

# The impossible city: short reflections on urbanism, architecture, and violence

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## ABSTRACT

*This contribution aims to offer some reflections around the notion of contested urbanism that characterize the contemporary process of making and inhabiting cities, discussing the intricate relation between architecture and violence at different scales.*

*Grounding in previous international research and in the work of scholars like Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Eyal Weizman, the text wish to reposition contestation at the centre of an architectural and urban research, addressing the intersection of spatial and temporal aspects of conflicts in the production of the city, where intellectual and spatial categories are able to construct new epistemologies, cities and space in a paradoxical tension.*

*My intention is to trace generic and almost sketched reflections around the tensions between the notions of space and political in the urban dimension, especially around contested urbanism that characterize the altermodernity, intended as condition of the contemporary process of making and inhabiting cities. Somehow, my aim is to reflect on the intricate*

*relation between architecture and violence at different scales.*

*Massimo Cacciari, Italian philosopher and once Mayor of Venice, argued that “the city does not exist, what exists are different and distinct forms of urban lives” (2004, p. 4). With this, Cacciari is suggesting the impossibility of a common, universal definition of what a city is, calling for an anti-essentialist acceptance of the multiple origins and futures of urban territories. Tracing the etymological origins of now very common words as ‘polis’ and ‘civitas’, Cacciari suggests that the linguistic difference between them, the Greek and the Latin, is essential to the origin and the nature of the city itself. The polis is the place where determined people, genos, with specific traditions and uses, have its own ethos. On the other side the word ‘civitas’ grounds its origin in the cives, a group of people that got together to form the city under the same law and norms. If we follow Cacciari, it seems that the polis resembles, fundamentally, the unity of people, the togetherness of citizens, the place and the site of the origins; however, in the civitas, the original founding myth is the convergence of a diversity of gens who agree on the power of a common law: Ab urbe condita.<sup>(1)</sup>*

*The Roman constitution does not recognize in the civitas the origin, but the result, of a process of becoming, or as Cacciari suggests, “growth, development and complication” (2004, p. 16). What holds together all such differences is certainly not the roots, the genos, but rather the aim, the end, the goal: the expansion of the empire. On the contrary*

*the issue with the polis is not excessive expansion in order to hold control over a ‘manageable’ territory within its borders and within which the genos is rooted – civitas grows and expands itself de-lira, transgressing its borders, its limits. The issue with the contemporary city, Cacciari is suggesting, is exactly this renewed tension between two ideas of cities. What emerges is a city that is polemos, conflict, the stage of great tensions between rootedness (polis) and pact; treaty (civitas), fixity, and movement; dwelling/property and exchange/commerce; memory and future. The essence of the urban appears to be the capacity to hold such competing different qualities in a dynamic perennial conflict, in an irreducible tension. The city is polemos, is contestation par excellence. The city is growing and changing through the courageous attempt of recombining the elements of such tensions, despite the inability to resolve them. The city is complexus, what is embraced, weaved together, in a multiplicity of forms in an impossible final synthesis.*

*The present urban condition – globally – proves that Cacciari was right in pointing to the fact that no single definition of the city exists. One single city is impossible. The city is in a continuous mutation, reassembly, change, and transformation, but it exists just because it is inhabited, perceived, and lived: its consistency is the plot of the different desires, ambitions, hopes, and projects it is able to arouse. If the city is not unique, then the knowledge of contemporary urbanisms is not homogeneous as well, and thus no single universalist claim on*

urban epistemology is possible. Rather, the city seems to emerge from a complex interaction between “cultural structures, social values, individual and collective actions, and observations of the material arrangements” (Hou, Spencer, Way, & Yocom, 2015, p. 3). This notion of course is not new. Lefebvre suggested more than forty years ago in *The Urban Revolution*, advancing the thesis of complete urbanization, a general transformation of society, changing the living condition of habitable territories, a dissolution of the social and morphological structure and its dispersion in all sorts of fragments and the creation of an urban society as the result of contradictory historical processes full of conflicts and struggles (Brenner, 2014; Stanek, Schmid, & Moravánszky, 2015).

Recognizing that there are a myriad of relationships between the built environment and how it structures and is structured by social life, understanding this multiplicity of urbanisms, reinforces the need to also understand the political, economic, and social dynamics at play within the urban fabric when acting in the urban realm across time and space. The compositional, messy, uncontrollable, and recombinant nature of the present urbanism, and the differential knowledge at play in the construction of the urban as object and subject is anything but straightforward. Rather it is energized and constructed in a continuous process of creation, legitimization, and contestation. The basic and somehow banal assumption of this contribution is that the urban is a de facto process oriented, contingent, and contested condition. As I have argued elsewhere – inspired both by Cacciari and Lefebvre – the urban is embedded in a web of contested visions where the production of space is an inherently conflictive process, manifesting, producing, and reproducing various forms of injustice; as well as alternative forces

of transgression and social projects. I use the notion of ‘contested urbanism’ (Boano, Hunter, & Newton, 2013) to depict the inevitable impossibility of reconciling monolithic and unitary urban visions. The term, used as an intellectual framework, emerged in a study in Dharavi, Mumbai, where we depict the hegemonic and technocratic discourses that sit behind aggressive interventions, both state and market driven, focussing attention on the politics of urban transformations that systematically excluded many urban dwellers whose visions, aspirations and everyday lives were ignored and ‘mastered’ in conventional, transnational alien forms of urbanism (Watson, 2009, 2014). Since then, we have recognized that the notion of contestation, certainly appropriate for the confrontational, speculative and situated politic that emerged in the Dharavi Redevelopment Plan, was not unique. Contestations, if understood as oppositional confrontational, resistive, and situated politics of spaces, are part of being urban. Certainly, discovering and researching urbanisms at a global scale, especially in and from southern and eastern perspectives, does seem to have its own advantage. In fact, problems often relate to multi-scalar processes in which many institutions intervene simultaneously, from the conventions that organize social life, to the formalised political processes that create state power and other forms of authority as well as multiple aspects, from socio-ecological interactions to the possibilities of drawing democratic forms of governance within a given political and spatial system. These are all dynamic processes, which make outcomes unpredictable, mutable, and not homogenous and where the current trend of urbanization is creating a variety of urban situations we actually lack the vocabulary to describe. Urbanism is certainly made and remade by encounters between different visions about what

kind of future is desirable and, thus, conflict between different parties is often unavoidable, and may generate division and eventually new forms of negotiated collaboration.

Different kinds of contested cities, then, share and are developing growing similarities stemming from ethnic, racial, and class conflicts revolving around issues of housing, infrastructure, participation representation, access, and certainly identity. For Lefebvre, abstract space “negates all differences, those that come from nature and history as well as those that come from the body, ages, sexes, and ethnicities” (1979, p. 289), constructing what he called ‘absolute politics’, where power was drained out of everyday sociality and situations and surrendered to both an increasingly abstract and authoritarian state as well as its knowledge institutions. In refusing this imposition of universal rationality over life, he recognized – instead – the autonomy of the practical and material constellations that constituted life and so in the everyday the “‘connective tissue’ that [gave] the totality its structure and coherence” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 224). The productive nature and the continuous struggle over the production of urban space in Lefebvre’s philosophy and politics, is no surprisingly based on an understanding of the urban space infused with time and history. For Lefebvre, “the urban is dialectical in nature, as urban space is socially produced by three dimensional (material, ideological-institutional, and imaginary-affective) processes” (as cited in Kipfer, Saberi, & Wieditz, 2012, p. 119).

Recent experiences of protest in the so called public spaces, from Gezi Park in Istanbul to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, all represents the actual taking place in space of Lefebvre’s idea of space: a

product of a social praxis inscribed in the power-structure and of an urbanism that can become truly anti-urban as it is capable of fragmentations, borders, and exclusions that nullify the possibility of the urban experience. The recent movements, especially in Latin America, that reclaim and support Lefebvre's Right to the City are part of a resistance, played in the space of the city, against the progressive mercerization, privatization of contemporary urbanism, globally calling for a reclaiming of the common: a multiplicity of practices that free saturated spaces and return them to the common, quotidian use of the citizen, create space of encounters and co-produced cultural and economic values. The public nature of such spaces is returned through an act of freedom.

They are enablers of the re-use of the cityscape, through "the redesign of the spaces and also the establishment of new communities of practice that represent, self-manage, maintain, and care the projects" (Inti, 2014).

The multiplicity of such practices is a laboratory for imagining, testing, and reflecting on new narratives, stories, and ways of speaking. A laboratory for the reinvention of the Commons (Romito, 2015).

Conflicts and political violence alike have not only direct spatial implication visible to all in the form of destruction, seclusion, control, but unfold at various interconnected scales: global, territorial, state, urban, human. Their geographical scopes stretch from the localized sites of citizen contestation and micro-struggles to the global networks of terror with different mode of visibility and intelligibility. Conflicts transform land uses, territorial arrangements, urban processes, and human settlement patterns according to temporalities that range from short-lived

states of emergency to the *longue durée* of chronic violence, permanent occupations, and predatory urbanisms.

In his foundational text *Politische Geographie*, written in 1897, Friedrich Ratzel writes that "War is the school of space [Der Krieg als schule des Raumes]" (1923, p. 264). Thought has always lagged behind the catastrophe of war, but most particularly it has lagged behind the ways in which war has taught us to think space. War generates a phenomenology and representation of space that since time immemorial have laid the foundations for our quotidian experience of space. The art of waging war was always about technologies of controlling territory, of surveying spaces, traversing topographies, and circumnavigating the world on the surfaces of the sea. As these arts and technologies become more elaborate, formalized, more entrenched, the strategists of wars came to realize that the theatres of war, the spaces of war, were not fixed, or given, but produced and determined by the interaction between speed, weapons, and superior knowledge of geography. War as the school of space, to follow Ratzel, has taught one fundamental lesson: space is produced by war.

What makes Ratzel's work singularly important for an understanding of the ways in which space has been determined by war is that for him life is a struggle for space, and war is the school of space as somehow is later reflected in Lefebvre's work. For Lefebvre, the study of the production of space has to be understood in terms of the tensions, interactions, and co-determinations among: capitalism, as a form of accumulation of wealth that is linked to different forms of the production of wealth, what Lefebvre (1979) calls the urban explosion, and the colonization of the everyday life. The key words 'production' and 'space' characterize

Lefebvre's analytic intentions; by 'production', Lefebvre means that humans create the space in which they make their lives; it is a project shaped by the interests of classes, experts, the grassroots, and other contested forces. For Lefebvre (1991) 'space' is not a mere container or milieu, as a kind of neutral setting in which life transpires, or a backdrop that is the obvious base upon which all activity must occur. Architecture, human densities, and locational relationships are forces in structuring what can be done in space itself. Walls and roads obviously privilege certain kinds of activities and inhibit others, support the projects of one type of actor and deter the goals of others. Beyond such material impediments are the symbols and styles that also influence behaviour: elements of monumental grandeur that disempower, varieties of endogenous architecture that falsely imply genuine choice, monotonous cubes and towers that stultify rewarding forms of sociability.

Thus, returning to the war metaphor, and the picture, space is produced either as a space of plenty and safety, or naught and dissolution, by the machines and industry of war, but it is also produced in the sense that imagining space as the space of war produces certain effects: "Certain spaces are construed as spaces of safety or danger, of devastation or preservation" (Mendieta, 2006, p. 9).

Was Walter Benjamin right when he wrote that there is no document of civilisation that is not also a document of barbarism? If so, then 'spatial violence' would offer itself as another name for 'architecture', a name that would open onto the manifold forms of harm mediated through built environments. 'Spatial violence', in this reading, may be understood not as something inflicted on architecture from the outside, but something that architecture inflicts even as it follows its

own practices and protocols. Architecture as inherently violent. This claim may seem rather self-evident from the perspective of those who study geographies of inequality, histories of colonialism, or the politics of spatial injustice, but may we consider the concept of 'spatial violence' as inherently architectural the game seems changing. It helps to refuse the conventional trend in architecture and urban design that rendered spaces of violence positively and empirically, rejecting architectural and urban histories periodised with respect to that form of spatial violence known as 'war', and resisting narratives situating the political condition of war as preceding or creating the conditions for architectural production (or its absence). Probably the best source of inspiration for an inversion, a resistance in architecture, is the work of Eyal Weizman<sup>(2)</sup>. We thus pose spatial violence as a constitutive dimension of architecture, urbanism, and their epistemologies, and thus it mobilise architecture as a site of research and inquiry in architectural and urban studies. Spatial violence, in this conception, may be understood as a force that has manifested systemically.

Working comparatively across spaces with contrasting histories and geographies seems crucial to reposition contestation and, at the centre of an architectural and urban research, addresses the intersection of spatial and temporal aspects of conflicts and its afterlife, and investigates practices of transformation oriented towards imagined futures and the fluidity of the production of the city where intellectual and spatial categories are able to construct new epistemologies, cities, and space in a paradoxical tension.

*The violence of neoliberalism and the form of spaces that emerges from such ubiquitous forces, being secluded and privatised, being spectacular and consume-oriented, being made obsolete,*

*ruinated or gentrified and renovated, have all made an attempt to delete from the city its capacity to function as a political machine, a hotbed for rights and new political and social forms of living together. The current urbanisms are becoming some sort of anti-city dominated by fluxes rather than relation, by numbers rather than live. The sole antidote to the violence is a contra violence that reclaims the centrality of habitants and users. A thesis fully developed and articulated in The Production of Space (Lefebvre, 1991). Habitants and users can challenge the social relations embedded in everyday life by appropriating urban space and participating in decisions determining the urban transformation of the city. In other words, a sort of a city of alterity 'altercity' where new forms of life are emerging as reactions, as rebel strategies and new forms of what Vasquez Pizzi called "new form of dwelling (abitare) [...] de facto minoritarian cultural logic as co-housing, cooperation, cohabitation and forms of living together that manage the common as a resource, both material and immaterial" (2015, p. 255). If the dwelling and the community, the process of inhabiting and using the city will remain bifurcated, the city will still remain impossible as common good leaving space just to violence. The urban future will be still founded around the dialectics between universality and particularity. The right to the city will be the capacity to discern among different essential and non essential violence. ■*

#### NOTES

(1) This refer to the monumental history of ancient Rome in Latin by the historian Titus Livius, known in English as Livy, which title can be literally translated as "since the city's founding".

(2) Weizman's recent work *Forensic Architecture* is a research project and consultancy agency based at Goldsmiths University in London, that undertakes advanced architectural and media research on behalf of human rights groups, those investigating

or prosecuting crimes under International Humanitarian Law, as well as political and environmental justice groups.

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