becomes specific and the bridges of connection go through an instrumentality that is global and cut off from what is expressive, we will then have at once a world of global instruments with an ahistorical cosmopolitan culture and a fragmentation into local tribes. From this we may deduce the importance of two old issues of urban planning: monumentality and centrality. Monumentality, with its capacity for emitting a generalising symbolic message, establishes, or can establish, a symbolic bridge of meaning between different localities and between the localities and the instruments of power with which they must coexist, negotiate, interact and struggle. Struggling is a relation. The danger today is not conflict (which is socially healthy and aesthetically creative), but the separation between the local and the global, creating thus the possibility of constructing global instruments that are disconnected from local societies. With the significant dissociation of monumentality, re-edification of urban centrality is being considered. Centrality, from the urban planning perspective, does not mean being a single centre: it can be multinuclear. This then raises the idea that the city is not just a few central symbolic elements, to which are added residential spaces that become significant, but rather that centrality means the diffusion of this monumentality into different centres that would articulate meaning and function in the territory as a whole.

III. Monumentality, Centrality and the Articulation of Places and Flows in the Informational City

So, what elements, what attempts of articulation are occurring between the space of places and the space of flows as an attempt to create systems of communication? I would say that there are two observable kinds of attempts, one that is more incipient and more exotic, on the basis of the space of flows, while the other is more traditional, more diversified, more complex, on the basis of the space of places.

Starting out from the space of flows, there are attempts being made to create a public cyberspace. These efforts are much more developed than what people usually believe and, in particular, they have enormous potential in terms of their future manifestations. Now, in 1997, there are 2,000 virtual cities, where what we understand by "virtual cities" (a somewhat grandiose term) is urban pages on the worldwide web, on internet, more or less permanent urban pages. Great efforts are being made by thinkers and analysts, including urban planners, in the face of the loss of public space and the decline of urban culture, to look at cyberspace as a new form of public space in which people can meet up again in the electronic agora. I refer, for example, to Michael Benedict, or to the ideas of Howard Rheingold in *The Virtual Community*, where cyberspace is seen as a new space of sociability. Then, on the one hand, we would have the instrumental space of flows while, on the other, would be the almost undifferentiated space of individual habitat with some places to go out to eat from time to time, while the space of real sociability, beyond the dangers posed by the city, would be the electronic agora. This could have more success than we think here in Barcelona because not all spaces have the power and constitution of Barcelona. If we are thinking, for example, about the mega-cities of Asia where there are small centres and then enormous constellations of totally poor and run-down, densely-populated neighbourhoods, the idea that reconstructing a virtual space instead of constructing physical spaces, apart from the enormous interest this might have from the standpoint of the electronics industry, is one that is sufficiently attractive for people who like to apply technological solutions to social problems.

IV. Virtual Cities

Let us look, in some detail, at two examples of virtual cities because I believe that this is a matter that should not be taken lightly and it might, on the contrary, have the interesting virtue

of articulation with other processes. To be schematic, there are two kinds of virtual cities. First we have those without physical existence or, in other words, that do not correspond to a specific city but rather to the idea that the city is a metaphor for acceding to different services on the global network of internet. These are, in general, commercial services and, in this city of X, in such-and-such a cityscape, or whatever, there is a bank or a shop, or a service that offers commercial products or, in some cases, political propaganda. What I find interesting about these virtual cities is that the graphics always or almost always show small cities or towns, and they even have an almost childlike architecture like the kind of urban naïf we see in Walt Disney films.

The other virtual cities, the more important ones, in my view, are the real cities that organise their virtual existence on the Web as a system offering information to their citizens. Then there would be a third kind to which I shall refer in more detail below. The second type includes the new network of European cities that are linked up in the on-line project of the Eurocities network. At present, most are essentially administrative databanks and information about services. In the case of Barcelona, it is an intelligent, well-informed and efficient interactive service. These on-line pages also function as a publicity catalogue in colour, with photos and texts that aim at attracting tourists and investment, while also promoting the government team of the day. I believe it could be a very interesting project in the near future but, for the moment, most the real cities that go on to the Web do so in the form of advertising operations and services offering information to citizens.

There are also more limited attempts but they are interesting to highlight, and these are the real cities that construct a participative system of the virtual city. Rather than speaking in general terms, let me give two examples for which we have some data and that are among the most developed cases in Europe: the digital city of Amsterdam and the Iperbole programme of Bologna. Both have been studied in some detail in the work of Stephen Graham of the Centre for Urban Technology of the University of Newcastle, so we have some material about them, in particular what I was able to obtain from my own real visit to the virtual city of Amsterdam. Both were founded in 1994. The digital city of Amsterdam is not under the auspices of the City Council but is financed by a private, non-lucrative foundation and is organised as a city into thematic sections, each with a square that appears physically, dealing with housing, municipal financing, local culture, work and environment. In the centre of these thematic squares, there is information about the related organisations, and around it are buildings, the houses where people who are registered in this virtual city (35,000 in the case of Amsterdam) can lodge their own information free of charge. Interaction is thereby structured between the people of these buildings and the information offered by the organisations in the square. Besides, there is a text programme called Metro, which enables direct interaction between citizens who can even —and they do— get married virtually, have families, choose the virtual mayor of the city, talk about their problems and relate the problems of the real city with those of the virtual city. Moreover, a special effort has been made in Amsterdam to create public terminals through which people can enter this virtual city, and organisations of socially-excluded groups have received special training and programmes so that they can join in the interaction. In some cafes and public places there are also computers that are especially designed for children. Public space? Yes and no. It is a public space that is obviously biased in the construction of the programme and although, as I insist, the NGOs have received help so that they can connect, it must be noted that, of the 35,000 residents of the virtual city, 85% are males, 75% are university graduates, and 58% are under thirty years of age. Again, financing problems have ensured that, now The Digital City of Amsterdam is a success, the foundation is selling space in the virtual city for commercial and advertising purposes and here, it is interesting to note, the problems of physical public spaces are reproduced because when something works it is commercialised.

Again, there is another problem, a basic one for anyone who wants to develop the idea of an electronic agora along the lines of the development of a real city and this is that, although the text is Dutch, since it is on internet, anyone can enter, from any part of the world. As happens with a real city. Well, yes and no. Not everyone takes a plane from Jakarta to Amsterdam every day, of course, but it is true that the real city is also open to any kind of visitor and the so-called floating population of the real city is one of the most important issues for urban planners, but this is not global on-line access as can occur with the virtual city. In fact, from the statistics

we have available, 50% of the virtual city users are not registered in the virtual city because it is necessary to provide an Amsterdam address in order to register, but this is not required in order to enter because there is no way to connect up entry. Besides, the local Chamber of Commerce and the Amsterdam City Council are using this digital city as an international lure to attract people to Amsterdam and are therefore sending out images on internet with the result that the proportion of real non-residents is rising and it might, in fact, become a global public space around a virtual Amsterdam, which is how it is tending at present.

Another example that might illustrate our analysis is Bologna's Iperbole programme, which was also created in 1994 by the Bologna City Council. In this programme, in principle, the information is something that issues from the City Council and the city's civic and union organisations, with which the citizens can interact but without being able to add their own information. It is a more asymmetrical system. It is divided into three departments, each of which offers a wide range of services, and these departments arise from the different kinds of organisations that are managed by each one. There are thirty-three groups of subject areas with Usenet-type conversation groups about them. Participation in Iperbole is free of charge and is funded by the City Council in terms of training projects at neighbourhood level and also at the level of civic organisations so that people can use it and, in this sense, Iperbole has managed to achieve almost exclusively local participation. Almost 90% of the people who enter into the Iperbole programme are local, largely because the problems it deals with are very local ones, as the City Council and local organisations propose. By 1996 it seemed that, once the programme was underway, advertising space was being rented out to small local enterprises. However, a selection is made of these enterprises and not just anyone can advertise, but only those companies that the City Council thinks should be helped in the local sphere. The City Council also wanted to use the Iperbole system to organise referendums that might give some indications about specific problems of municipal administration but, for the moment, technical problems of organisation have prevented it. The technical problems, it seems—and this is not official information from the City Council—consist in how to organise a referendum on a local issue when anybody from any other city or any other part of the world can access the referendum and vote. This is a complex problem that has not yet been resolved. I believe that it could be resolved but, in the specific case of Bologna, it has not yet happened.

The problems raised, then, by virtual cities is that they are still very excluding, highly commercialised, and many of them are networks of individuals who do the same as they would do in their personal relations, but they do it in cyberspace, and the studies even show that these networks of individuals tend to replace the urban life they once had with life in this electronic agora.

Nonetheless, there are possibilities for articulation, a chance for localities in the space of flows, so that, for example, virtual communities can be created where transit between flows and places can happen. One example is San Francisco where there is an Iperbole-type programme called Citysearch in which people can chat about different matters and, on this basis, establish personal, physical interaction and also receive information about the kinds of activities that they can engage in within the real city of San Francisco, etc.. It functions, first, then as a channel for electronic conversation and then as a system for connecting to the local services of which they can avail themselves.

However, I must stress that the efforts of connection in cyberspace are presently limited to interactive networks of groups from a fairly high social level, or they are essentially administrative spaces, without either of the two being able to re-create public spaces, neither in the sense in which we know them historically speaking nor, as I tried to point out above, as spaces of integration, and spaces where integration enables the creation of social synergy.

V. The Localisation of Flows

Is it possible to reconstruct meaning and establish bridges between the space of flows and the space of places, and from the places? Here we have a whole series of attempts where the design of architecture and urban design are playing an evermore basic role in an overall society

in which, and I insist on this, people and societies resist disappearing into the global non-differentiation of the space of flows.

There are several ways to create this new monumentality and this new centrality. The first and simplest would be symbolic uses for the new instrumentalities of culturally identifiable places that have historic and cultural sense. To put it clearly, the Casa de la Caritat in Barcelona is a good example. It represents the project of using buildings whose cultural value, identifying value and historic value, is maintained, reinforced and highlighted in order to articulate these values with an instrumentality that is open to information flows or, in different cases, to other types of flow. Banks, as we know, are trying to absorb historic buildings and give them instrumentality. This might be criticised from another point of view —although I don't criticise it— but there is an effort to connect what was the physical identity of a place to a projection of the new instrumentality. Public institutions and, in particular, the branches of the administration in the autonomous regions all over Spain, are reusing a good part of their artistic and architectural heritage for their offices and headquarters. I do not know if they could use them for other purposes but at least there is some connection of historic identity, physical culture and the new instrumentality. There is another example that might appear ridiculous, but it seems significant to me, and this is what McDonald's does. McDonald's, from a superficial standpoint, has become the symbol of global culture, of the massacre of cultural forms, always with its yellow born-in-the-USA arches. But what McDonalds is doing all over Europe is to reuse culturally significant buildings in each city. Wherever they can engage in symbolic marketing of something —but not in all cases because there are too many McDonalds— they do so. They also do it in Japan, of course. Then, the attempt at a cultural leap is what, very primitively, is considered in connection with symbolic uses that people can identify with new instrumental uses. But this is too specific. The problem, as I suggested above, is how to extend the public sphere of meaning.

VI. The New Urban Signification

I shall begin with what is not working. What is not working is the attempt at bringing the new instrumental spaces under control by trying to give them new symbolic meaning through privatisation of public uses. To be precise, examples in Barcelona are the L'illa shopping mall and the Nova Icària Centre. In other words, this is the idea of creating spaces that reproduce the functions of urban centrality, spaces that aim to reconstruct, and they do reconstruct, sometimes quite successfully, the density of urban life, but they privatise it. And in privatising, they definitively introduce bias into the uses of the space and the perception of the space because it is dominated by the commercial function. There is nothing wrong with the commercial function, which is as legitimate as any other in society. However, the issue at hand is symbolic structuring when there is excessive predominance of this function.

More excessive cases appear with the attempt to introduce into discrete spaces the logic of the space of flows. In the space of flows, just like extraterrestrial beings, shops like Planet Hollywood are organising landing systems. What is Planet Hollywood? It means bringing Hollywood to any part of the world and installing it in a space where you suddenly enter into the culture of Hollywood. Or, for those who have rather more money and ambitions, there are places like Fashion Café, which conveys the idea that if you go there some day you might meet up with the co-proprietor, Claudia Schiffer, and have a coffee with her.

From a more creative standpoint, we can see the attempt to go beyond privatisation and to try to achieve articulation between flows and places. In brief, there are different types of initiatives. This articulation between flows and places can occur when either flows or places are dominant. When flows are dominant, we find, first of all, attempts to articulate a new monumentality of the instrumental by way of technological design. One example is the work of the engineer-architect Calatrava. The bridges of Calatrava, the communications tower of Calatrava, etc., and the idea that what is technologically advanced, what is the instrument of connection, let's say a bridge (if there was a river) could be significant and monumental, while also instrumental. The articulation of significance and instrumentality, places and flows, is at the basis of a huge effort in architecture and urban planning with regard to places of interchange of flows: airports, stations, highways. It is what I call the Changi model after the

Singapore airport, which is really a city that has been totally designed from within to make the wait very agreeable. In a place and space where people are edgy because they find themselves suspended in the space of flows, a cosy space has been constructed, which includes piano concerts of classical music in the vestibule and all kinds of other activities. Although Changi is highly commercialised, it is designed to make you feel you are in your living room at home. A much more uncompromising model, but one that I think is a lot more interesting from the design point of view, is the Barcelona airport, where we have the idea of dealing with a space of interchange by bestowing significance on it, along with commercial elements to which is added an aesthetic dimension of the relation between culture and instrumentality. Then there is what Moneo has done with the AVE station in Madrid, which is a brilliant genuflection to this, though I don't know whether it has been noticed. The AVE station is in fact two stations, the old Atocha Station that, with a wonderful rehabilitated design with the trees and birds of the surroundings, is a park and not a station. Then, next to that is the crummy thing that is the new station for the AVE that goes between Madrid and Seville, and that is all. Obviously, then, the idea, or the oblique reference, is that the former could not be a station but a park, while this AVE ("bird" in Spanish) is there fortuitously because somebody got the bright idea of having an AVE that goes from Madrid to Seville. Another significant example is Koolhaas's design for the transport modal interchange system in Lille. The treatment given to the centrality of the Gran Palais and to the organisation around the modal interchange points for European transport once again combines instrumentality, expression and a strong cultural component. To sum up, the attempt to turn crowded places of transit into public spaces and not just places of fast connection is an idea that at least has the strength of trying to integrate what is expressive into what is functional. I reiterate, however, that the space of flows is still predominant.

As for the attempts to articulate spaces when places are predominant, we have, on the one hand, an idea of prolonging what is historic, or the idea of maintaining and developing public places, as we see happening in Barcelona. The Rambla continues to be a historic place. In a book written by one of the great American urban planners, Alan Jakobs, and published by MIT last year, we have the great cities with all the major streets of the world, and he designates the best and second-best streets in the world. The best, for him, is the Rambla, followed by the Passeig de Gràcia, both of them in Barcelona. This may be a qualitative analysis, but it is also an authoritative opinion. Nonetheless, the idea of prolonging what is historic, as might be the case of the Piazza Navona in Rome, is one that conserves the space of places but is unable to organise the counter-offensive in the space of flows. To clarify this point, the Rambla only becomes a flow when Barça wins a match or, in other words, it vibrates then as a media event and it is there that it articulates to enter into another space beyond the place itself. Otherwise it continues to be a very local space, very much Barcelona and its tourists. So the idea of historical prolongation and the endurance of highly significant places, while it permits the survival of local cultures and identities, does not organise the counter-attack of significance in the space of flows. What is difficult, then, is to articulate physical monumentality, which has memory, with information flows as activities, and with spaces of urban life as an element of articulation between memory and activity.

In my view, this is the frontier between urban planning and architecture in the informational city. It is the idea of connecting activity with memory, of connecting flows with places. Are things being done in this sense? Well, yes. I think that here, the idea of museum activity that has existed still has some value and that, in part, the connection comes in here, though it is limited to cultural elements and some activities. The model of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, for example, (even though I find the design quite horrible), but let's say the cultural model and its relation with the city, its revivifying of the neighbourhood of Les Halles, etcetera, does work. However, what is sometimes called the French model has not always worked. For example, the Gare d'Orsay is a catastrophe as an element of revitalisation in its urban setting and La Villette is somewhere between the two models. However, the idea of a powerful stimulus of flows of activities, of all sorts of information initiatives, these flows being tied to cultural expressiveness and integrated into an urban space that is being reactivated if not directly through these activities then at least because of the presence of the project, is a truly interesting phenomenon.

There are similar elements in the United States. I shall only cite one case so as not to exceed my time. This is the effort that was made in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, to articulate collective memory by rehabilitating buildings and so on, along with cultural expressions through the interplay of images generated from the experience of California itself. California, too, has its culture and history, a history of only fifty years, but a very intense one, so intense that it is part of our everyday imaginary, and not just Hollywood, but surf, skateboards, video-clips, etc.. All of this forms the Californian identity and culture, just as the Baroque might have represented Italian culture and identity in other centuries. Santa Monica, then, has organised urban life with a multitude of oblique references in its public spaces to motifs pertaining to Hollywood, surf, skateboarding and so on, and these references articulate this urban life.

The set of activities carried out here in the Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona, in the Casa de Caritat building, next to the Contemporary Art Museum, in the Raval neighbourhood, near the Rambla, in Barcelona, Catalonia ... all these connections are the type of links that can really begin to construct bridges. The problem with this kind of connection is that the initiatives are still too limited to relatively elite cultural activities, but the idea of connecting information flows with historical significance, and this being integrated into urban space, and this idea being generalised to other neighbourhoods, to other sorts of activities and cultural expression, seems to be one of the ways to go about reconstructing an articulation of places and flows.

Experimenting thus with a new information-based design of what is material and a new material-based design of what pertains to information seems to be the new frontier of urban planning. How to make a city of the information city. In other words, a producer of culture on the basis of the interaction between work, everyday life and the imaginary. It is the articulation between the new capacity to create and the renewed art of dreaming in time and space.

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In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state". The idea of a public sphere was generated in the eighteenth century yet there is no doubt that it has a modern relevance and is essentially a way for civil society to articulate its interests. It has been argued that the internet has facilitated the phenomenon of the public sphere as it acts as a forum where public opinion is shaped. Notably, it's only in the new digital world that the perception and cognition of time and space as two tied notions has been allowed complete separation, while also changing the experience that we have of them in our social and everyday life. Public spaces are an important asset to our cities. They provide people many opportunities to come together and engage with the community. If public spaces are successful they are inclusive of the interactions people have in the public space and about the connection this forms between the person and the space. This might include the social networks people form on the street or city squares. Creating an opportunity for people to meet new people in the public space is important because this adds to the sociability of public space. Having social events in the public space such as music concerts or hosting movies are also a great way to get people to engage with one another. A public space is a place that is generally open and accessible to people. Roads (including the pavement), public squares, parks and beaches are typically considered public space. To a limited extent, government buildings which are open to the public, such as public libraries are public spaces, although they tend to have restricted areas and greater limits upon use. Although not considered public space, privately owned buildings or property visible from sidewalks and public thoroughfares may affect public space. Public space is all around us, from bustling town and city squares to the iconic beaches and wide-open national parks on our doorsteps. In its more mundane forms – such as roads, footpaths, or cycle ways – it's critical in getting us from A to B. But the line between what is considered true public space and what is publicly accessible private space is often blurred. For example, we can enjoy the outdoor plazas of privately owned shopping centres – provided we follow the rules, dress appropriately and consume. Read more: Don't forget the footpath – it's vital public space. But no prot