

The square as panorama

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Abstract

When you think about a square, you think about, among other things, the creation of space, a space that can only be understood by experiencing its limits. The square is, in this sense, similar to other spaces: you find the square from its borders.

The area of the square, regardless of its power, is rather subtle: it is evident but not imposing. The limits of the squares are their borders - a kind of a continuously crossed and bridged. You may consider the square as a place in the landscape. Yet, this place, unlike many others we see in the landscape, is not a place of contemplation: the square is a place of action, reaction and interaction. From this point of view, the square is essentially the place where humanity, as a community, becomes fulfilled. The square is a place you cross, you wonder in and where you spend time with others. This is why being in a square is an experience of intermittence: you are never alone for long, there is always someone crossing it and it is not a place where events can take place and not be seen. Collectiveness, ordinariness takes place in the square.

Keywords: panorama, zumthor, phenomenology of space, baudelaire.

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One of the most beautiful descriptions of this urban area is that by Zumthor:

"Today is Holy Thursday 2003. This is me. I am sitting there, in the sunny square, a long, tall and beautiful arcade in the sun. The square - the facade of houses, churches, monuments - is the panorama in front of me. On my back, the wall of the café. The dense crowd. A flower market. The sun. Eleven o'clock. The wall on the other side of the square is in the shade, in a pleasant shade of blues. Wonderful sounds surround me: conversations, steps in the square, stone, birds, a light whisper from the crowd, no cars, no engines running, every now and then, the sound of construction from afar. The fact that the holidays have started has made people walking slower, I think. Two nuns - this is real and not imagined - two nuns cross the square, talking with their hands, walking lightly, their gowns fluttering in the wind, each carrying a plastic bag. The temperature: pleasantly cool. I am sitting in the arcade, on a green sofa, with his back towards me, a bronze figure on a high pedestal is looking, just like me, at the church with two towers. The two church towers have different domes - they have the same shape on the bottom but, as they rise, they become different. One is higher and has a golden crown around its top." (Zumthor, 2006: 15).

In this wonderful description, Zumthor shows us, piece by piece, the elements that make the square (the sounds of people walking and talking, the days going by, the weather, the colors, the passing of time, etc.) in an attempt to find the square as a sensory experience rather than from a topographic, typological or functional perspective. This explains why he sees not only the houses, churches and monuments but a whole universe, more sensitive, subtle, emotional, and everything is equally relevant. Zumthor tries to describe an architectural scenario, which is also used as an identifying element of the square as an "architectural piece". Noteworthy in this description is the confluence of architectural as material and all weather, sense, color and time events and the square, as an architectural thing, emerges as condition for all events described by Zumthor as possible.

Zumthor thus concludes:

"What touched me? Everything. Everything - things, people, air, sounds, colors, materials, textures and shapes. Shapes I can understand. Shapes I can try to read. Shapes I consider beautiful. And what else touched me? My mood, my feelings, and my expectations in the moment I was sitting there. The famous English phrase comes to mind, the one which draws on Plato's philosophy: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' This means: everything exists within me, then I experience it and delete the square. And my feelings are no longer the same. [...] By deleting the square, my feelings disappear." (Zumthor, 2006: 17).

There are several levels this passage can be analyzed in. Yet, in our context, emphasis should be given to how shapes can touch us and how that "touch", viewed as an affective-emotional experience, is dependent on material existence. This is not any existence but is composed of shapes we can identify and recognize, meaningful shapes, meaningful and which can affect us, which we can feel. The density and depth of Zumthor's description could be analyzed as it encompasses the most important aesthetic issues in architecture, which, in this aspect is very similar to arts, i.e., the fact that the use of certain materials causes feelings/affective and emotional changes that no other shape or being can cause: architecture is unique.

In that description - which may be considered a kind of phenomenology of the square - we should analyze the type of experience that the architectural piece the square causes as well as the way Zumthor presents the square as panorama. This allows us to not only understand the essence of the square but also serves as guideline for future squares.

In its origin, panorama is a circular or cylindrical image organized in such a way that the observer is placed in its middle and from there can see the objects as if he stood on higher ground and could visually own the horizon. Panorama can be viewed as a kind of synoptic representation or a "bird's eye view". As Delfim Sardo¹ states, Panorama is related to the attempt of wanting to see everything. In this context, we should consider how panorama was placed in practice in the 20th century. At that time, panorama was a large scale painting, placed in an especially built place, and represented landscapes of great historical events, such as a war. These were a huge success: the public loved the illusion of being in a 360° image that made them feel in a completely different and new world. These paintings could be 110 meters high and have a radius of 112 meters, as is the case of the Bourbaki Panorama in Switzerland, built in 1881 and which still exists.

In this sense, the square emerges in its visual and sensory dimension. However, these dimensions are not sense or visual realities but evidence of the life developing in the square. This means that the square is not only a place of citizenship but also of humanity. This seems to have been the core meaning of the Ancient Square: be both the center of political life, of power within the city, and the center of life because humankind is not simply a political being (*politiko zôon*, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*). Politics is, in the words of Aristotle, one of the highest human activities (to be *bio politikos* is at the same level as contemplative live). This human feature can only be made manifest in active life, in the public sphere, in terms of human action and human relation, i.e., *vita ativa*². The architectural piece the square is the device or (to use a phrase dear to Rossi), the stage where this active life takes place.

The active life of which the square was the center appears to have been lost in the contemporary city: in its place, you find passage ways and roundabouts. People now will

walk around the Shopping Centre, or even a virtual square like Facebook, rather than around the square. These are new places where present takes place, the new spots to find the news, the novelties, the new books, and the fashion clothes³.

There are still some squares that remain lived in and are vital and energetic city centers: they irradiate energy and provide it to the neighboring areas. When you stand in one of these squares, you realize that public life is a truly human domain. Drawing again on Zumthor's words: being in a square is looking, looking around, checking those crossing the square and assessing the day; the square can, thus, be viewed as architectural entertainment that modernity has left us as inheritance. These entertainment features have made the street the favorite place for modern sensitivity: places of beauty, as Baudelaire would say. Therefore, in a certain sense, the square is the street.

For modern sensitivity, represented by the powerful figure of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the modern city is the moment of looking by excellence. Looking is the most important because, for the modern man, to be out in the street is to be at home. That is especially so for Baudelaire's *flâneur*. Benjamin states that:

"Before Haussmann there were hardly any broad sidewalks and the narrow ones provided little protection against the circulating vehicles, without passages, wondering through the city could not become as important as it did."

And Benjamin quotes an illustrated guide to Paris from 1852 - "The arcades, a new invention of industrial luxury, are glass-covered and marble-embellished galleries through housing blocks, whose owners have gathered to be able to speculate. On both sides of those arcades, whose ceiling allows the light to come through, are the most elegant shops, thus transforming the passage into a small world.

Benjamin adds: "The *flâneur* feels at home there [...], but for himself this is the place where he can be cured of boredom, a rather common illness under the deadly eye of a saturated reactionary regime. "Who is able to feel bored in the middle of a crowd is an idiot" - is a sentence by Guys quoted by Baudelaire. - An idiot, I repeat, and despicable. The arcades are somewhere between the street and the inside [...] The street becomes the house of the *flâneur*, who, like the bourgeois in between the four walls of his house, feels at home between the facades. For him, the shiny enameled signs of the shops are murals as or more beautiful than the oil paintings in the parlors of bourgeois houses; the walls are the desks on which he places his notebook; the newspaper stalls are his libraries and the street cafés are the balconies from where, once he has finished work, he observes the bustle of the house. Life in all its diversity, in all its variations, only develops in the sidewalk." (Benjamin, 2006, 38-39).

Benjamin saw this experience as evidence that private life had disappeared - people disappear in the big cities. However, the important element for us is to understand how the modern city sees the street as its core spot, a city that, as in a film, is continuously moving and in which there are no fixed observation point but where everything can be seen from every perspective and in every way: you can no longer speak of inside / outside, structures are turned upside down, buildings are cut, the skeleton replaces the skin, etc. As Beatriz Colomina states, "In modern times, public and private coincide." (Colomina, 1996: 31).

Modern cities are more transparent, which is why their inhabitants are always everywhere and that there is no longer the need to establish a difference between public and private in terms of space boundaries, of walls; their images define them. Yet, if, for the modern individual, the street is still part of his active life, in the mega-polis, contemporary squares are television and publicity windows, architecture is a support - a means - of those images; at stake is no longer humanity as political and social being but the fact that the individual has disappeared not in the crowd (a rather important theme for Baudelaire) but in the consumer.

In all these senses, the square is a scenario: the days and how each individual spends his day.

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¹ "Panorama, see everything, is the name given to those huge structures in which the paradox of 'seeing everything' becomes true under the assumption of 'seeing everything but not at the same time.' In fact the structure of landscape as a construction that encompasses the viewer makes it evident that the visible is a human construct that establishes a fiction, a horizon, as the realm of possibility. In fact, the horizon is mainly that which cannot be seen, the supposed limit of knowledge. However, it is also that which links what is before us and what is beyond our field of vision, what is beyond and what is behind - and in that sense, the horizon is a time line, the extension of what was deferred. Acknowledging these features of the landscape system has led to a funny situation: all of the first panoramas (built by Robert Barker, in London, and by Prévost, in Paris) are representations of the cities they were built in. In London, in the panoramas of Leicester square you could see ... the city of London, without sound or noise, represented as a series of houses and monuments, visible from the horizon (rather than from a narrow skyline). In Barker's panorama, late 18thc London is a transparent and extensive *civitas*, just like Thun in Switzerland simulates its cosmopolitanism in the panorama built by Marquard Wocher (1760-1830), around 1808, or even that of Paris by Pierre Prévost, made in 1799, a view of the city and



extending to the countryside, a part which had been engulfed by the city in the 19thc. Panorama was a Utopian machine which doubled the world around it, took away its imperfections and presented it as entertainment. (Sardo, 2004: 11).

² To know more about the concept of *vita ativa*, see Hannah Arendt, *A Condição Humana*.

³ To know ordinary things such as fashion is, since modern times or at least since Baudelaire, the main means through which individuals experience beauty, so knowing what the day tells is a crucial element: "Beauty is made of an endless, unchangeable element of undetermined quantity, and of a relative, circumstantial element which may be the time, fashion, morals, passion (one of these individually or all of them together). Without this second element, which is the fun, mouth-watering frosting of the divine cake, the first element would be indigestible, invaluable, inadequate and inappropriate to human condition." (Baudelaire, 2006: 281).