# From Utopia to Non-Place. Identity and Society in the City's Space

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## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates the possibilities of (re)definition of architecture based on a critical reflection on the factors that form the current culture and thought -in an opened frame that includes its natural, artificial and virtual elements, and its mixtures-, to open the complexity of the social changes, and its repercussion on the city's space.

In this particular frame, and according to the general aim marked by this congress, it describes various matters: from the transformations of the urban dynamics to its implications in the socio-spatial processes, crossing and exceeding its political, social and cultural connotations, taking the city's space as a reference in the contemporaneousness.

It does not concern to the space of material and dimensional relations, but to the space of the city alive and lived, considered as the sum of the traces that constitute the human realities, where the distance between the constructed world and the imagined world is diluted, and where the city is nothing more than the choice of a shared experience.

The city is a cognitive, interpretative and communicative system, where people, activities and places belong simultaneously to several types of space, which content is characterized by its non-linearity and by its discontinuity, reflecting the terms of a reality based on the discontinuity, the diversity and the plurality of the events.

These events do not still produce visible and immediate effects in the conformation of the urban landscape, but determine constant processes, which generate forms of relations as ways of thinking about the society.

In these processes every citizen can generate his own space of relation, creating a city that reflects the multiple urban experiences, which coexist in the territory, and modifying the forms of the city's spaces and the manners of living.

Parallel cities to the physical space, done by the people, whose social status remains the same, but whose cultures differ increasingly; and done by spaces, to which denied their identity, but they look for their potentials of place, with multiple physical and social dimensions.

## 2. The city's space

The city's space is never neutral, nor is it the pretension of its conceptualization: from its location to the offers for its uses, from its homogenization to the strategies of control and domination necessary for it, the city's space establishes rules of domination and subordination that are represented in it.

In fact, as Henry Lefebvre would say in "Reflections on the Politics of Space" (Lefebvre, 1976) "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference whit regard to its contents and thus seems to be "purely" formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is

precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape. Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies".

Space is not a model of proposing (nor imposing), as unquestionable object, in which the perceptions and representations of how it is necessary to use it and to live in it are implicit, but it is the plot of relations that arise in it and across which the experiences and even the contradictions of the social life are expressed and represented in it.

The "appropriate space"- as Lefebvre defines in "The Production of Space" (Lefebvre, 1974) -, "a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group", not like the putting in scene of the empirical man and of the domesticated space - "dominated" as would tint the author-, sham of the programmed and normalized life, but of the appropriation as subversive action that denies the official versions of use of the space and commits an outrage against its forms of control.

"Anthropologic place", as Marc Augé defines it in "Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity" (Augé, 1995), a place in which there are the definitions that allow to understand the variations of the reality -set of sudden and unforeseeable changes-, where the space is not a delimitation, but a relation, and where the humans have the possibility of transforming themselves, establishing forms of their own identity and their society in the city's space.

Or "human environment", as Tomas Maldonado describes it in "Ambiente humano e ideología: notas para una ecología crítica" (Maldonado, 1970), "constructed partly by ourselves ", because "our environmental reality (…) is the result of what Vico would have defined as the aptitude to do" and because "to make our environment and to make us constitutes (…) the same process".

## 3. Identity and Society

The relation between identity and society opens the possibility of a complementary vision that tries to reflect the complexity of the different interpretations of reality, and implies the importance of investigating its paper in the city's space.

These interpretations open the possibilities of diverse levels of approximation for the definition of space, and the city offers the strategies in order to which these could be superposed, not as a material, but as an intellectual device.

As Félix de Azúa explains in "La necesidad y el deseo" (Azúa, 2003), the cities always had "petrified the image of our desires": "painting and drawings were sufficient for the ancient city; the word realized industrial city; cinema and photography were enough for the 20th century. But the city of the 21st century escapes to these means technician of representation": "games of the illusion", as them Jean Baudrillard would define in "Simulacra and Simulation" (Baudrillard, 1977).

On the other hand, according to Peter Eisenman in "The end of the classical: the end of the beginning, the end of the end" (Eisenman, 1984), "The first fiction of the architecture is the representation".  And he adds that "when the distinction between representation and reality disappears, when the reality is only a simulation, the representation loses his source a priori of significance, and then it is when it happens to be only a simulation".

In this respect, there are also several authors who offer reflections about identity and its relation with reality that is, how the thought influences the representation actually- appropriating of it-, influencing in addition its conformation and determining its transformations.

For example, Nelson Goodman, in "Ways of Worldmaking" (Goodman, 1978), defines the metaphor as the cognitive element with which we construct "world versions", across the overflows between image and word, with which we symbolize every area of the human experience.

Maldonado describes how -from the philosophical and scientific thought, without forgetting the contributions of the literary and artistic description- "it has realized the delicate operation of transforming a philosophical notion into a sensitive reality" (Maldonado, 1970).

Or Oliver Sacks in "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat" (Sacks, 1991) speaks about the Korsakoff's syndrome of Mr. Thompson, which generates a world to every instant, in a way not so different from the narrative need with "that each of us builds and lives through a "story"".

Revisiting these relations is not especially innovative. Nor it is to do it across the architecture. Alvaro Siza said: "In my opinion the example, on having thought Architecture, always came from the writers, and between them the Poets, very competent makers of the record and of the dream, inhabitants of the loneliness".

Nevertheless, from these considerations, it is possible to think in reality and imagination, as equivalent terms, spatially and verbally.

Consistently, to speak about the architecture does not refer to its objects, but to a form of thought, and to speak about the space does not refer to the delimiting of possible, but to a mutual understanding of different realities.

Resorting to the literature, Italo Calvino, in " Six memos for the next millennium " (Calvino, 1988) demonstrated the need of the search of a knowledge that allows "to look at the world from another logic, other manners of knowing", and he asked himself: "Is it legitimate to extrapolate of the speech of the sciences an image of the world that corresponds to my desires? If the operation that I am trying attracts me, it is because I feel that it might get tied up again to a very ancient thread of the history of the poetry".

## 4.   From Utopia to Non-Place

When Thomas More, in 1516, visited the paradisiacal island that himself called *Utopia*, he named a tradition -begun probably by Pindar and his *island of happy men*, and Plato and his ideal *Republic*- which trace is read to the present day.

Nevertheless, his political, religious and social idea did not do explicit an urban model, using for it the contemporary London to his epoch.

It will be from the Renaissance, in the Tommasso Campanella's *City of the Sun* or in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* -in which he got as literary topic the utilization of the scientific and technical advances for the improvement of the living conditions (predecessor of the statements of science fiction)-, that the Utopias will turn into projects, of a perfect, highly rationalist and functionalist world.

On the ends of the 19th century, in *News from Nowhere*, William Morris does not only describe a political ideology, but also its ideal design and its aesthetic preferences.

From the 20th century, Utopias do not serve to construct ideal worlds, but to understand better the world in which we live, as sum of the cities that we live and that we are capable of imagining.

Or better, as David Harvey explains in "Spaces of Hope" (Harvey, 2000): "There is a time and a place in the incessant human effort for changing the world that the alternative visions, it is not important how fantastic they could be, they are useful to shape powerful political forces of change".

The author proposes a differentiation between "Utopias of spatial form" and "Utopias as social process".

Utopias of spatial form, which begin from the already mentioned Utopian projects, "can be characterized as Utopias of spatial form, since the temporality of the social process, the dialectics of the social change -the real history- are excluded, where as the social stability is guaranteed by means of a spatial fixed form"

The risk in this type of Utopia is that it materializes as restrictive forms of control, turning "degenerate Utopias": a harmonious space, without conflicts and separated of the real world.

In fact, this type of Utopia materializes, according to the author, only in those spaces that do not assume social responsibilities, but that reproduce the images of a city that has never existed and that was never inhabited: Disneyland, malls, residential zones.

Also Jean Baudrillard spoke about Disneyland as an example, between others, of the "mechanism of dissuasion put in functioning to regenerate the wrong way the fiction of the reality" (Baudrillard, 1977).

Augé, on the other hand, defines like "non-places" those containers dedicated to the production and to the consumption, empty in theirs iconography and in theirs contents, and defined only by theirs absence of identity (Augé, 1995).

A logic of consumption that is reflected in the architecture, in the urbanism and even in the protection of the heritage, valued for terms of market, of tourism and of spectacle: Félix de Azúa, would be call them *real simulacra* (Azúa, 2003).

On the other hand, continuing with Harvey, Utopias as social process develop out of the spatial limits, so much that do not need to be tied to any place, and they are expressed in temporary terms. The author recognizes the capitalism as the best case of this type of Utopia, which degenerated form is the inequality in the economic development.

According to Harvey, the fact that both Utopias only have materialized in its degenerated forms, it means neither its failure, nor its denial, but it indicates the need of his reformulation.

In addition to the Utopias as social process, there are media spaces or cyberspaces too, that "they make real the virtual spaces that in other times were reserved to the dreams and to the representations: world in construction in which, relocated, we locate and displace (…) since not a long time ago, whose remained attached to the land they lived in the virtuality so much as us even if without adapted technologies", as Michel Serres says in Atlas (Serres, 1995).

And these new spaces open the possibility of a complementary vision that tries to reflect the complexity of the different interpretations of the city, that is not an emptiness that contains objects and subjects, but an interconnected network of singularities.

Rem Koolhaas -that he refuses to believe that the globalization would carry to the homogenization- warned that "the same process of modernization drives in every place to result different, to new specificities, to new singularities ".

And also Alvaro Siza recognizes the fragmentation as "consequence of constructing the city" (Siza, 1992), with which the idea that he identifies with the city is "that of complexity and coincidence of diverse activities " (Siza, 2003).

## 5. Final considerations

Rem Koolhaas in "The story of the pool" (Koolhaas, 1977), considers the floating pool as "the first step, modestly but radically (…) to improve the world thanks to the architecture", and in the movement of the "architects or rescuers" wallowing, it will turn the vehicle that it will allow them to flee towards the freedom, coming to Manhattan, imagined place, and the possible only one.

The same Manhattan-laboratory that Koolhaas describes in "Delirious New York" (Koolhaas, 2004) as "a mythical island where the invention and the putting to test of a metropolitan way of life and his consequent architecture could be applied as a collective experiment in which the city informs was turning into a factory of artificial experience, where reality and nature were stopping existing ".

The network of proposed ideas does not want to be exhaustive, nor tries to include all the subject matters of reflection on the city's space and the relationship between identity and society in it.

It is more: all of them are nodes to completing and their relations are traced, as a reading always interrupted, and uninterrupted simultaneously, in that the disconnected fragments are placed each one in the space.

The question is about the city -and the network of relations that constitute it-, and about the precariousness of the processes that have generated it: in it, architecture cannot excuse from thinking its position to satisfy the desires and the needs of the man, in the generation of the world.

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