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Taking ‘use’ into account in the production of public space in Lyon, Louvain-la-Neuve and Lisbon

Contexts, methods and results

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Abstract—Issues of public space use have become a paramount subject of research in the recent past. While research of an overtly operative outlook has convincingly put forward design and management recommendations for improving the use of public spaces, it has struggled in approaching the issue as the scope of urban policy and planning. This research project aims at contributing to re-placing the problem at an urban scope. It will do so by comparing three very different policy and planning processes which, at an urban scale, explicitly put forward use as a main objective of public space production, namely Lyon, Louvain-la-Neuve and Lisbon. This research adopts an inductive approach to the subject, framed by readings in the intersection of pragmatic sociology, policy and economics/management studies which suggest the explanation of policy outcomes by in-depth analyses of the processes leading to them. However, it maintains a geographical standpoint as it is concerned, as well, with the “spatialization of public policies”, i.e. the spaces that are actually produced by said processes and the dynamics of use taking place therein.

Keywords—*production of public space; public space use; Lyon; Louvain-la-Neuve; Lisbon*

I. PROBLEM AND RELEVANCE OF THEME

The problem of this thesis is how to produce public spaces which foster ‘good’ uses, i.e. which are marked by conviviality, overall pleasantness, accessibility, some of them imprinted by multiplicity and ‘situated surplus’ [1], others by the presence of more homogenous groups of users and communitarian appropriation dynamics [2]. Such concerns have been around for long, especially since criticism of functionalist, technocratic approaches to urban planning began to arise. In fact, the genesis of ‘public space’ as an operative and analytical category is linked to critiques of modernism and to the rise of a post-industrial city [3].

The subject of such concerns has, however, expanded. Early urban commentators usually criticized the impact of functionalist urban forms, zoning techniques, traffic segregation and the privilege of individual motorized transportation on social life. Nowadays, even though earlier concerns persist, the social and political effects of neoliberalism and globalization in urban policies and of the rise of a ‘metropolitan civilization’ [4] have also come to the fore.

Public spaces and their use are thus often seen as epiphenomena of broader, structural changes in society. Why is it, then, that producing public spaces (programs, designs, and management) which foster ‘good’ dynamics of use is a relevant research theme and policy goal? Even though the exact role and the importance of public spaces as an arena of social and civic formation are debatable, there seems to be an agreement on the significance of conviviality in public spaces for a broader notion of urban culture and *civitas* [1]. Actions on public spaces may, then, contribute to minimize the negative consequences of structural trends, namely by influencing users’ individual and collective behavior.

II. OBJECTIVES AND RELATED RESEARCH TOPICS

The main objective of this research is to contribute to a methodological framework for public space production centered on its use, at an urban scale. Such a framework may entail two different domains of enquiry, one substantive, the other procedural. From a substantive point of view, related research topics regard the relationship between public spaces and use dynamics therein. It becomes, for the most part, a question of urban design and management, by seeking an understanding of how given characteristics of public spaces and of their administration can promote or deter certain uses. Or, conversely, of understanding how can different characteristics of public spaces answer to individuals’ needs or demands. The procedural dimension of the problem is twofold. On the one hand it addresses the actual reasons, processes and methods which ‘taking use into account’ might entail, from the adoption of guidelines based on existing research to different sociological surveys in the field and participatory processes, among others. On the other hand, it implies an understanding of the processes of public space (and city) production themselves, in order to identify the potentially most effective ways of formalizing any operative recommendations.

This research thus poses four interrelated questions to the case studies. First, how, and why, have public space and public space use become privileged policy goals? Secondly, how have these goals been translated in the specific production processes and how can different options be explained? Thirdly, what have been the results of these policies, in terms of the actual spaces created and the dynamics of use within them? And,

finally, what can these case studies teach that might give shape to a methodological framework for producing well used public spaces at an urban scale?

III. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN

Given the research topic's broadness, it intersects a number of different approaches and fields of scientific enquiry.

A. *Microsociology, affordance theory and urban ambiances*

Dating back to predecessors in the Chicago School [5], sociologists have put forward detailed accounts of public sociability [5-6]. Displacing the analysis of publicness from spaces or users to situations [5-8], they have shown how public sociability is defined by an ensemble of behavioral norms, small gestures and bodily practices [*id.*] and how local social orders are constructed through everyday practices of conflict and negotiation [9]. These studies main concern has been more on how public life comes about in interactions between people, and less the spatial conditions behind them [10]. The clues they provide have, however, been appropriated and further developed by research with more operative aims, which has provided useful insights for urban design, as the following section will show. Moreover, by focusing less on the spatial conditions of public life, the political implications of public spaces may be overlooked, e.g. in identifying how sociability in shopping centers portrays every trace of public situations [11].

The need to conceptualize public space use in terms of situations has been further emphasized by affordance theory's take on environmental perception. Visual perception has always influenced architecture and urban design, namely in considerations around scale. Where affordance theory innovates is in presenting a relational understanding of the environment which surpasses narrow subject-object approaches to perception. An affordance, 'the functional utility of an object for an animal with certain action capabilities' [12] is relational in character, as it depends on an individual agent's characteristics. It is a property of the environment [13] that exists independently of perception [14]; an object may have multiple affordances [13], as it may be used in several ways, for several purposes, by different agents. It is thus a potential characteristic and its use depends on intentional acts in particular streams of behavior [13] conditioned by perception and motivation [15], body-scale [12], social signifiers and use cues [14, 16], culture and situational contexts [13]. Affordances have been little applied to research on public spaces, yet they show how aesthetics, ergonomics, symbols, social norms and use regulations, location of activities and users' needs and motivations play a role in perception and, possibly, action. Still, this research mostly focuses on visual perception, cognition and a rather utilitarian approach to practices.

Work on urban ambiances, too, highlights the mediating role of perception between the environment, action and sense making [17]. Drawing on both phenomenological and pragmatic traditions, it stresses how the experience of place takes place in comprehensive, diffuse and indivisible atmospheres, mediated, in context, by all the senses and the body, cognitively and affectively [18]. These studies have brought great insight on the role of the sensorial in architectural

and urban environments, and shown how design should integrate a subjective and active view of perception; yet, they struggle to investigate how ambiances may be instrumentalized by practitioners [17]. Shopping centers and, following their suit, town centers have been the forerunners of such endeavors [19], but, as much critical work has denounced, such instrumental use might be socio-politically pernicious.

B. *Urban design*

One prolific line of research addresses the substantive dimension of the problem. For the most part prescriptive, it has given way to an array of recommendations, especially design ones. Among them, several invoke studies of behavior-environment interactions for subsequent generalization on the role of spaces [20-23], while others depart from more formal analyses of the built environment [24-26]. The guiding notions of "good" uses and spaces behind them are often implicit and empirical data is presented in ways that not always make the connections between certain dynamics of use, spatial/situational quality and spaces' characteristics clear. Remarks on the relationship between prescriptive research and substantive knowledge, wherein several normative theories resort to empirical research to justify or give substance to *a priori* assumptions [27], are thus pertinent.

Notwithstanding these possible limitations, urban design literature reached an apparent consensus on how urban administrations may promote an intense use of public spaces. Generally, recommendations coincide with the canons of the compact city, namely with those of classical forms. They highlight how questions of scale, density, diversity and permeability, as well as the offer of things to see and do in both physically and psychosocially comfortable contexts, are relevant for public space conviviality [2]. They also show how public space use has a self-regulatory capacity that might downplay the need for more severe regulatory management practices, often criticized as exclusionary.

Research in transportation and public health on the relationship between the built environment and travel behavior or physical activity has generally agreed on the importance of density, mixed land uses, street network connectivity, design details, safety and aesthetics for the promotion of walking and bicycling [28], thus globally concurring in apologies of compact urban forms. It does not provide detailed public space design guidelines, as it still struggles in establishing causality between specific environmental features and walking/cycling. Understandably, it does not approach questions of street use. A recent exception has compared the effects different traffic reduction schemes on street use [29], but more evidence is needed before generalization.

To sum up, while this research clearly challenges the substance of urban design, it does not necessarily question existing procedures (management being the exception) – they can often be read as poignant claims for a severe rewriting of the 'function' in 'form follows function' without scraping off the dictum [30]. In spite of these achievements, there is an apparent "dead end" in its operative potential, as it struggles in dealing with the metropolitan scale, and particularly with public life in peripheral and/or splintered urban contexts. Service polarities or large public spaces devoted to leisure

seem to be the only existing propositions for these areas [4], as well as the development of compact suburban enclaves. Moreover, most of these studies conceptualize and analyze public spaces individually; each space is a single entity and both questions and solutions are sought within its boundaries. Their integration in a system, or network, of public spaces is approached in a rather non-systematized manner, besides acknowledgement of the importance of urban fabrics, density and diversity for intense public space use. In other words, *spaces* have been the privileged units of analysis. Moving beyond this ‘punctual’ understanding of public space use requires that space *and* use become units of analysis, namely research on how public space use, and use of particular spaces, makes part of people’s everyday lives.

C. Critical approaches to public space

Critical approaches in geography and urban studies have come to dominate scholarship on public spaces, as a way to evoke concerns over contemporary urban change [31], including neoliberalism, ‘class’ struggles, social cohesion, public life, commodification, privatization and homogenization [32-33]. Within it, public space as an analytical category functions in three overlapping registers, as an ideal type for democracy and civil society; as a set of criteria for assessing existing spaces and processes; and as an arena of ongoing conflict and negotiation [31]. These studies have been fundamental in exposing the political dimension of public spaces and their use and how they are epiphenomena of broader structural drivers. In that way, they have played a crucial role in denouncing certain negligence in regarding public space as a ‘mere’ design issue. Despite having achieved a rather acute ability for diagnostic critique, it seems to fall short when it comes “knowing what *does* work or *how* when it comes to intervening in public spaces” and to disregard “the demands placed on policy actors, decision-makers and actual spaces themselves” [31].

D. Public policy studies

Another set of critiques to critical approaches has come from geographers engaging with methods and theories from public policy studies [3, 34]. They have shown how the causal links between structural phenomena such as neoliberalism and the microgeographies of actual public spaces often overlook and downplay the explanatory power of concrete production processes. They have also challenged the Anglo-American bias of much of this work, thus joining recent pleas from the comparative urbanisms approach. Finally, they have also shown how analyses of public space production processes cannot be restrained to policy explicitly aiming at them (when there is any), but must also consider sectorial developments which impact them.

Work in collective action sociology and political science applied to urban policy and planning had long shown how decision-making is never linear and cannot be equated to the sole decisions of a political leader. Rather, they have shown how many solutions to apparently ‘technical’ or ‘political’ problems derive from complex interactions between myriad institutions, stakeholders and actors [35-36]; existing spaces, projects and management practices cannot be fully understood without consideration of these processes. The novelty of the

forementioned work by geographers [4, 34], which directly inspires this proposal, is that they also analyze what is actually produced and the use dynamics therein, notably in [4], a concern often absent from more strictly sociological or policy studies.

IV. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR THE RESEARCH

Following the brief presentation of some of the existing research, the wealth of possibilities for further investigations becomes evident. This particular research aims at contributing to re-placing the production of public spaces and their uses as an urban policy issue. It will do so through a comparative approach to three dissimilar processes of public space production, but which share two common characteristics central to this investigation: they are deployed at the scale of the *city*, i.e. there is a global approach to the public spaces within a given territorial jurisdiction; and use is one of the central concerns leading to their creation and implementation. The comparison of dissimilar processes in terms of policy scope, employed methods and formal outcomes is, because of this variety, expected to provide insight into the expected end result, the methodological framework.

While the *agglomération* of Lyon has become a paradigm in France on the inclusion of sociological surveys and thorough citizen participation in processes of public space production, Louvain-la-Neuve is a rare example of how a new town has explicitly conditioned urban form, land use and mobility planning to an idea of urban culture and conviviality rooted in public space use. Lisbon, in its turn, has since 2007 made public space, notably green areas, one of the pillars of its urban policy. Its concerns with stimulating use are evident in the renovation and installation of over thirty kiosks, mostly serving food and beverages, throughout the city in less than five years.

The research’s underlying assumption is that applied research leading to practical recommendations on how to produce public spaces which foster ‘good’ uses can go beyond localized project and management issues, without discarding their usefulness and appropriateness. The analysis will therefore address the issue at two levels of analysis. One, at the *city* level, will focus on the context framing the production process and on the overall approach to public spaces and the inclusion of questions of use. It will, then, imply the study of the sub-processes of program definition, conception and construction and management. The second level, that of a select number of specific public spaces, will study how the same sub-processes actually translate in particular moments of public space production, as well as existing uses and the relationship between processes and results. Existing uses will be confronted with the initial intentions of public space producers and with a set of criteria of ‘good’ public space use extracted from relevant literature.

Methods for studying the processes at both scales will include interviews with intervening actors and analysis of documentation produced during said processes. Even though ‘people can talk about their practices’ [37], the study of existing uses in specific spaces would ideally entail prolonged in-depth observations; however, practical limitations hamper its execution. Consequently, the overall description and assessment of uses will be derived from interviews with

process actors and local agents. Short periods of observation will be undertaken to raise issues for discussion in the interviews and to analyze interviewees' claims. Fieldwork will alternate between case studies, allowing for gradually deeper surveys, nourished by interim analyses of gathered data, readings and cross-fertilizations between the different areas.

V. EXPECTED RESULTS

The research should provide detailed accounts of the different processes under study, which should in turn allow for three different sets of results, all of which will contribute to a methodological framework to produce 'well used' public spaces. Firstly, it should portray how different territories have tried to move away from technocratic, functionalist planning, through categories and in-depth illustrations of what 'taking use into account' might mean both substantively and procedurally. These should, at least, constitute a novel synthesis for urban design, planning and management. By tracing back the whys of public space policies and specific project choices in each case study, it should contribute to the growing body of literature on the production of the city and its public spaces, which seeks to connect macro-scale accounts of political economies to microgeographies of specific public spaces via the mezzo-scale of urban decision making, including political and technical actors. And, finally, by its tentative analysis of ongoing use dynamics, it should bring about some notion of the 'effectiveness' of the different options made by urban administrations in each case study.

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