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Title: *Domesticating the street (from Rehabitar project)*

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Introduction: This article covers two chapters of the *Rehabitar* research project which refer to the street [3], to ground floor premises [4] and to all that which makes it possible to consider them together. *Domesticating the street* aims to return the condition of public space to urban space, encouraging social relations through a reflection on the nature of the street itself, on the uses to which it can be put –recovering others which have been abandoned or banned– and on the ability of ground floor premises to give energy to the street.

As a rule, in our streets, there prevails a language belonging to an infrastructure: asphalt, streetlights, cars... *Domesticating the street* means taking it away from the setting of infrastructure and bringing it closer, through elements and activities, to its condition of a place, assuming all the complexity that this concept contains. If domesticate comes from *domus* in Latin, we could say that a 'domesticated street' is one where one feels 'at home'.

Modern architecture has often tried to mix the street and the house. But this has been done as a one-way trip, that of bringing the street closer to the house. What would happen now if we were to do this the other way around, bringing the house closer to the street, as suggested in the Paolo Veronese painting *The Feast in the House of Levi* (figure 1) which despite the title, describes an equivocally urban setting which nevertheless suggests domesticity through the activity and the attitude of its occupants?

Everything fits into the street. Scenes of cities, in the streets of which vehicles, passers-by and diners co-exist, are a clear expression of this complexity which arises from the way of using public space pertaining to Southern Europe. With *Rehabitar la calle* (Re-inhabit the street) we propose this complex-free acceptance of an apparent disorder which is no more than the expression of our co-existence.

Domesticating the street, 15 suggestions and a final manifesto:

1. A non-specialized street.

If we compare a current picture of a public space and another from sixty years before¹, we will notice how empty streets were some time ago. Missing are the traffic signs, traffic lights, lines and arrows painted on the road surface... Or in other words, elements linked to vehicle transit. However, there is more freedom of movement. The specialization of public space, that is its division into specialized 'plots', is common practice in most cities. In this way, those who manage public space feel comfortable because they can control the use of the street and avoid inappropriate uses. Specialization tends towards an impoverishment of the possibilities of use which a street can have.

2. Snow-covered street. Aldo Van Eyck believed that the best image a street can offer is when it is covered in snow as in this case nothing tells us how we should act².

There are materials for paving the streets which offer this ambiguous aspect which we are pointing to with the example of the snow-covered streets. Cobblestones are one of these. The Plaza Mayor in Madrid, the Plaza Sant Jaume in Barcelona, the Piazza Navona in Rome... In these cases the design of the paving is regulated by compositional laws which have nothing to do with vehicle transit or setting out areas for a specific use.

3. Shared space.

With the aim to suppress the hierarchization of public space by breaking the 'hermetic seal' of the specialized plots and giving them a social meaning, Hans Moderman developed *Shared Space*. An urban design concept which tends towards taking public space away from its setting as infrastructure to bring it to its condition as a place, by removing traffic signs or the removal of kerbs and railings, aimed at placing all the citizens on one single uninterrupted continuous 'platform'. Shared Space has become a Europe-wide project in which this form of city-building has been put into practice in more than five countries³.

4. Park(ing) Day.

Asked the question – what can be done in the street? – we think of the obvious: walking, driving a car, having a drink on a terrace, resting on a bench... However, if we asked ourselves what can be done in the open space left between a series of buildings? We would surely give a different answer.

The title of Jan Gehl's book, *Life between buildings* is a manifesto on how we should view public space. A look which does not take into account prejudices regarding how it should be used, but which conceives the street as a space which can be used in its entirety.

Performing in the street an activity which we would normally carry out at home is the simplest way of domestication. Sweeping the street is an action historically carried out by neighbours in Mediterranean countries –albeit, more and more difficult to find– which is, in our opinion, a clear example of this more domestic complex-free view, towards the type of public space we are calling for. In 2005, the San Francisco collective Rebar (www.parkingday.org), started off an initiative calling for a pleasanter and more participatory use of public space. For one day the citizens convert parking spaces into small gardens into which they move their activity with the help of small items of household furniture.

This action is inspirational. For some hours, the street can be seen as an extension of the houses which open onto it. Seeing the interest awakened in the short life of this experience, it is worth considering how the conditions to promote such intense and spontaneous uses of the street could be generated more often.

5. Depave.

The activities of the group Depave⁴ are aimed at obtaining areas of ‘virgin’ land where flowers can be planted and vegetable gardens sown. Actions like these, linked to the environmental movement, enable us to see how asphalt, and with this vehicles, monopolizes the ground space of the city. The solution proposed is to replace plots of asphalted area with land for growing, as if they were domestic vegetable gardens. In this way simply delegating the maintenance to the local authorities is avoided. This is a way of appropriating the street which implies its direct maintenance, making this the result of neighbourhood participation.

The different initiatives which form part of what has been named the Community Garden⁵ Movement have been carried out as protest activities since the 1970s in New York, giving a social use to unused plots and generating community spirit by creating and maintaining gardens.

6. Accidents and obstacles.

The architect Aldo Van Eyck performed activities in unoccupied plots in Amsterdam to fill them with children’s games and hence stopping these urban spaces from becoming residual⁶.

Actually, rather than children’s games they turned out to be ground accidents. We say they were accidents rather than games since the games themselves did not condition the way they were used, they simply invited children to play. A base can be used as a chair, a corner-piece as a domestic area... It is exactly this lack of attributes in Van Eyck’s games which we find interesting, a lack of attributes which invites their ‘wrong use’ or, looking at it in another way, a more open use.

Children are experts at giving the ‘wrong’ use to the wide range of things they play with. In doing so they show, in a naïve way, the alter ego of many elements but, moreover, adult’s lack of imagination and lack of flexibility. They show us the ambiguity of many things by daring to use them in another way. Children give things another use because their height and lack of prejudice allows them to see things from a different perspective. But aside from their size, there lies within them an uninhibited attitude, prior to recognizing the established use, showing an unwritten way of criticizing the street and this is what draws our attention.

7. Chairs in the street.

In Paris, the Luxembourg gardens are furnished with metal chairs, instead of the traditional benches which are in a fixed position. People take them and place them in the shade or in the sun, or simply group them together to chat for a while, as if they were their own household furniture. In 2009, Times Square, New York was filled with tables, chairs and loungers for some months as a test of the viability of closing Broadway, which passes through the square, to traffic. Sensibly, the local authorities preferred to assess how the city would react, before commencing such a large-scale transformation.

The two examples give back the initiative for using the street to the citizen, setting an eminently domestic atmosphere which might be compared to the less and less usual custom of taking a chair out into the street to sit down and chat with the neighbours. Perhaps the street no longer meets the requirements for us to colonize it in such a spontaneous manner. We should ask ourselves if this is not a symptom of ill health. However, we believe that a necessary initial requirement should be met which involves our own attitude towards using urban space more intensely: re-inhabiting the street also starts with ourself.

8. Street with a schedule.

The street schedule depends on the things that people do there. The aspect of the road in the morning, full of cars and children going to school, has nothing to do with what happens after nine, when it empties, or during the weekend. One could find out the time of day by merely observing how fast people are moving and the clothes they are wearing.

This changing reality of public space becomes more evident in those squares where each day a street market is put up and taken down. Italian cities have a long tradition in this and the scenes taking place in Campo dei Fiori, Rome or in the Catania fish market are particularly fascinating. As an extreme case we might mention the Mae Klong Station, a few kilometres from Bangkok, Thailand where the market, virtually installed on the railway tracks, must adapt itself to the frequency of the passing trains.

These and other examples serve to show that the same street can cover different needs as long as these needs do not coincide at the same time. Close observation of the workings of these environments allows us to think of the use of scheduling as a formula to fit in a greater wealth of activities throughout the day or the year, activities which could not be generated from an using an immutable stance.

9. Awnings.

In Sumer, some streets of southern cities in Spain are covered with awnings to bring shade to the public space and reduce the temperature. Covering the street allows it to be understood as a more domestic environment.

At times this domestication of the street does not stem from the local authorities or the architecture of the whole, but from individual initiative. Formerly, the streets were covered with store awnings. There were so many that the street was almost completely in the shade. Spreading the ceiling from inside out onto the street is a characteristic property of ground floor premises which shows their importance regarding the character and possibilities of use of the street whose boundaries they mark. It isn't a question of nostalgia. Rescuing a proposal like this allows environmental conditions to be improved by using passive systems. The challenge lies in thinking how a street awning for the 21st century should be conceived.

10. Re-inhabiting the ground floor premises.

Re-inhabiting ground floor premises aims to pass on the character of the domestic, diluting the limits of the public. The proposal involves encouraging uses which re-consider the former yet more and more valid relationships between work and home, capable of taking advantage of the distinctive qualities of the ground floor premises and preventing the deterioration of social life, giving new use to so many empty premises.

For years, the reduction in the number of small shops due to the de-localization imposed by the large shopping centers on the outskirts of cities has been observed. With the businesses of ground floor premises closed the street loses activity, cleanliness, light and the feeling of safety and decays as a public space for living together.

In order to understand this desertification effect we need only dismantle the active premises of a shopping centre and re-locate them, one by one, to the ground floors of a residential neighbourhood which has lost its activity⁷. We can see the large area of streets affected, reduced to roads for vehicles to drive down on their way to the mall.

11. Living on the ground floor.

It is not unusual to see a covert offer of dwellings in ground floor premises. Many of them are borderline legal, owing to the impossibility of being given permits as dwellings. Despite their precarious legality, their existence brings to light an unsolved problem and an opportunity to revitalize the street which cannot go unnoticed. Since 2004 there have existed municipal initiatives in the autonomous communities of Madrid and the Basque Country, targeted at promoting the construction of dwellings in ground floor premises overriding the limitations of planning regulations. Occasionally the creation of spaces to live and work has been promoted. But in most cases the need to obtain housing has predominated over looking into the capacity of ground floor premises as a testing ground for formulas different to the usual ones which might simultaneously allow the street to be revitalized.

12. Workshop-dwellings.

The aim is to convert these empty premises, making the most of their distinctive characteristics and features in order to adapt them as spaces to live and work in. This allows us to update other working methods linked to the house, furthermore resolving the always problematic contact of the dwelling with the street.

In some quiet back streets in the historic centers of Barcelona, Valencia or Madrid, there have been appearing a type of establishment which combines the craft workshop, the shop or the classroom. If some of them could have available a dwelling connected to the storeworkshop, we would be giving domestic life and, in the meantime, productive and commercial activity to the streets. In these cases, the vision of the street from inside the workshop and vice-versa opens up a series of unimagined fields of vision which illuminate profoundly the urban scene,

strengthening the identity of the neighbourhood and encouraging the such longed-for integration activitypasser- by.

The workshop-dwelling revisited might follow different formulas depending on the type of work being carried out, but it should be compatible with residential activity. We might think of converting the premises for both uses, taking advantages of the features of a split-level or of the back of the premises, overlooking a courtyard, or linking to the first-floor dwelling by adding a staircase.

This way the whole layout becomes part of a new registered unit which needs no modification to the permitted density and implies no changes to planning regulations. When the workshop becomes part of the house the link with the immediate environment becomes much closer and the street may become another room: the community room.

13. Pavement trading.

In many cities premises with a very small surface area subsist where the street becomes a co-participant in their activities. They tend to be located in very narrow plots, sometimes even sharing the entrance to the dwellings.

As in *The tapestry seller* by Mariano Fortuny (1870) (figure 2), the street becomes the shop window for their goods. It is a question of opportunity. Activity tends to occupy even the smallest space possible when circumstances are favourable, even where now a municipal permit could not be obtained. When the by-laws tend towards establishing a borderline between the public and private space of the activity, regulating shop windows and signs in order to prevent excesses, the antiseptic urban image achieved removes the visible signs of this activity from the street.

Seeing the results we wonder whether removing showcases or different kinds of tables for displaying goods might not have negative effects on the energy which the ground floor premises give to the street and its plural character. Despite this, the ingenuity shown by some establishments which refuse to close down offers the local authorities alternative solutions which might be taken into consideration.

14. Threshold space.

This symptom of a healthy social life recalls how Giambattista Nolli presents atriums, porticoes, courtyards and public buildings as a natural prolongation of the street in the streetplan of Rome in 1736 (figure 3). This dissolution can be seen in the temporary occupation of street space with the activity of ground floor premises, from the use of devices such as awnings or collapsible verandahs which qualify a distinctive setting.

On the other hand, including deep shop windows or fully opening up the entrance area at certain times of the year encourage this interrelation. It is not about acritically rescuing solutions which were effective in other times, with the risk of introducing an unnecessary break with present-day lifestyles. The transgressive image of the facade of the New York gallery *Storefront for Art and Architecture*⁸ plays the role of this threshold space without any nostalgic concessions to the past. The gallery blurs the line between the public space of the pavement and the private interior space. The activity takes place with equal intensity on both sides, in a strip of area which gravitates around the two sides of the moving facade.

Walter Benjamin names this deliberately equivocal quality of the limits of public space 'porosity', concerning the lifestyle of the city of Naples. Within this porous concept thresholds, the areas where the street and the shop-workshop coexist, gain importance.

To talk of flexible limits in the form of transition areas which are neither completely private nor completely public is to refer indistinctly to the relief which these threshold spaces incorporate and the action-manipulation of their occupants on the aforementioned relief. The entrance steps to the ground floor premises typical in Anglo-Saxon culture, the benches which act as plinths in Italian palaces or the arcades which cover the way in cities with sunny or rainy climates have a social use which can offer a domestic quality to the street. The challenge lies in revealing the ability to attract of these and other examples and trying find formulas which are equally receptive and which contribute to re-inhabit our own streets.

15. Domesticate the street!

This reasoning allows the necessary harmony to be established between the direct action of neighbours and the regulatory capacity of institutions. This is the only way to make acquiring mutual responsibility over the urban environment possible. In this context ground floor premises play a leading role as mediators due to their borderline position.

Giving ground floor premises over to activities which participate in the street and are linked to the dwelling modifies the perception of the urban layout. Inhabited ground floors establish a

close bond with the neighbouring floors which serves as a catalyst for the street to be once again understood as another room which bring them together.

L. I. Kahn states that the measure of a city is the character of its institutions. And street, as an exterior room which expresses a pact between the people who live, learn, shop and work there, is one of the most important. If the street works, so does society.

Final manifesto:

WE CALL FOR, definitively, streets conceived as places and not infrastructures, less designed, less regulated and more flexible streets. Just as we attempt to give flexibility to our housing, we also call for this in our streets. Streets whose ground space should not be fragmented by the demarcation lines of unchangeable uses. Streets with more equalitarian paving allowing a more spontaneous social use. Streets with obstacles, with more friction against the walls, with ground floor premises and establishments which participate in them. Shops with awnings which protect pedestrians from the sun and the rain and which avoid the indiscriminate use of air conditioning. Streets with schedules allow them to be used in different ways depending on the time, the day or the season. We refuse to designate some streets as pedestrian because all streets should be so. Shouldn't they?

Images:

1. *Feast in the House of Levi* by Paolo Veronese, 1573. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.
2. Mariano Fortuny, *The tapestry seller*, 1870. Montserrat Museum, Barcelona.
3. Negative of the *Nuova topografia di Roma*, Giambattista Nolli, 1736-1748. Comparison of the streetplan including the ground floor premises with the modified streetplan showing only the streets.

Notes:

¹ For instance, the picture of the Madrid Gran Via shot in 1949 by Dimitri Kessel for the magazine LIFE, and a current photo of the same public space.

² To explain this idea the architect show the image: Skating on Gelderse Kade, a canal in the centre of Amsterdam, by Ed van der Elsken appearing in the book by Aldo Van Eyck, *The child, the city and the artist: an essay on architecture*, Pub. Sun, 2008.

³ There is an organization which has the web page: <http://www.shared-space.org>.

⁴ It is possible to follow the activities of the group Depave in www.oregonlive.com, or www.kailashecovillage.com.

⁵ It is possible to have a look at the interventions of the Community Garden Movement in www.cenyc.org, www.greenguerrillas.org, www.greenthumbnyc.org.

⁶ Interventions that can be seen in the book VAN EYCK, Aldo, *The child, the city and the artist: an essay on architecture*, Pub. Sun, 2008.

⁷ If we were to place each of the premises of the 3 floors of the La Vaguada shopping centre (Madrid) side by side, we would revitalize the ground floor premises of a street nearly 1.5 km long, equivalent to the length of Gran Via of Madrid.

⁸ Renovation of the gallery Storefront for Art and Architecture which the architect Steven Holl and the artist Vito Acconci collaborated on. (New York, 1993).

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