

Another city for another life

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a research on the social movements that emerged in Spain and some European cities in 2011, and describes how public space has become an essential element to claim back the right to the city, as Lefebvre proposed a few decades ago, and more recently David Harvey. In describing this re-appropriation of the city by the citizens, it also allows discussion of the current role of the architect. What are the challenges for the profession to participate actively in this dynamic and complex context? The participatory process that took place in Barcelona in order to give new uses to the abandoned complex of Can Batlló can give some responses to this question.

In the last century, we lived an important crisis not only financial but also political, social, ethical and of values. The fall of Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers and other giants of global economy in 2008, has represented an inflexion point in the urban environment at international level, deeply marking ways of living in our cities and, therefore, the way of understanding and practising architecture. The relationship of the

financial crisis with the housing bubble – mainly in the case of Spain – has been the basis to analyse the role of architects in this delicate situation and try to redefine the profession, providing an answer to the following question: how can architectural practice reinterpret itself and answer the questions that emerge in the present context?

Public space is, by definition, always intrinsically linked to the social and cultural context in which it is located. In recent years, it has been not only the place where citizens express themselves, but also the fluent and dynamic space where migrations, social struggles and financial interests become visible. This fact causes relationships among political, economic and social powers to play a very important role in the decision making process that shapes urban legislation and structures our cities. Privatization of public space, unemployment, surveillance systems, displacements, are some of the concepts that Saskia Sassen includes in the term ‘expulsions’, that she summarises into a simple and common element: “There are people being (usually permanently) cast out of what had been their lives” (Sassen, 2014, par. 3). These expulsions result in inequality and segregation in the cities and form an urban environment in which architecture comes into conflict with these other actors and flows – economic, systemic – it is in constant tension with.

This is the scene where a series of intrinsically violent actions take place, sometimes almost immaterial and difficult to perceive, such as austerity policies, eviction, deterrent measures of

the use of spaces or surveillance cameras that observe our movements at all times. This series of ‘expulsions’ or ‘systemic violence’ has reached an action-reaction effect in the cities, in which the space becomes node and catalyst of a renewed activism that transforms these spaces into fertile land for architects to take up ways of focussing the architectural practice that had been lost in the years of economic growth; beginning by asking – as citizens rather than architects – how they want the city they inhabit, how to strengthen the relationships between the different actors, how to establish dialogues starting from frictions and disagreements, and, from there, use their professional knowledge to provide ideas and projects that help shape that city. Just as Constant dreamed over 50 years ago, when he was trying to create ‘another city for another life’ (2009).

The way in which a considerable diversity of citizens’ movements emerged in 2011 has had a great importance to revalue the public space as the place to recover the value of collective work and as areas for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Among all the experiences that emerged a few years ago, we can name the Arab Spring, which appeared in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libia; the 15M in Spain; and the student demonstrations in Chile. But the seeds sown in 2011 prevail so, we can also mention the recent peaceful demonstrations in Guatemala, which caused the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina.

From this perspective, we can remember the words of the Invisible Committee

(2009) declaring that traditional forms of resistance change and are more effective if they are spread by resonance, from one friend to another, from one home to another, thus reaching the promotion of long term projects that actually influence and improve citizens' daily life.

The importance of dealing here with these social movements lies in the fact that they have been strong enough to cause structural changes at governmental level in many cases, retaking and putting up for discussion topics like 'the right to the city', as Henri Lefebvre called it in 1968 in his book *Le droit à la ville*, a concept that at present has become valid again through David Harvey's studies for his book *Rebel Cities: from the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, in which he suggests a basic problem:

"To claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right that no longer exists (if it ever truly did). Furthermore, the right to the city is an empty signifier. Everything depends on who gets to fill it with meaning. The financiers and developers can claim it, and have every right to do so. But then so can the homeless and the sans-papiers. We inevitably have to confront the question of whose rights are being identified" (2012, p. XV).


As a result of this convulsive moment, several endless practices have emerged all over the world, bringing into fashion labels such as 'tactical urbanism' (Baraona & Reyes, 2011), 'participation' and 'social architecture', among many others. All of these concepts are constantly mentioned in every meeting of architects, whether it is a conference, an informal cafe or a lesson at a school of architecture; and it is because of this

that we are still wondering how they can evolve so that architecture may work from urban conflicts and suggest possible solutions in the search for fairer and less fragmented cities. Perhaps one way to transform these trends into engines of real change might be through projects that work from a small scale, from the neighbourhood rather than the city, where knowing the name of our neighbour is more important than the frantic race for growth. This is the point where recovery of the concept of 'relational cities' is crucial to redefine and value the role of the architect in this situation. Scott McQuire, in his book *The Media City* (2008), coined the term 'relational space' to refer to the new urban space that is generated from the social relationships in the city. Now, almost ten years later, we may confirm that the moment has arrived for ephemeral interventions in parks and squares, DIY (do it yourself) and bottom-up projects to evolve towards more stable projects, with a long term look and which can be developed in stages, transversely among politicians, technicians and citizens for a better urban environment.

There are several examples that may give us some clues as to how to do it. In Barcelona, in a traditional and central neighbourhood called La Bordeta, we find ourselves in front of a huge abandoned Factory (located in a roughly 14 ha site) formed by some empty buildings. According to urban planning of decades ago, the whole area was destined to be the site of a housing development (high standing skyscrapers), which due to the financial crisis was paralysed for many years. In 2011, the *Salvem Can Batlló*⁽¹⁾ platform used one of the naves and a public library was inaugurated there one month later. From that moment on, several architects

(the collective *La Col*, among them) began to work together with various cooperatives on rights related to labour, urbanism and access to housing (*La Ciutat Invisible*, *Raons Públiques* and *La Borda*, respectively) to propose a project of progressive development and at a larger time-space scale, to use the whole old factory and create service infrastructures for the residents. It is very important to remember that architects as well as cooperatives have been working together with local institutions (schools, libraries, merchant associations) and with neighbours' associations to obtain urban, economic and quality of life improvement. By means of this collective work of technicians and citizens, several of these spaces have been reactivated to implement new uses, including an auditorium, a library, a self-managed educational centre, a cooperative housing project and even, more recently, a cooperative to promote commercial initiatives of social economy.

This simple but powerful example has been the result first, of a conflict and big frictions among urban policies, financial interests and the citizens, followed by joint work in which architects form part of a larger group in which each group provides varied kinds of knowledge that superpose and complement themselves, to be able to act in complex and dynamic environments such as the city itself. Therefore, it is essential to stress that this type of project can only work with the active participation of all the parties – and there are many, as we have seen – and that the architect is one more actor within a transverse and diverse group, which requires leaving behind egos and leaderships of our profession that belong more to the 20th century than to the present. Thus, urban conflict, disagreement and evictions can be transformed and become a basis

to generate, through joint work and interactions between architects and non-architects, 'another city for another life'. 

NOTES

(1) See, Castro, Martí-Costa, Gual, & Martínez Moreno, s. f.

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