No Place like Home: Domestication and Public Space Appropriation in Post-Soviet Countries

Europe has existed as a cultural, political and economic identity for centuries, although the nature and consistence of this identity has been greatly contested over time. Since the mid-twentieth century, for example, one of the major challenges in this sense has been the necessity of linking European identity to forms of integration that could produce tolerance and respect, thus promoting coexistence and mutual interaction among people. The problem, however, is that the construction of an open and inclusive European identity cannot be based simply on neo-functionalist approaches that explain Europeanisation only by reference to national governments operating within an international functional order. On the contrary, it needs a social constructivist perspective that highlights the multiple ways reality is continuously created by social actors and public discourses, in processes that cannot be reduced to either agency or structures (Delanty and Rumford 2005, 2).

In this regard, an essential role is played by the possibility of creating open and inclusive public spaces that support these processes (Delanty and Rumford 2005, 68). Public spaces, in fact, are the arenas in which key cultural interactions and societal dynamics take place, where values, belief-systems, memories, languages, daily practices and social lives operate and evolve. They are the spaces in which people recognize themselves as a public, but also where specificity, difference, and separateness can be maintained and asserted in productive ways (Madanipour 2003). They can be virtual spaces defined by media, creative practices, shared values, political allegiances, or religious identities. However, they are mostly physical places populated not just by people but also by things, objects, and material traces of culture, all of which provide new opportunities of looking at multiple histories and identities within a diversified Europe.

Probably, the best way to highlight the essential social value of public space construction is to look at those countries that are still at the margins of the Europeanisation process, where participation in this action seems to be much stronger. Here, in fact, top-down actions of urban design and management tend to recede, due to the public economic insufficiency (Gadanho 2014). In opposition, smaller catalysts have pervasively become a preferred mode of intervention for public space building and re-activation. These "tactical" interventions have arisen, as a counterpart to a classic and strategic notion of design, in the form of everyday and bottom-up approaches to local problems, which make use of short-term, low-cost and scalable interventions and processes (Lydon, and Garcia 2015). Be they sanctioned or not by urban authorities, spontaneously arising from the streets or emerging from given creative and professional practices, yet they always represent a form of diffuse, uncoordinated, and creative re-appropriation of the contemporary city's public dimension, advocating for a more flexible and adaptable urban environment in new and unexpected ways.

In 2008, for example, a group of young artists led by Stefan Rusu and Vladimir Us, and supported by the European Cultural Foundation, pioneered an original intervention for the rehabilitation of a dilapidated esplanade located in front of the Council's Department of Culture of Chişinău, the capital of Moldova.[1] Everything started with the idea of building a new urban identity for a civic area that was formerly dominated by the representations of power or advertising, thus restoring the sense of a real public space that could be different from the one imposed by the central government. The group, then, studied a permanent installation, meant to represent both a catalyst for the artistic events of the city and a trigger

---

[1] David Bravo Bordas. "Apartament Deschis / Flat space." Accessed February 8, 2018. http://www.publicspace.org/en/print-works/g145-apartament-deschis-flat-space.

for active processes of social engagement, using the only typology of participated public space that could be symbolically recognizable by the citizens, namely the domestic one.

During the Brezhnevian Stagnation, in fact, Moldova faced the birth of the phenomenon of clandestine exhibitions, which proliferated throughout the Soviet Union until its fall. As underground art was prohibited and prosecuted by the authorities, artists resorted to showings in an informal network of private homes, where groups of trusted people offered the space of their flats, which were so tiny to be barely inhabitable. For this reason, the artists, supported by the Oberliht Association, placed as a kiosk in the corner of the square a literal replica of a functionalist apartment, freed of the walls that marked its perimeters. In other words, the whole intervention of rehabilitation, called *Apartament Deschis*, consisted in a section of a facade equipped with a small balcony and PVC carpentries, a transversal partition-wall, and a raised platform with outlined pieces of furniture and sanitary equipment, which could be used for different activities, such as exhibitions, debates, concerts or projections. As if, in a square historically dominated by the institutional propaganda, only the intimacy of home could restore a real public sphere, through a necessary act of spatial re-appropriation.

From a certain point of view, this case could be seen quite as a unique and peculiar event, as it contradicts the traditional anthropological assumption that means urban space as the exclusive place for public life and home as the place for the private one. However, in a wider perspective, it may also represent the epitome of an emerging trend that is characterizing the reconstruction of the public spatial dimension of some Post-Soviet countries, in a perspective of progressive Europeanisation. In fact, if European cultural identity represents a process of self-recognition articulated through emerging repertoires of evaluation (Delanty and Rumford 2005, 55), European spatial identity cannot be culturally defined by geographical borders but by the self-recognition of citizens as part of the social space. For this reason, in order to highlight innovative practices supporting the development of a more reflexive idea of Europe, this paper is aimed at describing this phenomenon in its cultural depth. The purpose is to demonstrate that this sort of domestication is only the most recent strategy through which artists, designers and creative practitioners have been attempting to enable and encourage people to re-appropriate public space, thus creating a new sense of social identity and civic belonging.

Re-appropriation and domestication

According to Henri Lefebvre, the sense of mutual belonging that develops between subjects and the spaces they inhabit is essentially determined by their own process of production, or by the direct possibility that subjects have to control them, both socially and individually (Lefebvre 1974). From this point of view, the nature of urban space can be simply defined by the variable relationship between it being a collective artwork and it being a market product, a difference that lies in their different dynamics of production. A city is as an artwork when it represents a domain in which space does not respond to the logic of profit, whereas it becomes a product when the mechanism of the industrialization process excludes its inhabitants from the production of its space, thus repressing their inalienable "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1968). For this reason, according to Lefebvre, the city has to be reclaimed through a non-violent urban revolution capable of reconnecting people to the space they inhabit, in a symbolic process of collective re-appropriation that, although intellectually fascinating, struggles to find a concrete spatial dimension.

A first definition of this process of re-signification can be found in Michel de Certeau's theory (1980), which follows Lefebvre's thesis about spatial belonging but completely reverses the role that everyday life plays in this process. Where Lefebvre sees alienation and domination, de Certeau discovers a creative

dimension that emerges with all its destructive potential towards all the forms of power that govern the urban environment. This is because only in everyday life people can subvert the hegemonic sense of space through the different practices of definition, transformation and interpretation that structure the relationship between human beings and the territory to which they belong. According to de Certeau, in other words, the production of urban space is not only determined by the institutional "strategies" of planning, design and management, but it is also made of countless "tactics" – both individual and collective – that take the shape of everyday practices aimed at reclaiming public space simply by inhabiting it. Therefore, only in this continuous, repeated and informal act of inhabitation it is possible to find the base of the sense of belonging.

Probably the first conscious attempt, from an architectural point of view, to describe in a broad and systematic way the human faculty of inhabiting beyond the domestic borders dates back to a 1984 essay by Christian Norberg-Schulz. In Norberg-Schulz's opinion, in fact, inhabiting has nothing to do with the domestic environment, but it more generally represents the principle of reciprocal belonging between human beings and the environment. It is an act that goes beyond the definitions of scale and typological categorizations and which, more simply, involves the possibility of feeling part of a certain place. To inhabit, in other words, means nothing but to establish a meaningful relationship between a human being and a given environment, capable of transforming an abstract space into a "place to be" (Norberg-Schulz 1984, 13).

In this sense, the space of inhabiting is much more than a physical environment. It is a sort of mental place that can be identified with very different dimensions, although the meanings attributed to it are implicit in the material practices of spatial appropriation. In fact, as Mary Douglas wrote (1991, 289), dwelling does not represent the search of a refuge or the definition of a form of private property, but it begins with the repeated possibility of controlling a portion of space and defining it through practices and habits. The domestic space, in other terms, metaphorically represents the circumscription of a part of the physical reality that surrounds the individual, and its introjection into the "manipulative sphere" that constitutes the core of everyday life (Schütz 1945, 533-576). Therefore, its symbolic boundaries are not given a priori, but they change according to the personal attitude to recognize a place through its daily appropriation.

Thus, if the domestic sphere is not only a spatial typology, but also a very precise modality of territorial control (Heller 1994), domesticating an urban space means understanding it as part of an action of personal resignification that is based on the daily practices aimed at transforming the city into a familiar place. It means making every place a home, by personally constructing, through a daily attribution of meaning, that relationship of identification and mutual belonging that structures the sense of inhabiting. This action, however, cannot be only based on the different capacities that citizens have to interpret or creatively modify the urban space, but it largely depends on the way in which this space is designed to include citizens. This is to say that it is based on the qualities and the measure of a project that welcomes and encourages the practices of appropriation of its inhabitants, allowing them to really inhabit that space.

Planned to be reclaimed

Historically, since classical antiquity, urban design has never paid much attention to the idea of inhabitability of public spaces. However, something began to change during the fifties of the twentieth century, with the designers' first attempts to increase the responsivity of public spaces focusing on the human dimension of architecture (Sert 1944; Giedion 1959). From this premise, during the following decade the debate developed in a trans-disciplinary dimension. On the one hand, environmental

psychology approached urban geography (Sommer 1959; Hall 1966), while on the other, urban geography addressed the psychological and perceptual outcomes of the physical form of urban space (Lynch 1960). Simultaneously, a significant part of design practitioners focused its attention on the concrete tools capable of making the city "inhabitable" (van Eyck 1962) leading the discussion on open space beyond the criterion of representativeness that squares have always had to meet, to focus on their "potentialities of accommodation" for the most disparate and unexpected uses (Hertzberger 1963).

It is probably for this reason that, starting from the eighties, the design research on the adaptability of urban open spaces has begun to define a theoretical and operative position that replaced the intention to work on pre-established formal structures with the attempt to amplify possible and unexpected "events" (Tschumi 1994). This has involved the definition of a new architectural language that has been predominant for the following thirty years, reflecting the character of a sort of "playful modernism," through which any participatory possibility is resolved in the form of an uncommitted game (Mosco 2010). In other words, most of the recent projects in this field highlight an approach based on a spectacular form of personal involvement with public space, meant to arouse curiosity, surprise, or also uneasiness, which in a few years has concerned a whole series of minimum projects designed to reinterpret the city.

Finally, in the second decade of the new millennium, along with playground, house has made its appearance as a typological and spatial reference, progressively identifying the public sphere not as separate from the private dimension, but rather as an extension of the process of inhabiting that does not seem to meet any differentiation. During the last twenty years, in fact, as a result of technological improvements, a gradual anthropological transformation has started pushing the act of dwelling beyond the boundaries of privacy (Riley 1999). Thus, due to a direct semantic overlap, public space design has gradually started to interpret this extended domestication with a formal and functional repertoire that recalls, in all its aspects, the architecture of a real home.

In this sense, although it is not difficult to find more than one trace of this approach in some of the most important projects of the last years, the domestic reference appears to be more stringent and literal when citizens are called to indicate their idea of public through a specific spatial form, in many contemporary interventions characterized by a very high rate of participation (Klanten 2012). Moreover, its strong political value is clearly appreciable in some interventions carried out in the context where the construction of a new public sphere, breaking the bonds of a forced collectivism, is experienced as a real reconquest. It is the same spirit, for instance, with which in 2008 the artists of Chişinău used a domestic space for the rehabilitation of a plaza, but it is also the same spirit affecting an even more radical intervention, which was implemented two years later for the rehabilitation of a whole underdeveloped district of Bucharest.

In 1989, in fact, the urban "systematization" of the Romanian capital started by Nicoale Ceausescu was abruptly interrupted by the end of the regime, leaving the city with many urban voids that the market economy had no interest in recovering. In this regard, probably the most impressive case was represented by the Calea Moşilor, one of the city's major arteries. The public space remained devoid of any formal and functional qualification, although its sides, defined by public housing buildings, had been fully completed. For this reason, in 2010, a group of architects, artists and local representatives launched an experiment to put an end to this twenty-year situation, through a very delicate intervention of urban renovation that mainly consisted in a series of guidelines.[2] A single colour had to identify the interface of

---

[2] David Bravo Bordas. "Magic Blocks." Accessed February 8, 2018. http://www.publicspace.org/en/works/g202-magic-blocks.

people with space, while the furnishing had to make use only of the elements recovered or recycled by the inhabitants. The common purpose was to create a series of "micro-places" capable of subverting and giving a new meaning to the uniformity of totalitarian urbanism.

After the definition of the guidelines, the whole intervention was divided into four different projects, only unified by these principles. The first, called "Passage between Two Worlds," concerned the use of signage that made the homogeneous urban space more familiar. The second, "A Place for the Community," was attempted to provide the street with a minimum equipment to make the empty open spaces inhabitable. The third, "Please Do Step the Grass," developed a series of ingenious devices to return to live green spaces, once exclusively meant as urban decoration. The last, "Urban Living Room," finally defined a series of more controllable and differentiated areas, each defined by the equipment with which the individual inhabitants built this sort of domesticity outside the walls of their homes.

Once again, therefore, this sort of pervasive sense of intimacy proved to be crucial to structure the formal strategies aimed at encouraging the different practices of spatial re-appropriation. The connoting power of the domestic space, after all, is unquestionable, even just from a symbolic point of view. As in their own homes people are free to create their own spaces by modelling a kind of interior "shell" made of objects, the same possibility is offered them outside thanks to the definition of a concave and hospitable place, in which the productive process of place-making can take shape. Obviously, this risks to deprive a part of the civic value traditionally attributed to urban open spaces, in favour of a spatial and behavioural uniformity. However, it has the merit of highlighting the need for a stronger sense of belonging that, today, the production of public space seems to require. For this reason, from a series of "tactical" interventions, this approach is now spreading among different strategic projects – from public art to urban design[3] – in a form of diffused acupuncture that is progressively colonizing public spaces with substantial extensions of domestic interiors.

In conclusion, the emerging trend that is characterizing the reconstruction of the urban identity of some Post-Soviet countries, through some of the most interesting projects of public space design of the last few years, can be read as part of a longer disciplinary redirection in this field, aimed at enabling and encouraging different forms of spatial appropriation. In fact, each strategy attempted by architects, designers, and artists in order to enhance the creative features of human behaviour has always focused on the possibility of "inhabiting" public space (Leveratto 2015). In this sense, home is just the most direct and literal symbol of the possibility of constructing a new sense of spatial belonging, even in places that were traditionally subject to a different regime.

This, however, does not only mean a change of the urban imaginary. From a design point of view, this approach involves both a significant change in scale and a new way of looking at the morphogenetic mechanisms of urban projects, moving the conceptual centre of design from its margins to its interior. Moreover, it entails a gradual shift of interest from the shape of space in itself to the many opportunities for personal appropriation that the architectural construction allows and encourages (Leveratto 2016). This is because, in these cases, urban space develops, as a domestic interior, around the gestures of the subjects who inhabit it, in a dimension in which the possibility to exert a real control on their environment is explicit. Thus, showing how the collective representativeness that public space has traditionally had to materialize is gradually fading in favour of a new idea of urbanity that is not imposed, but can be imagined, built, and modified in the most absolute autonomy.

---

[3] In this regard, see for example Kamila Szejnoch's artistic intervention *Swing: Memorial to the Berlin Army Soldiers* (Warsaw, 2008) and Buromoscow's redesign of Triumfalnaya square (Moscow, 2015).

References

De Certeau, Michel. 1980. *L'Invention du Quotidien*. Vol. 1*: Arts de Faire*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions.

Delanty, Gerard, and Chris Rumford. 2005. *Rethinking Europe: Social Theory and the Implications of Europeanization*. London: Psychology Press.

Douglas, Mary. 1991. "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space." *Social Research* 58: 287-307.

Gadanho, Pedro, ed. 2014. *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities*. New York: MoMA.

Giedion, Sigfried. 1959. *The Human Scale: Advanced Seminar for the Master's Class*. Cambridge MA: Harvard GSD.

Hall, Edward T. 1966. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Doubleday.

Heller, Agnes. 1994. "Dove ci sentiamo a casa?" *Il Mulino* 353: 381-399.

Hertzberger, Herman. 1963. "Flexibility and Polivalency." *Ekistics* 4: 238-239.

Klanten, Robert. 2012. *Going Public: Public Architecture, Urbanism and Interventions*. Berlin: Gestalten.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1974. *La Production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.

Leveratto, Jacopo. 2015. "Planned To Be Reclaimed: Public Design Strategies for Spontaneous Practices of Spatial Appropriation." *Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal* 1(1): 6-12.

Leveratto, Jacopo. 2016. "Personal Urbanities: Domesticating the Public Domain." *Philosophy Study* 6(7): 424-431.

Lydon, Mike, and Anthony Garcia. 2015. *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change*. Washington-Covelo-London: Island Press.

Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Madanipour, Ali. 2003. *Public and Private Spaces of the City*. London: Routledge.

Mosco, Valerio Paolo. 2010. "Città e spazio pubblico." In *XXI Secolo*, 179-184. Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1984. *L'abitare: L'insediamento, lo spazio urbano, la casa*. Milano: Electa.

Riley, Terence. 1999. *The Un-private House*. New York: MoMA.

Schütz, Alfred. 1945. "On Multiple Realities." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5: 533-576.

Sert, Josep Lluis. 1944. "The Human Scale in City Planning." In *Architecture and City Planning*, edited by Paul Zucker, 392-413. New York: Philosophical Library.

Sommer, Robert. 1959. "Studies in Personal Space." *Sociometry* 22: 247-50.

Tschumi, Bernard. 1994. *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Van Eyck, Aldo. 1962. "Dutch Forum on Children's Home." *Architectural Design* 32: 602.