

Symbolism a priori • Symbolism a posteriori

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Most of the theoretical proposals aimed at explaining symbolization processes -how specific objects or places become significant to human experience- differ in processes or functions. However, different approaches have a common point, they share a part of the explanation focused on social agreement on individual experience of the objects or places as the origin of symbolization. Historically, there is a double origin of the creation of collective spaces: social and spontaneous creation of new places by the users, and planning or intentional action of those people with the power to change the environment. Our proposal of talking about 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' symbolism arises from this double origin.

starting assumptions

what do we understand by symbolism 'a priori'

When ever an organism of the social structure is able to promote or propose the creation or change of an environment, with a specific intention, it is wielding power. This action aims at endowing space with shape, structure, elements and name trying to highlight some values, aesthetics and facts to stand in the group mind or to remove other facts, memories and experiences considered not desirable, from the collective. It is intended to create a symbolic space with a prefixed meaning that can or cannot be assimilated by the population as a reference and become or not a shared symbolic element.





Most of the big urban actions and artistic interventions in public space, have these characteristics. For instance, building a monument or a public space more or less monumental, is intended to evoke a memory, a fact, a person or to put a political, artistic or social moment on record. Moreover, the power structure, from its own office, gives names to streets, squares and parks with the intention to endow them with a specific symbolic value.

The actions can have different consequences:

1.- The intervention could suit the shared values, aesthetics, culture and tradition of the population. In this case, it will easily be integrated to the shared referents as a social joint element of the collective reinforcing its identity.

2.- The intervention could not suit the population's sensitivity, breaking its course of action and tradition. There are three possible results of this:

a) The population feels assaulted and it actively rejects the intervention. However, due to its severity, the intervention could still become inevitable referent of the collective.

b) The population feels estranged to the intervention and to the symbolic value given. Thus, the intervention does not reinforce the collective identity and it is not a collective referent. (e.g.: although it's a powerful structure, the monument to Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera that has been in the present Avinguda Josep Tarradellas for thirty something years, it is unknown by the citizens and it is not socially significant)

c) Although the intervention disregards the popula-

tion's sensitivity, it brings about new elements, values and symbols (eg: modernity, dynamism, status, wealth) which are positively evaluated by the group. The intervention is easily assimilated as an identifying referent and joint element of the group. (eg: the new Olympic Marina area)

what do we understand by symbolism 'a Posteriori'

We refer as 'a posteriori' symbolism to those objects and places which obtain a meaning for every individual and for the social group as a whole through time and use. Therefore, they play an active role in the reference world of a collective. Those spaces which become common places, are loaded with meaning from social interaction and which represent joint elements of the community.

'A posteriori' symbolic spaces do not require any powerful or notable formal structure. Thus, they can be structurally insignificant but terribly relevant for a specific group of a population.

Actually in our cities there are plenty of spaces with these characteristics. People, individually or in group, need to identify territories as their own, in order to build their personality, to structure their cognition and social relationships and to satisfy their identity and belongingness needs. Some authors, such as Lefebvre, refers as 'social construction of the space' to how life spaces -the city- are traditionally built from a social agreement and with a



certain level of citizens' participation. This is to the advantage of a strong identification of people with their creation, and regardless of its structure space has a strong significance for their users. Some examples of this are the spontaneous meeting points in towns or the surprising and marginal corners used by teenagers or urban bands as a common place. (eg: same bars as a social center that evoke the origin of migrant people)

Nevertheless, this phenomenon can also occur in spaces preconceived with an 'a priori' significance. In this case, time is required, a longer or shorter time depending on the situation. Hence, the structural aspects of the intervention, together with the functional virtues of the space, are crucial. (eg: Colombus monument)

art in the city

Art in public space is 'par excellence' located between the 'a priori' and the 'a posteriori' symbolism. This is because any artistic intervention intends to become a shared referent and a plastic expression of collective values or even to adjust to these values from its own aesthetics.

Art in public spaces is mainly an urban phenomenon, or one of rural civilizations but with a very complex social plot. Through history, one can find different controlling functions of art which are always present but with prominent aspects in different stages.





In some periods art is used as a **power demonstration** in front of the enemy and as a threat and strength demonstration in front of their own people. This is the case of the Egyptian and Aztec temples and pyramids.

In other times, there is a predominance of art as **monument** which reinforces processes of **exaltation of celebrities, of deification and of idolatry**, such as in the case of the Roman Empire and the Roman-Catholic Church. Art is always communication, among other things, but in some specific moments the function of **transmission of an articulated message** is pre-eminent, like in Romanesque painting or in modern comics.

Art as **commemoration and as dramatization** can be found in the preparation and properties accompanying the Prince in the Renaissance, as well as in the Nazism and, in contemporary time, in such big sport celebrations as the Olympics Games.

Art as abstraction can be considered the most representative art of this century, intending to be **pure art**, a simple expression of the artist's feelings or the aesthetic experience of the observer.

Never before the XXth century, man was so aware of the will of 'making' art, instead of letting daily life become art. This implies inexorably the will of creating significance, or at least the contribution or the reflection of shared social values or values that can potentially be shared. Abstraction inevitably loses then its pure art dimension of

feeling or aesthetic experience and becomes a value of social interaction and communication, provided it is integrated in the collective experience.

These five aspects approached, which are not exhaustive -power demonstration, exaltation of celebrities, commemoration of facts, dramatization, transmission of an articulated message and abstraction as a feeling and a aesthetic experience- show the function of art in urban space. Furthermore, they are functions of art in urban space regardless of the artistic intention of its creation. In other words, they summarize the qualities and virtues of a space which became symbolic for a collective. This argues about the need of public art as something apart from the own conception of public space. It also links its meaning to the quality of space understood as a whole.

Modern world's overspecialization has brought about a separation of creative functions which detaches the actions of inhabiting, organizing, structuring, building and decorating, and makes the social symbolization process difficult.

Again we find the distinction between 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' symbolism. We should ask when, why and which aspects a space must hold in order to become symbolic for a community.



some existential processes related to urban symbolic space

Urban space symbolism is not a superfluous anecdote. It seems to be a basic and determinant component of social well-being. Studies about quality of life in Barcelona (Pol i Dominguez 1986; Pol, Guardia i col. 1990) have confirmed the tendency that if there is a good identification with the city, a strong place identity, the global satisfaction level of citizens is higher. This is true, in spite of citizens' strong criticisms to services or particular aspects of their daily reality.

An old and well known proposition to explain that is from Lynch in *The Image of the City*. According to Lynch, an element or urban space requires three characteristics to become symbolic for people and collectivities:

- a) **Identity**, it can be distinguished from other elements, it has its own entity, apart from the rest, which enables it to be perceived as a whole, independently of its context.
- b) **Structure** which points a guided relationship between the element and the observer or other objects.
- c) **Meaning**, understood as an emotive and functional implication by the subject.

However, these aspects are not enough to explain the process, since it needs a theoretical explanation regarding the social dimension, which we will try to tackle.



People and groups need to identify themselves with their own physical space and with a group which gives them keys to create and share their way of life. That is to say, people need reference models. What is known by culture, shared ethical, aesthetic and relational values are in the deepest of the psychological processes.

The feelings of attachment, belongingness, ownership and managing, through legal property, regular use or identification has been called *appropriation of space* (Korosec 1976). This concept and the still valid concept of alienation are both sides of the same question. It takes time for a new collective identity to appear but it is supported by the organization of urban environment (action-transformation component in appropriation of space). At the same time, the same appropriated environment supports the created identity (symbolic identification component) (Pol 1994, Pol & Moreno 1992).

Social identity is supported by place identity (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff 1983; Lally 1988; Hunter 1987). As Valera (1993) has shown, this is an independent process of the aesthetic and monumental quality. Meanings of city spaces suggested from its town-planning treatment, building monuments or taxonomy (what we called 'a priori' symbolism) will not be successful unless there is a recreation-approval-appropriation process by the group (Valera, Pol et al. 1988).

When the collective sees the intervention as gratuitous, against its referents or not bringing new desirable entity



and identity elements, the intervention results in feelings of alienation and inhibition instead of identification. Since public properties are perceived as something alien and not common, apart from inhibition, people show aggressiveness.

Individuals can also identify themselves as members of a group or community on the basis of a sense of belonging to a concrete social spatial category. In general, we can consider urban categories as one kind of social categories which individuals use to define their social identity. The fact of considering oneself linked to a concrete urban setting presupposes a set of socially elaborated and shared attributions (self attributions) or widely recognised by the members of other categories. From our perspective, individuals or groups can define themselves on the basis of an identification with an urban surrounding on a definite level of abstraction: «neighborhood», «area» and «city», demonstrating the intercategorical similarities and the differences between the individuals of other neighborhoods, areas or cities according to given definite dimensions of the category which acts as reference. Taking as example the neighborhood category, these dimensions are:

- *Territorial dimension*, if the inhabitants of the neighborhood are capable of establishing some boundaries for this, and in this way, delimit a geographical area identified as «their neighborhood».
- *Behavioral dimension*, if the individuals who make up the population of the neighborhood are capable of identi-





fying themselves as such through some behavioral specific manifestation or through definite social practises characteristic of the neighborhood.

- *Social dimension*, if the composition or social structure of the neighborhood is, up to a certain point, perceived by its inhabitants as widespread within the whole neighborhood and different from other neighborhoods.
- *Psychosocial dimension*, if the individuals consider that, because of the fact of being from this neighborhood, they can be attributed with a special character, personality or idiosyncrasy, or well determined psychological features which allow them to differentiate themselves from other neighborhoods.
- *Temporal dimension*, if the inhabitants of the neighborhood are conscious of a common past which identifies them or, in other terms, if they are capable of perceiving a temporary continuity as a neighborhood through their historical evolution.
- *Ideological dimension*, in which case it is considered that the neighborhood is defined through definite ideological values, politics or culture shared by its inhabitants.

some unexpected effects of design and space structure

In discussions about design, controversy between functionality and aesthetics, rationality and emotivity, always arises, with professionals wanting to reduce it to a ques-

tion between good and bad designs. Market laws -regardless we like them or not- promotes 'natural selection'. Since objects designed ten years ago are sold more easily now, fashion is a relative phenomenon.

But what happen with urban furniture or public space art that are not directly purchased by users. In this case discussions are between designers and public agents who choose, buy and locate these elements in the street.

As we have already mentioned, Barcelona modern image is excellently approved as a whole by citizens. In spite citizens are still critical with specific places and have their own preferences.

In spite of the fact, pointed out by social sciences, that some people can have preferences towards innovation, there is a real behaviour preferring what is known. More than a period when reactionaries have a good name, this is a 'natural' human reaction to save efforts.

People is used to perceiving 'good shape' forms, as the Gestalt movement described time ago. Therefore, changing to different shapes demands an effort that people are reluctant to make. 'Good shapes' are referents which allow us to identify objects, functions, preferences and the group or class we belong to. Changing these references is a long cultural process linked to the experience people have with the space or object. Thus, it is a coherent and logical situation that citizens prefer innovative objects - urban furniture, objects of art- but only partially innova-



tive, allowing them to identify their function and use them confidently. A beautiful and decorative fountain which cannot be clearly identified as a sculpture, a dog toilet or a drinking fountain, although it could manage to comply with functionality, aesthetics or emotivity, fails to communicate trust and identification.

Confusion between innovation and extravagance (often discomfort) is causing some distrust in design, which is risky. Progress in art, through history, has used some resources as innovation, extravagance and perversion of 'good shapes', which is good. However, if we apply them to city objects at random (or selected in the wrong way), this could reinforce a modern and post-modern tendency in urban life: the city, public spaces, streets and their objects are seen as aggressive for citizens and have the perverse effects mentioned in the paragraph above. This is due to structural problems of the social model we are immersed in and not due to design, which could also be of help to it. Urban life elements, i.e.: quick rhythm of life, quick changes, stimulus saturation, different ways in which values and education are transmitted and distance between decision centres and the street, turn the city into aggressive centers that stands against more and more defensive and inhibited citizens. Design and its good use can make environment either kinder or more stressful.

Design has always existed in a more or less limited way by selected fields. Popularization, or maybe generalization, of design is a consequence of fashion. Furthermore, popularization results from economy, production meth-



ods and market becoming international. Some factors such as distance between production and consumption, attributing desirable status symbols to what has been designed, massive and concentrated production for a broad market ended with productive autarky, which is not necessarily bad. Nevertheless, this has also ended with form and aesthetic diversity in our communities. There is an increasing tendency to 'designed homogenization' which makes us react against what is unknown and different. This is also related to other social problems like repulse to social, cultural and ethnic diversity.

Getting use to a formal rhythm and to an aesthetic outlook of a 'well done' product, has deeply changed our environment making us dependent and inhibited. In ten or fifteen years we have changed from supremacy of popular and craft aesthetic outlook to aesthetic of industrial design of quality (or bad imitations with 'vulgar' appearance). Nowadays, a craft or popular sign is not a popular fact. However, changes go further than a mere aesthetic accommodation. Designed environment do no allow users' spontaneous intervention, which is not designed and looks vulgar. Therefore, keeping aesthetic looking of quality implies citizens' inhibition. Citizens feel assaulted, unauthorized and unable to act over their own environment reacting with aggressiveness, vandalism and destruction. We can find good examples of this in modern parks in our city.

Designed environment does not allow direct reuse of materials for different functions, as it used to happen in pre-





modern culture. It does not allow such creative actions as to make a poster or repair a fence with a fruit box when it is necessary. Although past times were obviously worse, this should not prevent us from a critical approach of present reality. This is the reason why it is necessary to point out contradictory messages in design culture now that we want to promote the culture of recycling and re-using of materials.

The necessary criticism to design should avoid sublimating critical reflection on our society, of which it is only a part.

conclusion

Finally, we could conclude that the physical structure of space -art in public space- does not determine people well-being, but it could prevent it. Space symbolization is a central element of well-being, depending on individual and social experience. Aspects related to place structure as much as physical and social aspects not directly related to space but inseparable, take part in symbolization. In spite of high adaptation capacity of human beings, adaptation always has a physiological and psychological cost. Quick changes at the end of this century makes adaptation more difficult, as Simmel, Park, Wirth and other authors diagnosed at the beginning of the century, but it seems that we have not learnt the lesson

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