

## **ARCHITECTURE AND THE CITY.**

### **2. COMMON PLACES**

Enric Massip-Bosch

Public spaces, as was argued in the previous article, are what make a city a city. They are the binding glue of the multiple interactions taking place in a city. It is a specific category of public spaces which makes visible the social and political bonds among the people inhabiting it: they turn people, in fact, into citizens.

These places, in the Northern Mediterranean, have been somehow redefined over centuries, but were invented as soon as democracy first appeared in ancient Greece, were developed in Roman times and have endured ever since, keeping their stubborn role of giving meaning to a community. They are our common places.

#### **A bit of history**

At the beginning was the agora, originally a trading space where makeshift shops were set up, close to public buildings. When democracy appeared in Athens and other Greek cities, agoras became the meeting point of the citizens, that is, the male landowners which were born free. They actually did not frown upon mixing with the populace and sharing space with lowly functions like commerce.

It was then that the agora (which simply means 'meeting place') took its name, and naturally evolved into the main space to exchange information, discuss the city-state issues and to renew the commitment to the community: political affairs, that is, because they were the affairs of the polis, or 'city'.

Since Greek social structures were more based on an idea of belonging than to the existence of institutions, the urban role of the agora was also more abstract than physical. It often consisted in just an open space in the midst of the built tissue of the city, and a portico surrounding it: hence the peripatetic (that is, 'walking around') teachings of Aristotle, for instance.

#### **Rome Redux**

This changed significantly with the reelaboration of the agora performed by the Romans, which would eventually result in the forum. The forum condensed and represented the very idea of Roman citizenship by accumulating political and religious institutions, and popular events like public executions, in a single spot. While the Greek agora contributed to giving the citizen self-consciousness, the Roman forum made the citizen aware of the state.

The Imperial Forum in Rome was the heart and the face of the empire, and all important rendezvous took place there, while commercial uses were held elsewhere. It soon developed into a grandiose background where to represent (in the most direct theatrical sense) the different scenes of the imperial triumphs and the political quarrels.

Other important Roman cities around the empire were built around their forum following the model of the capital, albeit less luxuriously. The replication of the Imperial Forum in every Roman city was another way to visualize the prominence and the protection of Rome over the territory: a glimpse or a reflection, so to say, of the brilliance of the capital into the dullness of the provinces.

In some few cases, the forum has endured beyond ages of social and physical changes, keeping its role as political centers. A quite unique case in point is Barcelona: Plaça Sant Jaume, to this day the political heart of Barcelona and Catalonia, stands where the forum was planned by the Roman founders of the city over 2000 years ago. To attest to this high pedigree, there are four columns of the Temple of Augustus still standing nearby, at the highest point of the old city, inside a building.

### **Twitter & Piazza**

But even more significant than the physical permanence forums is the permanence of the idea of communal belonging conveyed by its conceptual model as civic centers. That is, the very existence of a center signifying a society.

It might be argued that their existence corresponds to ancient times when the only possible interchange among people was in person and

when the visualization of power needed to be materialized in buildings. Therefore their role nowadays, with human relationships increasingly mediated by virtual connections, is doomed to disappear.

In reality, though, their role seems only to be more important now than some decades ago. And one lesson we have learned is that the physical existence of the forum or the piazza is not incompatible with the use of social networks. On the contrary, they seem to reinforce each other.

There are many examples of the mutual interdependence between specific place and virtual connection, at many levels in our lives (and teleworking and its discontents is one of the most interesting, which we will explore in an upcoming article).

But one of the most revealing was the way the demonstrations of the Arab Spring starting in December 2010 were summoned: using Twitter to call for people to gather in piazzas. It was effective, quick and cheap. And it represented the necessity of the existence of a physical common place.

These physical common places need not be used by all all the time. We might even have never been to a public gathering in a piazza. But when we think of a city, or of a political power it embodies, chances are that we imagine (in the sense of thinking in an image) its most representative common place.