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Architectural Positions on the Public Sphere: The 2007 Delft Lecture Series

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Looking back on architectural theory over the past two decades, a narrative of profound loss appears with regard to the public sphere. As theoreticians lament what they consider to be a decline in its content and character, some have even been moved to use such dire phrases as “The End of Public Space” and “The Phantom Public Sphere.”¹

During this period, however, architectural practice has offered a much richer picture, as illustrated, for example, by work on the collective domain by Manuel de Solà-Morales in Barcelona, the Neotraditionalist public projects of Rob Krier, and the minimal public interventions in European cities of Bernardo Secchi. In the end, one is left to ask: which view better captures the actual vicissitudes of the contemporary city?

The rift between architectural theory and practice was a key subject of the 2007 Delft Lecture Series, which brought together scholars and practitioners such as de Solà-Morales, Léon Krier, Bernard Tschumi, Kengo Kuma, and Hans Kollhoff between February and May to debate the state of the public realm in cities across Europe. Its format paired a theoretician with two practicing architects around the topics “Changing Definitions of Public and Private,” “Image Building and Public Space,” “The Temporalities of the Public Sphere,” “Monumentality and Public Representation,” “Alternating Programs and Practices,” and “The Perception of the Public.”²

What emerged was the view that architects and urban designers need to take a more nuanced approach to the public realm—one that considers change in contemporary public life not as lamentable, but as offering a series of new challenges. The lecture series also emphasized how many

recent public initiatives overlook the *longue durée* of public space—the traditional capacity of public buildings to play a role in the collective memory of citizens, and of streets and squares to offer an enduring structure to the city.

The Theoretical Debate

For years one of the main exponents of the narrative of lost public space has been the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. In his apocalyptic 1994 essay “The Generic City,” he claimed that cities were witnessing an “evacuation of the public realm.” He used this slogan to describe the pending transformation of the public sphere into a uniform space of traffic, implying that squares and streets, traditional urban expressions of public life, would be increasingly reduced to infrastructural figures. If places still existed in the new urban world where public life could unfold, they would certainly not be streets.

*The street is dead.... Roads are only for cars. People (pedestrians) are led on rides (as in an amusement park), on “promenades” that lift them off the ground, that subject them to a catalog of exaggerated conditions—wind, heat, steepness, cold, interior, exterior, smells, fumes—in a sequence that is a grotesque caricature of life in the historic city.*³

In Koolhaas’s view, the traditional street, with its opportunity for chance encounters with the “other,” would be replaced by decks, bridges, tunnels and motorways reserved for specific urban audiences. If the *flâneur* still had a place in this future city, it would be in the highly planned and privately owned interior spaces of hotel lobbies and shopping malls.

The underlying logic of these changes has been accurately described by Michael Sorkin, who has pointed to a strategy of “Disneyfication” that has increasingly been applied to cities.

*Whether in its master incarnation at the ersatz Main Street of Disneyland, in the phony historic festivity of a Rouse marketplace, or the gentrified architecture of the “Reborn” Lower East Side, this elaborate apparatus is at pains to assert its ties to the kind of city life it is in the process of obliterating.*⁴

Sorkin warned that even though the theme-park perspective was proving enormously effective in attracting tourists to historical cities, it might mean the end of diverse public life. After all, he wrote, “In the ‘public’ spaces of the theme park or the shopping mall, speech itself is restricted: there are no demonstrations in Disneyland. The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle for democracy itself.”⁵ Sorkin appealed for “a return to a more authentic urbanity, a city based on physical proximity and free movement and a sense that the city is our best expression of a desire for collectivity. As spatiality ebbs, so does intimacy.”⁶

In the late 1990s the Belgian philosopher Lieven De Caeter further characterized developments in the public sphere with the expression “capsularization of life.”⁷ He claimed that everyday life was increasingly unfolding in conditioned, private spaces of heterotopic character.

Our everyday life can be described as a movement, using transport capsules, from one enclave or capsule, home for instance, to another, campus, office, airport, all-in-one hotel, mall, and so on. One might say that hyperindividualism

+ *the suburbanization of everyday life = capsularization.*⁸

In an earlier lecture, De Cauter had linked this process to what he called the “Mediterraneanization” of historical centers in European cities. Part of this process was their exclusive and one-dimensional use for leisure, tourism and shopping. Though at first glance we perceive a variety of people using streets and squares, he argued, on second view we recognize a homogeneous group using a heterotopian place.

“Mediterraneanization is not so much a sign of the return to the Athenian agora, of a new public life, but rather of the injection of an archetype that stems from the dream world of advertisements into the real city; the ‘universal beach party,’” he wrote.⁹

Perspectives from Practice

The perspectives of Koolhaas, Sorkin and De Cauter sketched the outlines of a broader theoretical discourse lamenting the increasingly one-dimensional character of public spaces. But other insights emerged in the 1990s from European architectural practice.

One of the most interesting was that of the Spanish architect and urban planner Manuel de Solà-Morales. In a 1992 article “Public and Collective Space: The Urbanization of the Private Domain as a New Challenge,” originally published in the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, he questioned two aspects of the traditional definition of public space: that it should be publicly owned, and that it should be freely accessible by everyone.¹⁰ To de Solà-Morales, both these attributes were becoming obsolete, and he argued that even in the most traditional European cities, much public life was developing elsewhere.

As a response, de Solà-Morales suggested extending the notion of public space to encompass new spaces such as “parking lots, shopping malls, vacation centers and cinema complexes.” He called these “collective spaces” and argued that architects should seek broader responsibility for their design. They should not concede their design to commercial logic and developer standards, but rather seek to transform them into challenging new fields of architectural investigation. De Solà-Morales described this task as “the urbanization of the collective territory.”

At the same time, the Italian urban designer Bernardo Secchi was pointing to another important aspect of the public sphere: its ability to accommodate different forms of appropriation over different time periods. In the mid-1990s Secchi developed several designs for “a project of the soil.” For the Belgian city of Kortrijk, this involved a minimally defined series of public plains or “*galletes*” which were carefully inserted in the topography to become a substratum for future public life and building.

Crucial to Secchi’s approach was a belief that everyday appropriation would take place only if sufficient time were provided for new practices to unfold. The design of public space must thus accommodate

*...a slower pace, in which everyday habits can again legitimately play a role. Too often there is a refusal of the space of life which is a continuous construction site, continuously traversed by nomadic populations and activities, never reaching a recognizable stable condition. There is a necessity for a narrative which, as Wim Wenders says, “protects its own characters.”*¹¹

A third perspective on the appropriation and temporality of the public sphere came from Bernard Tschumi. In his design for the well-known Parisian Parc de La Villette he explored ways to serve different publics, and especially the short-term cycles of appropriation that characterize a space such as a park. He saw these “events” as crucial to understanding contemporary public space. They involve practices of shock and reinvention that architecture should accommodate, creating loci where differences might become visible. Tschumi noted that “the event is by definition the place of the combination of differences.”¹²

Parc de La Villette was thus designed to express a superposition of differences. On the largest scale this involved the introduction of a grid over the site, an open frame within which all activities might unfold. Defined elements were then added to the grid, such as playgrounds, purposefully designed gardens, and red *follic* pavilions employing a common formal language. The combination of uniform grid and specific elements offered a clever blend that might function as a background for both daily life and singular events.

Hypertrophy of Invented Public Spaces

The positions of De Solà-Morales, Secchi and Tschumi illustrate a disconnect between theoretical debate and actual developments in architectural practice. Indeed, practicing architects were discovering new complexity and richness in the public sphere. And their calls for more nuanced attention to it did not remain unanswered. Despite the dour forecasts of architectural theorists, during the 1990s architects and city governments in Europe started to regard public space (both open areas

such as squares and park and public buildings such as museums) as a matter of concern.

Projects in Barcelona (Spain), Lyon (France), and Groningen (The Netherlands) highlighted a growing awareness of the value of public space in a new competition to establish regional “poles of attraction.” Attractive public space was seen as key to catching the attention of both the local population (for entertainment and shopping) and the international public of congress participants and tourists.

During the 1990s leaders in major European cities (and also secondary ones) became convinced that the reimagination of public space should be part of a general strategy to put them on the map. The results were staggering. In city after city public spaces were developed or redeveloped: squares, streets and quays were beautified; iconic public buildings erected; and abandoned industrial areas redeveloped into public parks. The public squares of Barcelona, the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao, and the conversion of the Ruhr district of Germany into new park areas became the templates for a variety of strategies applied across Europe. The outcome can only be described as a hypertrophy of public space.

The new buildings and spaces were often very successful and had strong visual impacts. The contours of the Bilbao Guggenheim, the fountains of the public squares in Lyon, and the public parks of Barcelona cut a high profile in the commonly held imagery of these cities today.

In these major cities attention to public space was embedded in a larger plan to improve the public realm. Unfortunately, however, this was not always the case in secondary locales, where occasional investment in public space was seen as a way to

augment their appeal in international guidebooks, advertisements and websites. Too often new public spaces were regarded merely as stage settings for concerts, festivals, or made-up festivities with little relation to long-term qualities of the city.

Many such spaces had two common denominators: a fascination with image quality and a concern with short-term activities. Attention was aimed at the fleeting logics of consumption and mass and congress tourism, as new or renewed public spaces became integral to a society of spectacle. A recipe of beautified public spaces, spectacular public buildings, and throbbing public events became the accepted norm.

The Return of the Perennial and Difference

Have things changed since the 1990s? In architectural theory, perspectives have hardly altered. In 2007 phrases such as the “evacuation of the public realm” and “the capsularization of life” seem to reverberate more intensely than ever. And renown theoreticians are still claiming that traditional squares and public buildings are obsolete, eventually to be replaced by electronic highways, chat rooms, and virtual communities.

But what has become of the more optimistic view among practitioners? This question provided the incentive for the Delft spring 2007 lecture series. Titled “Architectural Positions,” it aimed to convene leading architects and ask them for their views on the changing public sphere.

Once again, the perspective from practice differed greatly from the tone of mourning that is the grist for contemporary architectural theory. Not a single practicing architect claimed that the public sphere was being “evacuated.” Rather, a perspec-

tive emerged of important challenges and responsibilities.

Two important concerns were raised in particular. One was described by de Solà-Morales as follows: “a shopping center or a peripheral supermarket, an amusement park or a stadium, a large parking lot or a shopping gallery... these are the significant places for everyday life, these are the contemporary collective spaces.” The embedding of private spaces into the collective structure of the city clearly remains a worry for many.

But participants in the seminar series sought to interpret this as a challenge for the future. Michiel Riedijk was specific:

Architects are by default condemned to think and work for the future. The past does not offer clear-cut answers for contemporary challenges. Architectural and urban design must regain the conviction that new solutions, technologies and instruments allow for the design of a more comfortable and durable world.

The other main concern was the need for a careful consideration of the different temporal qualities of public activity. A recurrent theme here was the need to renew concern for the *longue durée* of public projects. In rethinking the design of public spaces, a number of presenters argued that new emphasis should be placed on their ability to structure the long-term development of the city, not merely lend it a quick imaginability.

In the words of Felix Claus:

Public building is asked to stand out. It represents society.... We want to build strong buildings because their strong presence could change

the environment.... It is an issue of content and not of images. There are too many images. It has to be about the content regarding social responsibility. This has very much to do with urban design; durability.

Beyond addressing the present cycles of building, deterioration and rebuilding, architects and urban designers should refocus attention on the capacity of streets, squares and important public buildings to serve as organizing figures within a city. But several speakers offered a second reason for the *longue durée*. They identified public places and buildings as “sites par excellence,” where crucial collective issues such as sustainability can still be addressed.

Thus, in his lecture, Léon Krier argued that “the main concern of architects today should be the relation of building to available resources. The realm of public building is one of the most obvious terrains for an architect to consider these issues.” Several presenters also characterized the field of public space as one where architects can engage with broad social considerations beyond fleeting commercial logic.

Another important theme was multiplicity. While it is generally acknowledged that processes like “Disneyfication” and “Mediterraneanization” create homogeneity in the use of space, de Solà-Morales, Tschumi, and Juhani Pallasmaa claimed that architects should aspire to strategies that offer room for the expression of difference—for the unexpected, otherness, and the unknown.

Projects presented illustrated attempts to come to terms with these new principles. For example, Lieven de Boeck of Xaveer de Geyter Architects proposed a strategy for “After-Sprawl.” As he claimed,

...the project presents an overview of a possible new spatial condition that can be created in the sprawl and be drawn from the inherent characteristics. After-sprawl aims to demonstrate that there can be a contemporary urbanity that is not founded on the classical dichotomy of the city and countryside. It finds possible ways to connect that urbanity to a public space based on a shared notion of perception and accessibility....”

A New Future for the Public Sphere

In general terms, participants in the Architectural Positions seminars confirmed the pleas of de Solà-Morales, Secchi and Tschumi for a more nuanced approach to the design of public spaces. No doubt, definitions of public and private are today shifting to give increasing importance to the private sphere. And, no doubt, the high expectations concerning spectacle and image within the public realm will continue to create volatility within contemporary public programs.

Yet, despite—or exactly because of—the complex temporality of the present-day city, concern for the *longue durée* should be a key consideration for contemporary architects working in the public sphere. The design of public spaces can provide an expansive décor for this alternating life; it can offer a frame for public events and habits; and it can offer room for expression of difference. In short, it can create places for meeting and exchange—or in the words of Hannah Arendt, “action and speech.”¹³

Notes

1. Michael Sorkin, ed, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New

York: Hill and Wang, 1992); and Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

2. For an overview of the program of the Architectural Positions seminar series, see <http://positions.tudelft.nl>.

3. Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City,” in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995), p. 1254.

4. Michael Sorkin, “Introduction,” in Michael Sorkin, ed, *Variations on a Theme Park*, p. xiv.

5. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

7. Lieven De Cauter, “The Capsule and the Network: Preliminary Notes for a General Theory,” in the architectural journal *OASE* 51, “Re: Generic City” (2001), Nijmegen, Uitgeverij Sun.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

9. Lieven de Cauter, *De capsulaire beschaving, Over de stad in het tijdperk van de angst* (Rotterdam: NAi Uitgeverij, 2004), p. 32.

10. The article was translated in Dutch and published in the architectural journal *OASE* 32, “De transformatie van de metropool” (1992), Nijmegen, Uitgeverij Sun. An English translation of the article will be published in a forthcoming *Architectural Positions Anthology*, which will present thirty-six articles by architects on “Architecture, Modernity, and the Public Sphere.”

11. Bernardo Secchi, “For a Town-Planning of Open Spaces,” in *Casabella* 597-598, January/February 1993.

12. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 258.

13. Hannah Arendt, “The Human Condition” (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 13.