THE DIFFERENCE IN LIFESTYLE. ‘A SHOPPING LIST’ AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AS URBAN PROCESS STIMULATOR

Renata Mikielewicz
Assistant Professor, Ph.D.
renata.mikielewicz@p.lodz.pl
+48 42 654 5418; +48 608 866 254
Institute of Architecture and Town Planning, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, Technical University of Lodz
Al. Politechniki 6, 90-924 Lodz, Poland
+48 42 631 39 31
+48 42 636 78 73 (F)

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Abstract

The urbanized space mirrors the way the society works. We have on one side the commercialization of the space and on the other side attempts to make the space more human through the social engagement of architects and urban planners. The yearning for authenticity is confronted with different forms of standardization of urban space and the domination of global brands. The space of a city core’s streets is full of brands, which symbolize the progress. The researchers concentrate mostly on this most visible aspect of globalization phenomenon when describing the urban processes, which are visible in the space. At the same time the strategies based on the idea of ‘the creative city’ for rather many of the cities, also polish towns, became an element of specific survival strategy in the time of profound changes in social and economic areas, caused by globalization. The author analyzes some of these contradicted? or/and consistent? types of nowadays urban culture trying to answer the question about the role of urban design in the context of contemporary trends shaping the locality and the global aspects of the city and its structure and concentrates on different examples of contemporary cities. The search for possible solutions based on sustainable development and the confrontation with the real urban development strategies (examples include the case study for the city of Lodz) are the starting points for the author to find answers how to re-shape the urban space into a user friendly city.

‘Architecture however do not exist in vacuum – the same space, the same building after few years can be a different building. Not because the space have changed. Simply because of the change of context.’

Krzysztof Nawratek in interview with Bogna Swiatkowska (Nawratek, 2014, p. 90)
The culture of shopping experience

What makes a city a working urban space is and was essential to every generation. In year 2013, in the book “The Metropolitan Revolution”, Judith Rodin, the President of the Rockefeller Foundation, states that ‘a city’s true measure goes beyond human-made structures and lies deeper than daily routine. (…) cities and metro areas are defined by the quality of the ideas they generate, the innovations they spur, and the opportunities they create for people living within and outside city limits’. (Katz, Bradley, 2013, p. vii)

This point of view is somehow obscured by the image of the urban space which we can find around us all over the world. The urban public space became a place for concentrated marketing of global brands, commercialized to the point where the form of the space get extremely uniformed because of the needs of consumption and advertisement. Everywhere, global brands as Starbucks, Zara, McDonald’s etc. are placed also in the spaces which pride themselves as symbols of locality. Standardized services standardize also the visual space – from shop interiors to the exterior of squares and streets. The feeling of the uniqueness of the space is starting to be problematic. In the contemporary urban space the user seems able only to satisfy his or her very narrowly defined consumer needs. The authenticity of a place is mostly achieved by the means of ‘staginess’ of the space – secured through adaptation to the image of space of these social groups, which have the means to satisfy their needs. The requirements of the virtual space in which we exist in personal and professional lives also cause that the constant need to be present in virtual community alienates us from the real surrounding space. A habit taken from virtual reality - to get a constant flow of changeable impulses – make impossible to focus on the elements of urban interiors. And perception of stable images needs concentration. Such use of space realizes itself in a concept that a city it is not what builds the outside space, but the image of the space in ourselves (such phenomenon is described in a book ‘The City is Me’; Brazilian researcher Rosane Araujo analyzes there the philosophical impact of such spatial image of the city). The city is then not a geographical element, it is a notion connected with the life style and the space use (Araujo, 2013, p. 139 and next)

But even defining of the city through individualized perception we can distinguish some rules of functioning of the urban space.

The urban space builds always a multifaceted conglomerate with repeatable and unique elements. And actually this ‘recipe’ for the city have not changed, even when spatial composition have changed. Nowadays analysis of the urban structure shows that the urban life concentrates mostly in different shopping centers – from ‘normal’ shopping malls (one big network store and a ‘street’ enriched with some smaller brand shops) to revitalized postindustrial complexes (f. ex. Manufaktura in Lodz, Poland), housing estates (cultural and commercial centers in Shanghai, China as Xiantandi),or even parks (f. ex. in Bercy in Paris, France, where a stylized commercial centre realized as a pedestrian city street is connected directly with park area). The need for displacement emphasizes the island character of the contemporary city space. Urban space composed and used as constant shopping experience.
The shopping culture grows from the consumerism of our society which still in majority defines progress with accumulation of goods. Goods with a very short life span. Such kind of behaviour results in very globalized urban space with repeatable patterns of use and spatial order. Even if exchange of goods was always essential feature of city space nowadays it took sometimes grotesque dimension. Even in distant sometimes exotic locations we meet the same brand names. The variety of stock in the shops does not differ significantly – the same coffee, the same hotel room, the same character of uniformed space… People and nature still make the difference but otherwise the cityscape bases on a mock feeling of security brought through already seemingly familiar surroundings. In present time local identity is standardized through the worldliness and cultural belonging to accepted value system, even when foreign tradition and believes are implanted to different culture.

**Figure 1. Globalized shopping. Commercial center Xiantandi in refurbished old shikumen-houses. Shanghai, China**

Such unified shopping space copies in form old city structures as streets and squares, but left the real city empty from users. They gather in secure excluded spaces of specially created centers not in the ‘real’ urban space where they can encounter poverty and problems. Such centers as postindustrial factory complex Manufaktura in Lodz, otherwise very valuable as the place where the cultural heritage of the city got preserved, take the ‘life potential’ of other city parts and create an artificial space – vivid and full of attractions, but also lacking the notoriety of the city center. The social differences, the ugliness and everyday problems are pushed to the outskirts of the consciousness of the users. The world seem friendly and unproblematic, secure and free from danger. In the terms of urban and architectural design the space is staged as such kind of traditional urbanity where the human scale, details and pedestrian solutions make it desirable for frequent use. But in such spaces even the possibility to sit down and rest is
connected with consumption. If something changes, as in the shopping gallery in Manufaktura, is connected still to the profit – more unpaid sitting possibilities enable the women to shop freely when their man can wait patiently sitting slightly bored. Such model works so the shopping space got equipped in more unpaid seats. In the beginning there where just few (extremely lovely designed) chairs in the whole center. The consumption space is sometimes jeweled with some cultural functions as museum or other exhibition spaces (Manufaktura in Lodz, Shanghai’s Xiantandi, Stary Browar in Poznan) but they even if centrally placed physically, they exists on the periphery of the perception for the majority. But still it is significant that the need to implement such ‘foreign’ elements shows the desire to consume not only on the basic level of human needs. But the chosen functions implemented in the space cover only the ‘civilized’, unproblematic aspects of life of the privileged. Everything else stays outside, in the sometimes strangely centrally placed periphery as the periphery in Lodz, which is strictly the city center with the main street and its neglected 19. century tenement houses. And just planned revitalization still lacks programs which enable to integrate the old inhabitants and in the effect will not push them from the renovated space somewhere in nowhere, but outside the gentrified, cleaned space. The urban design and architecture make the space friendlier but only aesthetically, the ethic part remains somehow nonexistent.

**Social induction**

Even if the new commercialized urban spaces meet our expectation in terms of urban design, the essence of what builds a community is lacking. It is very significant that the criticized by environmentalists ‘production of space’ with its capitalist usage of even empty space defined solely as an asset for further development also started the movements gathered under the headword ‘the right to the city’ (both notions formulated by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre). The notion ‘right to the city’ is understand as ‘the right to urban life’. (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 61-181) Such urbanity is based on the idea of a man realizing himself in urban space used as the meeting space. And the form of such space is not relevant. The space functioning without people who enjoy its use, is impossible to be described as habitable. Inhabited space is also full of contrast, it projects the hierarchy and divisions of the real society. And as the alternative to the urban spaces - polished, deprived of the edges – we can observe a tendency to use architecture as a form of activism. There are such ideas as “the third places” were people can gather and build (again) social networks. (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 2)

Extreme individualization and the quest to achieve very selfishly defined happiness common in our society are visible in our treatment of space and its urban form – unharmonious, overridden with brand symbols and gated whenever possible. But a growing trend of ‘the right to the city’-activists and also socially oriented architects try do develop a very different approach to the space. It is based on participation, where architects can have leading role but not the solutions based on superior position.

‘Think global, build local!’ (Arch+, 2013, p.04) – the slogan and the title of the exhibition in Architecture Museum in Frankfurt am Main in Germany (8 June – 1 September 2013) is also a program for many contemporary architects. This exhibition showed a trend already presented in 2010 in Museum of Modern Art in New York (exhibition ‘Small Scale, Big Change: New
Architectures of Social Engagement’). That event presented the contemporary attitude of many architects who try to make Project involving the users and stressing the local participation. At the moment that kind of professional stand got awarded through the Pritzker Prize 2016 for Alejandro Aravena. The social engagement of the architect for many seem necessary to maintain a standard of space and its purpose as the frame of the social life. Engaged design should enable socially weak groups of people to express themselves in public space. The architect or urban planner should include the implications coming from the local context and also try to help to build the competence of local people. And even then other aspects of sustainability are important the most pressing issue seem to be to show social equality with diversity of social qualities and identities. The main rule is the right for everyone to live in a community with healthy social, economical and environmental principles. (Wilson, 2008) So the main idea of such projects is not the composition and its aesthetic impact but the community. Not the material but the people living and using the space are the focus of the project. The social aspect of sustainable thinking is the most important. And such approach changes also the outcome – the designed space often is a rough one, not the eye pleasing one which is the common goal in most projects.

An attempt to find spatial solutions for creation of urban spaces which can answer the needs of the contemporaneoussness incline to analysis of the smaller urban organisms and their communities. The nowadays concentration of people in big urban structures tends to cause anonymity and spatial dispersal. (Mikielewicz, 2015, p. 113) What differs small urban structures from the big ones is their closeness, the possibility to reach the borders on foot, to know the passersby to identify with space known in every element (through its past and present). In mega-cities the pace of life depends upon speed.

**Figure 2. Commemoration place for unborn children. A social action in cemetery in Mainz, Germany**

Source: Renata Mikielewicz, 2008
Such aspect of the city life as the need for reflection is present in social activities of many formal and informal groups in Germany, where in the space of the cemeteries the multifaceted spatial structures implemented in existing space try to help to understand the mystery of life and its end. Otherwise the urban actions concentrate on the public involvement and a specially effective tool is the participatory budget which enables local communities to involve in the change in the use of the surrounding space on different levels. One of the actions of an artistic group Urzad Miasta in Lodz in the 1980s. helped to stimulate the awareness of the importance and the real sense of the urban heritage of the city. The action helped to understand that what makes a city is not a single building however beautiful but a street and its row character, the pattern not the singled element. The happening organized through young architects on 7th May 1981 after drastic widening of a one of many Piotrkowska (main street of the city) cross-streets elevated the remaining single tenement house to the rank of a monument - the Monument of the House.

Figure 3. Heightening of the monument for the city of Lodz, Poland, during a yearly anniversary

Source: Renata Mikielewicz, 2014
Figure 4. Piotrkowska Street, Lodz, Poland. Mobile figures of a famous Polish poet, Julian Tuwim, born in the city, placed in the new furnished and paved main street

Source: Renata Mikielewicz, 2013

Figure 5. Model of the city prepared by children. An social action in Old Market on the anniversary of the city of Lodz, Poland

Source: Renata Mikielewicz, 2014
Figure 6. A new pedestrian-friendlier street in the city center, remodeled after voting in participatory budget in Lodz, Poland

Source: Renata Mikielewicz, 2015

Nowadays the same people are bound in formal organized structures in the city and try to reshape it with other means but also with symbolic actions as the yearly heightening of the Monument of the City, which shows all years from the 1423, when Lodz was given the city rights. The most significant achievement of such groups is the ‘public awareness’ awakening. The city starts to fulfill the sense of belonging which is not connected with the privileged. We see changes in the way the people act in space with which they start to identify. What is mostly disturbing in revitalization schemes is the gentrification of urban space with only differently ghettoized space, attractive in the sense of urban composition but lacking the real urban value – the sense of community. The new space serves only these citizens who share the same social and economical position in the society.

Catalyzed space

Throughout centuries urban space in its shape emphasized the structure of social values. Nowadays we can observe the dominating tendency to unification of the urban space. The creation of false homogeneity responds with the obligatory consumption model. The space becomes uniform, cleaned out of contrasts. It looks illusory safe and domesticated. Without need for any other way of engagement as passive contemplation. Such users, who from cultural or economical reasons are not compatible with the desired consumption pattern are moved to the peripheries of the world of these who can compete. What is not seen is not disturbing the
The sense of indulgence. The social well-being is defined through such self-satisfaction and safety which creates urban spaces gated and not accessible for strangers. Such preferences create a world of people copying similar activities based on the same consumption ideal, but separated from the others and tolerating only the alike.

In the process of globalization the cities the cities even more generate all goods. But even more they replace states in the global economy competition. So they need to look for new resources and for enhancing of their position on the market. In this specific ranking the skill to use the image of the city to exist in public imagination seems extremely necessary and sufficient. For many cities as Dubai, Shanghai or Madrid it is the main strategy. The iconic city is then a magnet (with the use of the immaterial qualities) for gathering the potential urban space users and generate the development conditions. (Landry, p. xviii) on such strategies of possible city development growing number of cites try to implement a policy based on sustainability. Still worldwide we can count such examples nearly on the fingers of one hand. And this in not because we do not have examples of successful implementation of sustainable design in the form of sustainable oriented districts as the European examples as Swedish Malmö or German Freiberg im Breisgau. But the holistic approach to urban design using the knowledge and understanding that about the nature of the natural, social, economical etc. processes and the use of such way of thinking is making very slow progress. In build solutions nearly always there is one main focus point, a much cherished “show case” which obscure the idea of sustainability as implementing the balance between needs and necessities. And sometimes such ideas as ‘the creative city’ do not work properly because of somehow falsely made assumptions. This idea was basically formulated as a solution underlining the exceptionality of the place, but because of its massive implementation in contemporary world looks like some means for mere survival in constantly changing world. (Florida, 2010)

Interesting point in this approach builds the idea of intercultural exchange (different from the multicultural notion) which enables the flow and exchange of values coming from different cultures, which allows to live together and not only near each other in closed communities. (Landry, p.xix)

There are some examples of different social approach in building new social values based on the philosophic ideas of ‘deep ecology’. The community is then changing the communication and co-operation structure (using also the tools of modern capitalist society) and tries to establish new links between the inhabitants. An example of such solution is Ecovillage Munkskøgård near (or now in the outskirts of) Roskilde. With 100 row houses in 5 groups and ‘common houses’ for each group, where 225 inhabitants gather at last ones a month for common meal, it builds an enclave of new social understanding. The whole structure is centralized. In the terms of ecology there are not only energy efficient architecture solutions as conservatories, solar panels or sea-shells roof coverings, but also shared gardens. The function base on accessibility, visibility and togetherness. New social ideas for our atomized, self-centered society but with amazingly old fashioned urban and architectural patterns and aesthetic solutions. Such attempt to build a kind of community were everybody is important to the others and all care about each other is possible because of the scale of the estate and brings difficulty when considered as something not repeatable in the sense of multiplying but
enlarging and interconnecting. But what is important in the whole idea is the conviction that to get better living space the actions of the society should change. And then we can repeat the old ways of creation of the habitable spaces in form but not in mental use. Such kind of thinking that only the change of mind will help dominates in the way of thinking of many researchers and as expressed as in Naomi Klein’s book about climate change the change gets ‘suddenly, everyone’. (Klein, 2014, p. 464)

So we have to approaches a ‘technical’ one which looks for advantages of technology, looks for new shapes, materials and more refined modernity (and brings it to the extreme) and on the other side a kind of thinking where the sense of the city should be find in the people not structures. Desirable but also very difficult affair.

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