

# URBAN PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CONTEXT OF MOBILITY AND AESTHETICIZATION: SETTING THE PROBLEM

## WORKSHOP INTRODUCTORY SPEECH

‘URBAN PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CONTEXT OF MOBILITY AND AESTHETICIZATION:  
FACING CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES’

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**Oleg Pachenkov**  
(CISR, St.-Petersburg,  
[pachenkov@yahoo.com](mailto:pachenkov@yahoo.com))

**Lilia Voronkova**  
(AvH Stipendiaten 2009/10, CISR/free lancer,  
[lilia.voron@gmail.com](mailto:lilia.voron@gmail.com))

Dear colleagues, let us say a few words to explain the idea and the background of this workshop. Many of you have read the call for papers where those ideas were formulated in short; right now we would like to remind you and to elaborate some of them. So, *why* and *in what sense* the notions of *mobility* and *aestheticization* could be considered the challenges for the urban public space, and why it matters?

### Why mobility?

We need to start with the definition of public realm & space. The dominant understanding of the public realm is most often associated to the ideals of citizens meeting each other in order to discuss the public issues, to produce an open and free public debate and to formulate public concern. We find such definition of public space in the works of Hannah Arendt (1952) and Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1989), the two most influential social philosophers who formulated the idea of public sphere.

There is also an approach associating public to the “sociability” – to the potential of the encounter and communication of the strangers. This approach is more culturally than politically concerned, and is most often associated to the names of Richard Sennett, Ervin Goffman or anthropologist Clifford Geertz. But still, even when this “softer” or “lighter” version of the public is meant, where public space is seen as a one where strangers meet, it is still implied that people come to this space and *stay* there for a while, encounter there with one another, use this space as a stage to perform particular social interactions.

When we look at these most famous definitions, we realize that all of them understand public space as the one of *gathering* – not of “moving through”. Arendt, was concerned about Agora and Forum which by definition were spaces of gathering of citizens – for meeting and speaking, for spending leisure time, for encounters etc. For Habermas the typical public space were coffee and tea houses where bourgeois gathered, read newspapers, talked, discussed the common interests.

Probably the third approach, the sociability one, is the most so to say “open” in this regard, since it implies the possibilities of not as much of *gathering* as of *co-existence* in the public space with the potential of interaction – but equally with the potential of the lack of it. Richard Sennett defines public realm simply “as a place where strangers meet” and he seems to consider *anonymity* as one of the main virtues of the public space. Sennett also pays much attention to the boundaries and borders and their “porosity” (Sennett 2010) which means – to the movement across the borders. But still he attributes himself to the so called “dramaturgical” or “performative” school in approaching the issue of public, and clearly, both – theater and performance – imply gathering and interaction rather than silent and ignorant movement through the space without encounter.

Another significant characteristic of the public realm to be mentioned here is its opposition to the *private* and *individual* (Weintraub 1998). For several decades critical social philosophers were defending public space from privatization and domination by the private concerns – for the sake of public issues. So the main features of

public space are considered: 1) *public (not private) stewardship*, 2) *open access*, and the fact 3) that the space is “*used by many people for common purpose*” (Zukin 1995).

The current anxiety of social philosophers and scientists about vanishing public spaces in cities is rooted in the very fact of blurring and disappearance of these two key characteristics of the urban public space – the notion of *gathering* and the notion of *public-ness*.

On the one hand, public is jeopardized now not only by the privatization, but also by *individualism* (Bauman 2000, 2001, Elias 1991). The danger is not just that somebody is interested in appropriating public space for private interests, like private business does; but another trend is the *lack of interest to public concerns among individuals*. “The individual is the worst enemy of the citizen”, - said Alexis de Toquille; so the public issues are not much in demand. And as long as the space is constituted by activities fulfilling it and by actors performing them, vanishing of *public* itself means vanishing of the public space too. The latter is therefore more and more often characterized by the “*void*”, by the categories of “non” and “less”.

On the other hand, social scientists admit that space is getting more and more often expressed not through the “*place*” but through the “*flows*” (Castells 1996, 1998); the place itself is less characterized by the stability and authenticity, and more often - by the movement and flows too. For some scholars it means the end and dead of the place, like for Edward Relph (1976) who wrote about “*placeless*”, about place lacking its roots and authenticity, about “*other-directed places*” full of people from elsewhere going to elsewhere. Mark Auge (1995) wrote in 1995 about “*non-places*” (though without such a regret as characterized he work by Relph) to mark the “*unrooted places marked by mobility and travel*”, where traditions and authenticity are not relevant.

At the same time, other scholars speak about a “*cosmopolitan existence*” where the pleasure of travel, for example, is not only to arrive, but also *not to be* in any particular place (Chambers 1990: 57-58). Zigmunt Bauman (1998) attributes the right and possibility to move, and not to be tied to any particular place – as a key notion of identity, and as the main privilege in the age of globalization; Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) in the same concern writes about the necessity for understanding a place in terms of interactions, networks and movements.

The question for us is – how to correlate these new concepts of space and place and the original notion of *public* space? How much of public-ness and which part of it remains in the public space in the age of mobility and individualization? Could public life in any of its traditional understandings be performed by individuals in the urban spaces characterized by the lack of authenticity, by “*fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral*”?

Probably, we should admit that public space or place in the city is not a goal itself, but a mean – of performing public life. So public space only makes sense as a condition to be used by the “*public*”; and when there is no public or it is different (than before) – then we probably need different public space(s)?

Probably, the gatherings of the numerous citizens for discussing public concerns in the city squares particularly designed for this purpose are out of time? Probably flash mob or one-time performances could be considered more convenient spatial forms of public gatherings in contemporary cities? Just because they potentially can take place in any site of the city, because they are more mobile and flexible – this does not make them less public though. Probably traditionally understood public places are too self-concerned, too static, too introvert? Shall we following Doreen Massey (1997) think of the place as “*events*” and “*processes*”? Shall we, paraphrasing her, think of “*progressive sense*” of public place?

The ultimate question is therefore, whether we shall change our way of thinking. As Tim Cresswell put it “*While conventionally figured places demand thoughts which reflect assumed boundaries and traditions, non-places demand new mobile ways of thinking... Not only does the world appear to be more mobile but our ways of knowing the world have also become more fluid...*” (Cresswell 2003: 17). We will come back later to the issue of the new way of thinking Tom Cresswell is writing about; but right now let us address the other set of challenges the urban public space is facing nowadays.

## Why aestheticization?

Another global trend is the aestheticization of all aspects of social life. As Baudrillard (1993) put it, nowadays "Everything is sexual. Everything is political. Everything is aesthetic". State policy and social movements, city space, public and private places and lives - everything around us is to be designed and aestheticized. Even protest against aestheticization is aestheticized.

In regard to the urban landscape and the city public culture, aestheticization could be understood in at least three different contexts:

- 1) the raise of the cultural and creative industries and their role in the production of urban space;
- 2) implementation of the modernist ideals in the urban planning and design;
- 3) aestheticized "tactics of resistance" and re-appropriation of space.

### *1) The increasing role of the culture and arts in the cities; cultural (creative) industries.*

The global aspiration to aestheticization led to the increase of the role of the culture and arts, which since 1980s have been playing a significant role in urban redevelopment strategies all around the world. Creative industries became a significant part of the forces producing contemporary physical and symbolical, i.e. (id est) social, economic and cultural space of the cities: "*The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city's symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and spaces*" (Zukin 1995).

One of the consequences of this process is re-development and revitalization of the city quarters by the means of creative industries, which is usually followed by **gentrification**. Ironically, at the end artists are usually pushed out of these quarters they have changed and improved – being unable to afford the growing rent.

Another consequence of the increasing role of the arts and culture in contemporary cities is what Sharon Zukin called an "aesthetic pressure". The dominant logic of aestheticization of the urban space implies that only few particular forms of aesthetic are possible and have the universal value. For example, in Berlin of 1990s aestheticization has been expressed through the so called "festivalization of the city policy" (*Festivalisierung der Stadtpolitik*). At that time art and culture, festivals and an entire art scene of the city were proclaimed an important part of the official city development and marketing strategy. But this policy turned finally into what some people named the „taste terror of a normative aesthetic“ (*Geschmaksterror einer normativen Ästhetik*). What this policy concealed by the rhetoric and means of aesthetic was an aspiration for appropriating particular city areas, gentrification and ghettoisation of Berlin. The festivalization of the city has been finally reduced to one particular aesthetic closely linked to the tastes and ideals of particular social groups with particular political preferences (mostly represented at that time by the Germany conservative party CDU). All the alternative aesthetic forms have been officially blamed as associated to the disorder, dirty and danger (Becker 1998). Such a terror of particular taste and aesthetic in the urban design has in fact historical roots.

### *2) Modernism and "terror" of particular aesthetic in urban design.*

It is well known, that the public life of the medieval cities was concentrated at the city markets. It was characterized by density, chaos, noise, brightness, strong smells, dirt, crowds and mixture of use. But the transition from medieval times to modernity implied the processes of regulation of spaces and activities. The aestheticization of modern cities contributed to making them cultural centers, but implied the functional divisions among the city spaces, and the separation of the acceptable from unacceptable, of proper from improper, of the "higher" functions of cities from the chaotic ones (Zukin 1995: 280). As some scholars believe, modern urban managers were unable "to distinguish between disorder and diversity"; they assumed that "any violation of their ideal of public order, necessarily equated with anarchy" (Dennis 2008, 146). These ideas and ideals were formulated and brought to perfection by le Corbusier, who, in according to Sennett's characteristic, "hated the unregulated disorder of street-life" which he considered "impure": "*Corbusier's intended destruction of vibrant street life was realized in suburban growth for the middle classes, with the replacement of*

*high streets by mono-function shopping malls, by gated communities, by schools and hospitals built as isolated campuses. Over-determined pre-planning on this model has become endemic in modern urbanism: the proliferation of zoning regulations in the 20th Century is, for instance, unprecedented in the history of European urban design” (Sennett 2010: 263).*

This modernist’s urge towards purity and harmony had some particular consequences for the city life. *First*, the modernist obsession by the principle of order, hygiene and aestheticization, led to *the vanishing of the public space* in Europe. At modernism public space seemed to win in that “permanent struggle” between public and private, but some scholars consider it was a “pyrrhic victory”. While in the pre-modern cities there were logics of public and private co-existing and struggling in the city space, the modernist ideology “resulted in clearer distinction between “public” and “private” space, with fewer ambiguous, semi-private, or semi-public spaces in between” (Dennis 2008: 145). Although in the modern city public unconditionally dominated the private, it was different public space than before: *“This might appear a domination of public space, as it was drastically expended, in form of the parks in the middle of which high rise buildings were erected. However, this space was ill-defined and under-used, indeed it was “lost space” ..., where none of the functions of the public space could be performed; sociability was becoming impossible” (Madanipour 2003: 202).*

*The second consequence of the implementation of the modernist ideals in urban design - is domination of the passive spectatorship and sacrifice of the social functions to the aesthetic.* Before modernism, the monumental buildings “were meant equally to be used” and the spectator “was also an actor in it”. Since the 19th Century major buildings in the city “came to be conceived as objects to be looked at, to be viewed”. This domination of aesthetic led to the “offer of visual pleasure at the cost of mixed social and economic use”, to the “social exclusion in the name of visual pleasure” (Sennett 2010).

Zukin writes in this concern about the “curse” of aesthetic and culture in the context of urban spatiality. On the one hand, aesthetic based “historic preservation” can save the area from demolition and large-scale redevelopment; another argument is that marginal ethnic and racial groups could “use the cultural power of landmark designation to change the social class base of their communities”, so the historic preservation could “effect the neighborhood revitalization” and therefore meaning of landmarks shifts “from aesthetic category to public good” (Zukin 1995: 125). In this sense Zukin speaks about “the production of symbols” as conflicting with the “speculative production of space”. On the other hand, in the context of gentrification, “a landmark designation may raise rents and taxes so high that lower income residents are forced to move away” (p. 124), cultures and aesthetic are therefore used to “clear” space for real estate development (p. 133-135).

What this modernist trend underestimates - is the fact that, though we live in the world of total aestheticization, there are several possible aesthetics. The “visual pleasure” does not have a universal meaning and content. Glamour and trash are both aesthetic forms, just one is dominating while the other is dominated. Here we come to the issue of aestheticized resistance.

### **3) *The visual “tactics of resistance” and re-appropriation of the space by marginal groups and artists.***

If the entire culture is getting aestheticized, one can expect the same happening to the counter-culture. Traditional “revolutionary” forms of resistance are getting out of time and fashion; in the age of total aestheticization riot should take different forms to be effective; here are listed some examples of the actual aestheticized tactics of resistance: *“the resistance of advertising space (through anti-advertising and the “tactics” of resistance), resistance against roads (through tunnelling and seeking to “reclaim the streets”); resistance against capitalism (through spectacular rallies); resistance against consumer society (through skip diving, No Shop Day and a myriad other actions); resistance to home ownership...; resistance around the dinner-table ...; resistance through the construction of temporary autonomous zones, including “rave” spaces and “mystic spaces” ...; the “reclamation” of the body through tattooing or piercing, resistance through the creation of web-spaces via the development of new “communities” (Gals on Web, netchicks, Napster.com)” (Desmond et al. 2001: 258).*

This “tactical resistance” (de Certeau 1984) is based now on the principles of aesthetic re-interpretation, re-appropriation, decoding and "countervailing opportunities for symbolic resistance through polysemy and active re-signification of meaning by sub-cultural practices".

We have discussed above the example of Berlin, which became a city of festivity in 1990s, and which festivalization turned into the „taste terror” of one particular “normative aesthetic“. However, there were opposite tendencies as well. An alternative aesthetics of the squats and “Wagenburgs”, of trash and punk, of graffiti and street art was opposed to the policy of the “taste terror” and cleansing (Räumung) of the city.

As Richard Sennett claims, city is not only a site of power; some aspects of urban experience such as “difference, complexity and strangeness” could result in the “resistance to domination” (Sennett 1994: 26). In the same way, aestheticization is not always about gentrification. It has some potential of resistance. Exhibitions, open-air performances, video and media projects, graffiti and other forms of public and street art – all these are the tools and means of the alternative aestheticization of the city public life and space.

The only problem is - that even these aestheticized tactics of resistance are often getting commercialized and absorbed by the political and aesthetic mainstream, and therefore are losing their protest potential and slightly becoming refined means of the strategic domination over the city space too. Apart, no aesthetic already implies equality and democracy, quite in contrary – any aesthetic is about power.

What is important though, is the fact that both gentrification and resistance to it are performed by the means of aesthetic. All in all, the slogan of Berlin is still - “Poor but sexy!” where “sexy” is rather aesthetic than biological category. That is why we think, that Berlin is a right place for our workshop.

### **Why interdisciplinary?**

The last but not least: interdisciplinary approach is another trend of the current life, just as mobility and aestheticization. Tom Creswell, who we already cited, considers interdisciplinarity a significant part of the new “fluid” way of thinking, that social scientists need to switch to: *“This “weak thought” or “nomad thought” is more willing to transgress the boundaries of academic disciplines, the boundaries that separate high and popular culture and the boundaries that separate academia from the everyday world outside the ivory tower.”* (Creswell 2003: 17).

We believe that the problems of the urban public space could be only understood and resolved by the joint efforts of the representatives of different spheres of knowledge and activity who come across the borders of not only disciplines, but of the types of knowledge such as science and arts, academic and practical, theoretical and applied. Our idea was to bring all of you together today in order to discuss the questions as follows:

Shall we – social scientists, urban planners, artists, and so on and so forth – make efforts to “awake” citizens “inside” the individuals? Shall we struggle for bringing classical public and public-ness back to the life of the contemporary cities? Or shall we choose another strategy?

Arturo Escobar (2001: 143) said, “place gathers things, thoughts and memories in particular configuration” – so, when the things, thoughts and memories are different – why should the place stay the same? So, shall we admit, the times of the classical public life has gone? Instead of borrowing the terms and their content in the past – shall we start thinking of some updated concepts which would help to understand the contemporary social reality in more actual terms?

In particular:

- Shall we deplore the very fact that gentrification pushes the artists out of areas they have developed? Or shall we instead resign ourselves to this tendency as a part of the global trend of total mobility and temporality? If nothing is eternal and stable, if everything changes and moves – why shall these city quarters stay the same forever? Why shall artists stay in the same city areas for long?

- If the place is not essential and understood as an *event*, shall we, instead of regret for the vanishing traditional public spaces of squares and parks celebrate the spaces of galleries and studios, the events of exhibitions and vernissages – as new (although temporary) spaces of public life produced by artists?

- Considering public art a significant “aesthetic mode of producing space” (Zukin 1995) - shall we discuss the particular ways of combining our efforts for production of the city public spaces in the way we want them to be? Shall we discuss the ways of participation in the decision making processes?

We hope we will address today these and many other issues, and will produce answers to at least some of them. That was a try to offer a framework for the discussion today, though any other frames and views, and ideas are very welcome!

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