

Citytainment - Staging the City and Public Space

One of the birth places of the European City is the market place, the other is the cult place. The market place is the public space *sui generis*. It has been from the very beginning a narrative, theatrical space. Just think of the stage-like fronts of the houses surrounding the squares, the loud and varied activities of the tradesmen, shoppers, suppliers, foreigners and passers-by, the microcosmic theatrical process of buy and sell between shopper and tradesman, the chatting groups of people and children playing. When sociologists attempt to describe the present situation, they are inevitably confronted with the phenomenon of the disappearance of spatial qualities. Places are destroyed, eliminated, abandoned, ignored or reshaped. What is this thing being handled with so much disrespect? What is this thing we call a place?

Places are spaces that give the people who inhabit, visit and use them an identity. They are perceived by these people as a part of themselves. Places are spaces that keep our memories of history alive, making the present visible and thereby open for the future. Places are spaces with atmosphere. They touch us, we enter into an emotional relationship with them, we even identify with them. They can evoke approval or criticism, bring joy or pain. But they never leave us indifferent. Places can provide a stage for the great, the sublime, the dignified, the spectacular, but they can also be the scene of the small, the transparent, the simple, the every-day, in other words, spaces of the 'middle-range.' They are, however, always characterized by a stable stock of signs and symbols which make each place unique. Places accompany us people through shorter or longer spans of our lives and contribute in part to the meaning of our lives. In this respect, places are spaces of closeness, security and belonging.

It's possible to distinguish three spatial features, a social, a functional and an aesthetic one. If a city has these features in a high quality I call it "urban" (a city that denotes urban qualities). The first feature refers to the ideal type of the tolerant, cosmopolitan and intellectual city dweller. The second refers to the utility value of the city, to its centrality, variety and mix of functions. And the

third feature refers to the aesthetic dimension of the city, to its experience value, its atmosphere, aura, ambience and flair. Cities which provide these urban features have character, individuality and significance. They are unmistakable, coherent and legible places. In Europe this legibility can have its basis in what is called the "old European city".

However, places today are a highly endangered species. With their mazes of narrow spaces and alleys, their variety and intractability, their sensibility and unmistakability, their corporate and bourgeois self-portrayal, the old cities are only a nuisance in today's turbo-society. They are simply too slow. Thus they are accelerated, straightened, standardized, cleared out. Their structures are freed from one another and separated according to their function. The previously integrated uses such as living, working, relaxing and consuming, are separated from one another and each assigned to their own territory. Under this Fordist treatment, streets are transformed into mono-functional traffic routes, squares into parking lots, the lively organized house fronts into smooth, sterile and cold facades. Cities become machines. The public places once populated by the young and old, the poor and rich, the bohemian and conventional, the locals and strangers mutate into efficient functional spaces. The city falls apart and pours into the surrounding countryside. Business parks, single-family housing developments, traffic routes, shopping centres and recreational facilities push their way into the environs. Extenuated, confused, torn borders arise, chaotic structures of space, collage-like landscapes spoiled by development. A semiotically empty, indecipherable city-country-continuum is formed - a space without qualities.

However, the loss of places describes only one side of Fordist modernization. The other is the overcoming of space (and time) itself. Through high-speed traffic systems, distances shrink and the availability of physical space increases. New media technologies open placeless, virtual communication spaces, rendering the existing, built arenas of public life superfluous. Under the pressure of economic globalization and mechanization, of growing mobility and permanent acceleration, places transform themselves - to borrow a term from Marc Augé - into non-places. What is meant here are efficient, fast spaces with a high turnover of people and goods, lacking any sense of character and meaning, places of power and efficiency that become more and more similar, until they can no longer be distinguished from one another. As a consequence, the ties that bond people to places dissolve until they do not feel responsible for their environment any more.

Amazingly the disappearance of places is contrasted by their re-appearance! Places return in an altered form and function. Apparently, the loss of the qualities

of place is experienced as a lack of something. A need for places develops. This need is translated into a demand, which is answered with a corresponding supply. A market for places - and with this an accompanying 'place industry' comes into being.

What type of places does this industry offer? In the attempt to answer this question, one comes across a particular type of place, which in and through itself represents the suggested contradiction between place and non-place. Places are produced which deny themselves as places - placeless places. But what is a placeless place? Well, it is a fiction of a place, a space that visually reproduces, anywhere in the world, qualities from arbitrary imaginary or real worlds.

The most important raw material for the manufacture of these placeless places is ideal nature: it is mined from those deposits of the imagination which we know as fairy tales, novels, comics, paintings, photographs, films and television programs. But 'place industry' also makes use of images and pictures from real places, prominent buildings, streets and squares. Even entire city ensembles are prospected for this raw material. Think about Disney's 'Main Street' concept or the fake of the inner city of Amsterdam near Tokyo or the reproduction of an old Tuscanian village at the border of Johannesburg or the numerous fakes of cities in Las Vegas.

A type of cultural mining industry develops, which, instead of iron and coal, exploits pictures of spectacular nature scenes and attractive cultural details. The products of this branch are non-places which clothe themselves in the garments of place. I refer to these places as atopias, in order to highlight their close but complicated relationship to utopias.

The distinction between atopias and utopias refers to the difference between reality and possibility. Utopias are places which exist nowhere (only in the imagination). They are pure possibility and therefore a force for changing reality. They represent the eros of the political. Atopias, in contrast, are realized non-places with fictional qualities. They are simultaneously real and placeless. They are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Whereas utopias, the stuff of which dreams are made, produce images of a better social life in an imaginary world, atopias unfold themselves in the here and now. They are available and materially present and at the same time without any connection to place, location and region. They are the topological expression of the fact that in today's world, everything is everywhere at the same time. They are the socio-spatial harbingers of a very powerful but superficial experience- or leisure-society - also called 'Erlebnisgesellschaft'.

With this term, sociology is reacting to a transition that is already in its advanced stages - the transition from the 'reason dominated' to the 'emotion dominated' modern age. According to this theory, people's actions today are no longer determined predominantly by reason, rather more decidedly by feeling. The rationalistic, Fordist consumer society has become a mood-governed affluent society. Whereas instrumental-technical aspects such as efficiency, productivity, functionality, objectivity, etc. have dominated until now, emotional factors like atmosphere, ambience, aura, flair and other dimensions aimed at the senses and sensibility are gaining influence. An object must not only function, it must also be appealing to the senses, even exciting or fascinating them.

If one asks how the Erlebnisgesellschaft expresses itself in a spatial sense, then one comes up with the so-called theme park. Theme parks are staged environments which should generate wellness, agreeable moods and feelings. The category of thematization refers to the origin of the ratio of experience (Erlebnissrationalität) in the medial "logic" of film and television. The medial habits of reception improve a kind of narrative space production that is oriented at the sequents of pictures and cuts of films. So each theme park remembers us that the time of functional space consumption and space organization has come to an end and that the time of story telling space improvement has already begun.

How can we picture it?

Each Disney-Themepark - in the USA, Japan and France - has its own "Main-Street". This street fakes the fake of the good old American small town main street as used in the film studios of Hollywood. Facades divided into small sections are staging a variety and mix of functions and some pleasant block border architecture. But these houses are nothing else but a set. Covering the walls of big stores they cut the informational connection between what is shown in the street and what is offered behind the facades. By inventing the main street-concept, Disney has created the prototype of an inverse city-space. It is a private space, that pretends to be public. Here the customer is at the same time an observer and an actor of a game called "public life". By means of a materialized "secret instruction" Disney succeeded in producing something that is missed more and more in everyday life - the urban city.

With Celebration (near Orlando, Florida), the Disney corporation has just put the first private city on the market. This city is entirely a product of **citytainment**. Whoever buys here acquires not only a house, but also a lifestyle. It arises from the old American middle-class dream of a clean and tidy house in the country with a garden, dog and family. In the town hall of this utopian city are working or better say: acting employees of the Disney Corporation. They impose taxes,

enforce design regulations and keep watch over the cutting of the lawns and hedges of the inhabitants and the condition of the house facades. Even the "mayor" is an employee staging a mayor.

Celebration is the ideal type of the new, inverse city. Here the public is private and the private is public. The classic relationship of regulating state and private economy has swung to the other extreme. It has changed into relations of economic protagonists. The inhabitant can and should not accept any responsibility beyond the contractual. Who buys a house in the "new city" buys at the same time a complete lifestyle, urban flair, security and simulative public order. However, he doesn't get one thing - participation in the public power over public space.

The situation is strange: At a time, where public order does not work properly the pseudo-public order in Celebration is guaranteed by private services! In the world that is still familiar to us, only the democratically legitimized state is entitled to lay down limits to private action and thus to intervene according to regulations. In Celebration the relations became reversed. Disney cares for the public order. While the state fails in guaranteeing it, the private enterprise is successful in creating a fictional public order. So the staging of public space is to be taken as the postmodern way of its declining.

Nevertheless, it makes no sense to condemn the development manifested in cities like Celebration as merely undemocratic. Its success demonstrates a widespread need for urban qualities. These qualities are however, as to their nature, public goods. Nobody can be excluded from their utilization. So, in order to avoid the social excluding capitalization of urban atmospheres and services, state engagement is needed for reconstructing our fordist treated - and in the end - executed cities.

Citytainment is not only to be taken as a mere attack to public culture. It encloses also chances for the improvement of civil society. Postmodern citytainment can deliver useful ideas and experiences in the fields of management and aesthetics. In my opinion it should be possible to generate a kind of public "outdoor-imaging" out of private "indoor-imaging".

This consideration brings me back to the old European city, which, as already mentioned, does not fit into our fast times. Influenced by the postmodern condition we discover in our old cities a natural potential for "Erlebniswelten". We see hundreds of public "Mainstreets" and "Celebrations". Their experience-value is so formidable that the world champions of theme parks, the Japanese and North Americans, admire and occasionally reconstruct them with a lot of

energy and money. We should not dismiss the postfordist trend towards the production of spectacular places as kitsch. We should rather comprehend it as an invitation to acknowledge the urban and rural world, in which we are living, as projects that have to stand up to emotions. So to take the postmodern challenge of citytainment for serious means in the end to give back the urban space its proper values.

Citytainment admittedly should not only be left to the "bourgeois". It is also a concern of the "citoyen", of public culture. If not, postmodern cities will become the splendid graves of civil society.

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