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► **To cite this version:**

Jérôme Monnet. PUBLIC LANDSCAPE AS COMMUNICATIVE SPACE: EXPLORING THE THIRD DIMENSION OF PUBLIC SPACE. Hajzer G., Matyus, I., Merkovity, N., Molnar, J., Stumpf, P.B., Szabo Palocz, O. Communicative Space – Political Space, Polay Elemer Alapitvany, pp.149-160, 2020. <halshs-03202043>

HAL Id: halshs-03202043

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03202043v1>

Submitted on 21 Jun 2021

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HAL Authorization

Monnet J., "Public Landscape as Communicative Space : Exploring the Third Dimension of Public Space", in: Hajzer G. & alii (eds.), *Communicative Space – Political Space, 11th Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference 2018*, University of Szeged, 2020, p.149-160

PUBLIC LANDSCAPE AS COMMUNICATIVE SPACE: EXPLORING THE THIRD DIMENSION OF PUBLIC SPACE

Jérôme Monnet

Abstract: This article proposes an analysis of urban public space as a medium of communication, based not only on the physical interconnection of different places in a city but also on the different communicative uses of the urban landscape: street signs, monumental architecture, shop displays and advertisement, street art, protests or parades, all contribute to the representation of public space as symbol of society.

Keywords: Public Space; Urban Landscape; Architecture; Public Art; Street Art; Orientation; Advertisement; Government Communication

Introduction: Landscape as the Third Dimension of Public Space

Communicative space is commonly understood in two distinct ways. On the one hand, in communication sciences, it refers to the medium through which messages and information travel: the press, the telecommunications network, advertising, political speeches, etc. In engineering and geography, on the other hand, it refers to the physical spaces that connect other types of space together, such as streets, roads, canals or railways. In the former definition, the concrete spatial dimension is often ignored in favour of an abstract conception of the media or informational sphere. Conversely, in the latter, the informational role played by physical infrastructures beyond simply connecting places together is often underestimated.

This dichotomy between, on the one hand, an abstract sphere in which human beings exchange information, and on the other hand a material space within which places are connected, emerges in conceptions of public space. Philosophers and sociologists like G. Simmel, H. Arendt or J. Habermas, among others, developed major theories on the role of spaces where people can meet to express opinions, accept differences of opinion, debate and reach consensus; in the 20th century, these theories were linked with the conception of liberal democracy. In parallel, however, an entirely separate vision of public space developed in the technocracies responsible for the planning and construction of the roads, in a context dominated by the functionalist ideology illustrated by Le Corbusier: the roads infrastructure was designed for the sole purpose of connecting areas characterised by separate activities (residence, work, consumption, leisure, etc.).

As a geographer and urban planner, my purpose here is to observe, from a distinct angle, public space as it is actually used by human beings in a wide variety of conditions

across the entire planet. My point of view, therefore, is not the idealist position of political philosophy (public space as it should be, open to all forms of expression and discussion in a perfectly democratic society), nor the functionalist standpoint of technocracy (public space as a physical means to move from one place to another). My viewpoint is more consonant with the position of the interactionist micro-sociology illustrated by Lynn Lofland (1973, 1998) from a pragmatic and constructivist perspective: public space is defined and produced by all the different practices that take place in the presence of strangers. I propose to classify this diversity into seven main categories: 1-Connection, 2-Information, 3-Commerce, 4-Conviviality, 5-Abandonment of things and beings, 6-Regulation and resistance, 7-Symbolisation.

So here it is the 2nd category of practices that will concern us. Whereas in order to identify the possible routes between places (category No. 1), we usually look at a map of the streets of a city in two dimensions, instead we will focus here on the “third dimension”: the landscapes that we see while on the move. That is why I choose to refer to “public landscape”, insofar as it is the vertical dimension of public space that informs and communicates with users. In the sections that follow, we will review the different subtypes of uses that make up this broader category.

Directing Behaviours

All of us use public landscape to situate ourselves in time and in space. Public clocks replaced the sundials of the preindustrial era for telling the time; the bells of Christian churches or the Muslim muezzin’s call to prayer punctuate the divisions of the day; bells too may mark the beginning and end of the day for workers or schoolchildren; sirens announce the arrival or departure of ships in harbour.

Bell towers, minarets and other monuments that stand out in the landscape also help us to find our way in and around the city. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, it is common for residents to give directions using Sugarloaf Mountain and the statue of Christ the Redeemer as landmarks. Below this regional scale, monumental facades, distinctive architectures, big squares and wide avenues provide valuable directional information. At an even more granular level, the architecture of buildings tells us about their function and the services they offer. At individual street scale, we obtain information from shopfronts, commercial signs, signposts and urban signage of different kinds (names of streets, neighbourhoods or monuments, maps, tourist and historical information, etc.).

Much information that we glean from the landscape has been placed there intentionally by actors who want to guide us, either for reasons of public interest (indicating how to get to a place), or for their own private interest (e.g. to attract customers, a subject we will return to later). As well as this guidance, there is almost always information on the rules of expected or forbidden behaviour for users of different kinds: one-way streets, bus or cycle lanes, traffic calming measures, pedestrian crossing zones, CCTV warnings, etc. (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Street signs in Paris (France), May 2009 (© Jérôme Monnet)

Monumentality: The Architecture of Glorification

In the previous section, we considered utilitarian uses of information via public space. Now, we examine how monumental architecture and in particular the public facades of buildings have been used to glorify the rulers that ordered their construction.

Everywhere on the planet there are examples of religious architecture placed before the public as an expression of grandeur, superiority, wealth and complexity: pyramids, stairways, towers, walls, gates and galleries, often vast and highly decorated, are part of the universal architectural vocabulary of religious places and buildings.

Some of this vocabulary is reproduced in buildings that represent military power, notably the power of conquerors whose fortresses and citadels are not solely designed to protect the troops against attack, but also to express power and to intimidate subject populations. This is true not only of peoples colonised by foreigners, but also the urban populace to whom the rulers wished to present an image of invincibility. One famous example of symbolic reversal is the “taking of the Bastille” by the revolutionaries on 14 July 1789 in Paris: the invasion of the citadel and the liberation of the prisoners are commemorated as the moment the public recognised the change in political regime.



Figure 2. City Hall in Trieste (Italy), July 2014 (© Jérôme Monnet)

From the 15th century, the cities of Europe also became the stage of the emergence of a specifically civil monumentality, through the palaces and stately homes of the social elite and the halls or assembly rooms of the merchants or guilds (fig. 2). This monumentality was further reinforced with the industrial revolution, when it glorified the wealth of owners, economic development and technological progress: railway stations in their turn became monuments, and factories took their place in the public landscape with grandiose facades punctuated with ornament, statues or towers. This trend culminated in the architecture of the skyscraper, with the race for height and technical prowess pursued by leaders of the financial or industrial sectors. It may be that the skyscraper has passed its pinnacle, since giants of 21st-century capitalism, with their focus on the information and communication technologies and services, represented by the famous GAF A (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), prefer to glorify their modernity in greener and more horizontal ways, by establishing their headquarters on high-tech campuses.

Another contributor to this list of monumental uses of public landscape to promote religious, political and/or economic powers, is the urbanism of the “tabula rasa”, new cities created either by colonial powers in conquered territories, or as part of a process of internal colonisation apparent in the example of Brasília, or equally in the French, Soviet or Chinese “new towns”. In these cases, it is the urban morphology as a whole that expresses the cosmology of the planning state.

Commerce and Services

In the previous section on the architecture of glorification, what matters is the use of public landscape to communicate power, and possibly no other function than the communication of power. This is how commerce differs in its use of public landscape: almost invariably, its communication is linked with a transaction. For a commercial entity, therefore, the

function of public landscape is to make the public aware of the availability of goods or services. In this case, we can say that there is a genuine exchange: sellers of goods or providers of services need the landscape to tell the public what they have, whereas the public uses the landscape to locate and identify whatever corresponds to its needs and wants. Public landscape thus becomes an interface between supply and demand that is expressed in different subtypes:

- *Shop signs.* Visible from a distance, these devices tell potential customers what service or goods can be found in a specific place “open to the public” (often within a building): they enable people to distinguish between a baker and a post office, a service station or a doctor’s surgery, a police station or a bar,... When brands are concentrated in certain streets in dense urban areas, they have a major impact on public landscape by adorning facades with a variety of aesthetic forms which combine words and symbols that represent the product sold, the place, or the identity of the owner (e.g. Harbour Hotel or Smith’s Pharmacy).
- *Displays:* Here, the aim is to show the merchandise in the place where it is actually sold. Material goods lend themselves most universally to attractive display (fig. 3): markets all over the world are prized by tourists for the visual presentation of food items (fruit and vegetables, fish, joints of meat or other preparations) or manufactured products (particularly craft goods). However, it is also common for stores to position a temporary display in public space to make its goods more visible to passers-by: racks of fruit, newspapers or postcards, ice cream or pancake counters. In certain respects, cafe and restaurant terraces can be seen as a means of display. In general, however, nonmaterial services are less likely to use display to communicate in public space (though one might cite the hairdressing salon that displays the different hairstyles it offers).



Figure 3. Shop fronts in Los Angeles (U.S.A.), January 2013 (© Jérôme Monnet)

- *Shop windows:* although product displays and racks can be found both inside and outside commercial and non-commercial premises, the shop window is a particular device for communication between public and non-public space, since it separates

them physically while maintaining a visual connection between them. It thus protects the interior from bad weather while maintaining the visibility of the displays from the outside. While examples of brands and displays dating back millennia can be found in different urban civilisations, the shop window is a device that was created in the context of the industrial revolution in Europe and has spread by means of globalisation, contributing in its own way to the homogenisation of the planet's public landscapes.

- *Advertising*: like the shop window, this has spread through the globalisation of public landscape, with the proliferation of information that I will describe as “remote” because, unlike the systems of communication considered previously, it is not located in the place where the service is provided. In certain cases, this display may indicate a destination and a distance (“service x can be found 5 minutes away” on foot or by car), but advertising increasingly seeks only to familiarise the public with a product without indicating where it can be found, perhaps even communicating nothing about the product, but only a brand image, an abstract value. In recent decades, the use of the urban landscape for advertising has proliferated to an impressive degree. After the spectacular concentration of billboards at iconic locations (Piccadilly Circus in London, Times Square in New York, Shibuya in Tokyo), or tunnels of advertisements lining major traffic arteries (e.g. in Mexico or on the roads into French towns), after the proliferation of lollipop signs in public spaces redeveloped for strolling, shopping, tourism and leisure, there seems to be no limit to the capacity of advertising to invade every kind of space. In the last decade, different European cities (Venice, Madrid, Paris...) have seen advertisements painted on pavements and roads, stuck on public stairways or projected onto facades. In particular, it has become common to see facades, or even entire buildings, completely “wrapped” in an advertisement, on the pretext that a small fraction of the profit would go into restoration work (fig. 4)...



Figure 4. Building advertising wrap in Venice (Italy), May 2009 (© Jérôme Monnet)

- *Tracking technologies*: apart from physical surfaces, advertising has also set out to conquer the virtual space embodied in portable information-communication devices (smartphones, tablets, connected vehicles, etc.). These days, the advertising screens located in public space can adapt the information they broadcast to the information detected in the devices of passers-by and by mining the socio-economic profiles revealed by personal data. Similarly, stores can send individualised messages to devices informing passers-by of some nearby special or promotional offer. Finally, it will soon be possible to modify the content of shop windows or displays to match the profiles of the people who pass in front of them.

It would thus seem that public art is an important priority for leaders, whether ecclesiastical or civil, or indeed economic in the case of the sponsors of the modern world. The symbolic power attributed to works displayed in public space is also confirmed in times of political change, military conquest or religious overthrow, when the newcomers desecrate pagan representations or revolutionaries tear down the statues of tyrants (kings, dictators, colonisers). Sometimes, a single artistic object crystallises a society's internal antagonisms, as illustrated by the statue of a naked Diana the Huntress adorning a fountain installed on Mexico's most prestigious avenue in 1942 at the request of the federal government, clothed in an undergarment in 1943 following pressure from a conservative Catholic movement, and then once again disrobed by the authorities 25 years later in order to demonstrate the country's modernity at the time of the 1968 Olympic Games.

Public art in urban landscape can therefore express the official order, but can also oppose or subvert it. This alternative use seems to have grown spectacularly from the beginning of the 20th century. Indeed, while graffiti expressing alternative or critical opinions have existed for millennia, it is only recently that they seem to have acquired any artistic pretensions; under the *Ancien Régime* in France, historians have shown that politico- artistic opposition mostly took the form of the clandestine circulation of songs and poetic pamphlets. Contemporary public space, on the other hand, has become a flourishing arena for a multiplicity of expression that varies in its oppositional content and artistic form: graffiti, flash mobs, satirical or critical street performances, etc. (fig. 6).

Figure 6. “White wall, red mist of anger”, anarchist slogan in Paris (France), May 2017 (© Jérôme Monnet)



In this respect, mural painting is a good example of the contemporary diversification of public art. Following the Mexican revolution of 1910, and supported by the new regime, a significant muralist movement developed to promote leftist progressivism by means of this avant-garde aesthetic. From the 1940s onwards, however, what had initially been revolutionary in both its artistic expression and its political message became an official art that lost its liberating social ambition in Mexico, but maintained its subversive charge in the United States by becoming a preferred mode of expression for the demands of the “Chicano” movement until the 1970s, before undergoing an extraordinary revival in the “Hip-Hop” movement. Since then, graffiti and tagging have spread to walls on every city in the world. The developments of the last decade show a twofold trivialisation of an art form long considered marginal and transgressive by graffiti artists and authorities alike: firstly,

the graphic aesthetic of Hip-hop has been adopted by a wide variety of “mainstream” art forms and by advertising, and secondly, the commercial art world has begun to develop a specific and profitable market for what the mass media now call “street art”, in which the element of protest has become no more than part of the sales pitch.

The Choreography of Public Movements

Whereas in international parlance “street art” usually refers to the application of graphic techniques to urban surfaces, in France the term *arts de la rue* (street arts) is used more to refer to what in English are called the “performing arts” (music, theatre, circus, acrobatics, puppets, etc.). These “street performances” which, since the end of the 20th century, have boomed in parallel with street art, would now seem to be primarily individual initiatives, but are nevertheless part of a long tradition of performance in public space, in which the stated aim is historically not so much artistic as religious (processions), military (parades) or civil (ceremonies), and more recently has taken on an economic character (advertising “flash mobs”).

These spectacles, which require a fundamental distance between the spectators who watch and the actors who produce and perform, differ from ritual subversive performances such as carnivals and charivaris, in which the urban public plays a key role. Within the framework of seasonal festivities, carnivals have long provided an opportunity for the expression of social and political opposition, which is also expressed spontaneously, not to say unpredictably, through upsurges of protest against the established order, riots and other forms of insurrection. This anti-establishment use of public space, known since ancient Rome and maintained over the centuries, has recently been theorised in the form of “Temporary Autonomous Zones” that have been promoted by movements like the “*Indignados*”, “*Occupy*” or “*Nuit Debout*”, following the “Arab Spring” of 2010, in iconic city squares around the planet (Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Tahrir in Cairo, Taksim in Istanbul, Wall Street in New York, Maïdan in Kiev, République in Paris, etc.).

Public expressions of disobedience and resistance are not necessary collective. For an Iranian woman, dressing in a certain way may be a means to protest against a dress code that she considers repressive, whereas the provocations associated with punk or grunge can be used to ridicule the tyranny of appearances. “Speaker’s Corner” in Hyde Park in London is famous for allowing anyone to harangue the crowd on any subject whatsoever; in other contexts, it can be dangerous and courageous to sing in public. However, public disobedience is not always about politics, far from it: from one city or country to another, people’s tolerance of rules and laws varies greatly, and their behaviour in public space visibly reveals this variability.

Symbolic Uses of Public Space: Iconography

In the cities of the contemporary world, the remarkable diversity in the use of public space for communication and expression easily explains why it has become a symbol of a society as a whole and the freedoms it enjoys (or lacks). In photography, in films or on the television, in postcards or tourist guides, as in advertising, public landscape represents

a city in both its topographical and monumental specificities and in its supposedly typical social composition (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Urban skyline as background for a Beauty Salon's mural in Los Angeles (U.S.A.), January 2013 (© Jérôme Monnet)



Under these circumstances, “commonplaces” die hard. The iconography of Paris, of New York or of Rio de Janeiro continues to show a landscape that has remained unchanged for a century. This representational conservatism is problematic when it comes to the symbolisation of the local population: for example, while photographs of New York have incorporated the Blackness of a significant proportion of its inhabitants, representations of public landscaping Paris, Venice, Berlin or other European cities still have a long way to go in this regard...

Conclusions: Monopolies vs. Pluralism

We have seen the extent and diversity of the use of the communicative potential of public landscape, whether to find one’s way, as a guide towards a destination, to publicise a service, to glorify or to oppose the possessors of power, etc. Public space thus appears to be an important resource and, as with all resources, certain human actors try to control or monopolise it for themselves, whether for economic profit or political power.

We can see forces that are seeking to monopolise certain dimensions of public landscape. For example, the advertising industry wants to exploit as much space as possible for brand communication, to the detriment of non-commercial uses of the urban landscape. Authorities, whether religious or political, retain a monopoly over the conception of public order and art, and seek to repress other forms of expression. More subtly, architectural conservatism can promote a museum vision of the city on the pretext of heritage protection, but in so doing prevent the emergence of new social and aesthetic forms.

Nonetheless, we find that the communicational complexity of public space allows leeway for alternative, oppositional or competing expressions. We can therefore conclude

by recognising that public space plays a fundamental role in the democratic functioning of any society, a role often threatened by populist movements that reduce democracy to an untrammelled transfer of power from the people to the “leaders”. Indeed, public landscape is by definition a means of communication where pluralism can be expressed through the coexistence of differences in both messages and in forms of expression.

Just as the advocates of democracy promote pluralism and freedom of expression in the mass media, or the separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial institutions, it is up to citizens in the broad sense – i.e. all users of public space, regardless of their status – to defend pluralism in the urban landscape by the diversity of their uses of public space.

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Acknowledgements

This paper is based on the lecture delivered at *CEECOM 2018: 11th Central and Eastern Communication and Media Conference*, Szeged, Hungary, 30 May – 1 June 2018. My thanks to the organizers for their invitation, and to LVMT for covering the cost of the translation from French to English carried out by Mr. John Crisp.

