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THE MYTH OF ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC SPACE

MIT DOSTĘPNOŚCI PRZESTRZENI PUBLICZNEJ

Abstract

The subject of this study is the characterization of public and private spaces in the urban context, their interdependence, and the consequences of their shaping over the centuries. The analysis of selected cases, both ancient and contemporary, allows us to see how the contemporaneous social and political reality of cities created the above-mentioned spaces. It also prompts the question: Is the public dimension of space and its accessibility not a great myth of modernity?

Keywords: accessibility, public and private space, urban planning

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem opracowania jest charakterystyka przestrzeni publicznych i prywatnych w kontekście urbanistycznym, ich wzajemna zależność oraz konsekwencje kształtowania na przestrzeni wieków. Analiza wybranych przykładów, zarówno starożytnych, jak i współczesnych, pozwala dostrzec, jak rzeczywistość społeczna i polityczna ówczesnych miast tworzyła powyższe przestrzenie. Skłania także do postawienia pytania: Czy publiczny wymiar przestrzeni i jej dostępność nie są wielkim mitem nowoczesności?

Słowa kluczowe: dostępność, przestrzeń publiczna i prywatna, urbanistyka

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban and social structure of the Greek polis illustrates that which is public and that which is private. The stratification of society, in a slightly modified form, accompanied the formation of public spaces also in Roman times. In the medieval period, public spaces were primarily spaces of commercial exchange, and open gutters significantly reduced their representative character. A breakthrough in the shaping of public spaces within the complex existing urban fabric came with the rebuilding of Rome initiated by Pope Sixtus V and the construction of Piazza del Popolo. The strategy of connecting functionally and compositionally important points with wide, radial arteries constituting a network of connections superior to 'ordinary' streets can be seen in the urban planning of the Enlightenment and such layouts as the Washington plan and the Paris redevelopment plan. At the end of the twentieth century, in addition to representative districts of the bourgeoisie, vast industrial districts, and districts of the urban working-class poor were created. In opposition to the development of the latter, Modernism proposed a completely different way of shaping and defining public spaces in the city. The large-scale open spaces, so typical of many of the world's cities rebuilt and expanded in the twentieth century, led to a situation in which some theorists began to look back to historical models with a certain nostalgia.

At present, commercialization, politicization, and privatization constitute a significant threat to the existence and development of public spaces. Increasingly, the form of public spaces is driven by a culture of money, free-market play, competition, the aims and rationale of entrepreneurs, and the ambitions of local authorities. It is questionable whether the above-mentioned individuals, regardless of their good intentions, can build and maintain public spaces equal to European historic centers. On the other hand, it may be noted that in totalitarian regimes the growth of the public sector at the expense of the private sector led to a blurring of the very concept of public space.¹

2. PUBLIC, PRIVATE, ACCESSIBLE

The definition included in the Charter of Public Space² adopted by the 3rd Congress of Polish Urban Planning in 2009 emphasizes that the public character of space is determined by the collective way in which it is used. It defines it as “a good used collectively, purposefully shaped by man, by social principles and values – serving to meet the needs of local and supra-local communities.”

When defining public space, it is not possible to omit the definition of private space. Their coexistence is a necessary condition.

The terms “private” and “public” appear in classical Latin and still function today in many Indo-European languages. In Latin, *privatus* means: private, being someone’s personal property, belonging to one person, one’s own; private, non-official, not public, not official.³ In contrast, *publicus* means: belonging to all, common, public, universal, state; official; open, public, obvious.⁴

The dictionary *Słownik Etymologiczny Języka Polskiego* indicates that the term “public” originates from *populus* meaning “people,” in opposition to “private.”⁵

Public space is a subject of interest of several academic disciplines such as geography, urban planning, architecture, sociology, psychology, political science, etc. Taking into account the complexity and comprehensiveness of the issue, this paper refers to the trend in which public space is perceived as a holistic system, which is subject to specific regularities that cannot be deduced from the knowledge of the properties that govern its individual components.

This holistic approach is presented, among others, by Małgorzata Dymnicka who defined public space as a system of open and generally accessible places within a city, that function as a whole. She includes the city center with its grid of streets and squares, set of important

¹ L. Krier, *Architektura wspólnoty*, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2011, p. 125.

² *Karta przestrzeni publicznej przyjęta przez III Kongres Urbanistyki Polskiej Towarzystwa Urbanistów Polskich i Związku Miast Polskich*, <http://www.tup.org.pl/download/KartaPrzestrzeniPublicznej.pdf> (access: 30.06.2021).

³ *Privatus* [in:] *Elektroniczny Słownik Łaciny Średniowiecznej w Polsce*, <https://lexicon.scriptor.es.pl/pl/lemma/PRIVATUS> (access: 30.06.2021).

⁴ *Publicus* [in:] *Elektroniczny Słownik Łaciny Średniowiecznej w Polsce*, <https://lexicon.scriptor.es.pl/pl/lemma/PUBLICUS> (access: 30.06.2021).

⁵ A. Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, Kraków 1927, pp. 446–447.

buildings, monuments, and greenery. It is also a space open to the most varied forms of daily and festive contact and behavior.⁶

The public character of space is determined by the type of accessibility, which is discussed by theorists in many aspects. According to S. Benn and G. Gaus,⁷ apart from physical accessibility, there is also accessibility to activity (the possibility to participate in open public events), accessibility to information (the city's information infrastructure available and readable to all), and accessibility to resources (possibility to use a space's potential as technical, recreational and social infrastructure). Thusly understood public space should be characterized by unrestricted or equally organized access to space, activity, information, and resources. However, this is an ideal that may have little to do with reality. There is also a paradox in the assumption that public spaces can be used or accessed by all interested parties. In many cases, one activity eliminates another, thereby leading to exclusion and the appropriation of the space in question. One example that illustrates this situation is the placement of café gardens in a city square, which in consequence excludes users who are not their customers.

3. MILETUS – DIVISION INTO THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

The plan of Miletus by Hippodamos⁸ is the first known comprehensive urban design that set the course for later Greek cities. The architect divided the city into areas that corresponded to the relation of ownership: private, public, and religious, while also taking into account the distinction of zones related to the class of inhabitants (warriors, craftsmen, farmers). This urban organization was an image of the social structure of the polis, which was home to many different strata and groups of citizens.

Crucial to the whole project was a complex of three agoras that formed the main public space and divided it into three districts with residential buildings. All the most important public buildings such as temples, theatre, bouleuterion, or gymnasium, were planned in their vicinity.

The implementation of the project by Hippodamos was stretched in time and lasted from between the fifth and fourth centuries BC until the Roman era, the second century AD, when successive buildings, including public buildings, were erected, including public structures.⁹

⁶ M. Dymnicka, *Przestrzeń publiczna a przemiany miasta*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2013, p. 53.

⁷ I.S. Benn, G.F. Gaus, *The public and the private: concepts and action*. In: *Public and private in Social Life*, Croom Helm, London, pp. 3–27. After: D. Mantey, *Wzorzec miejskiej przestrzeni publicznej w konfrontacji z podmiejską rzeczywistością*, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 2019, p. 26.

⁸ Hippodamos of Miletus – architect, student of Pythagoras. He is credited with creating the model of a Greek (Hellenistic) city with a raster layout of the internal structure with zoned functions and freeform fortifications surrounding the city, adapted to the local topography.

⁹ J. Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and The Ancient World*, MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, London England, 1988, p. 86. After: Z. Paszkowski, *Historia idei miasta*, hogben, Szczecin 2015, p. 28.

4. AGORA – AVAILABILITY

The life of an ancient Greek was divided between the family – *oikos* or domestic life – and social and political life – *bios politikos*. In this way, two spheres of activity emerged: the private and the public. The public sphere, as opposed to the private one, was the area of civic freedom. Aristotle defined *bios politikos* as an aspect of action and dialogue, hence the essence of the *polis* was conversation, dialogical reflection that allowed one to rise above existential limitations.¹⁰

Social and cultural life took place in the space of the agora. It was usually surrounded by porticoes, temples, and official buildings (e.g. the agora in Athens). It was an element of the spatial structure, closely connected with the rest of the city. The agora was complemented by acropolises, theatres, gymnasia, stadiums, and academies, which developed a complex system of urban public spaces outside the city walls.

However, women, slaves, workers, children, metics, or barbarians were barred from cultural and political life. Women participated in religious rites, but their situation in terms of civil rights differed little from that of slaves. Their social role resulted from the division into home and city. The woman's place was at home, the man's outside the house – in public space.¹¹ Urban order was guarded by inspectors – *agoranomoi*.¹²

In contrast to public spaces, Athenian homes were modest. Such a state of affairs was desirable at the time, as citizens were required to give money for public purposes, discouraging them from spending funds for private purposes. In this way, public values were placed above private values and the gap between the rich and the poor was reduced.¹³

Consequently, the accessibility of the Greek agora was, by modern standards, illusory, for only a portion of the population had access to social, political, and cultural life. The polis gave privileges to a few and obligations to all. There is no denying that there is a crack in the idealized image of the Greek agora.

5. REBUILDING OF ROME – THE MODERN CITY

Before the reconstruction initiated during the pontificate of Sixtus V, Rome consisted of many extended and fragmented areas. The churches that were pilgrimage destinations were not seamlessly connected, and access to some of them was difficult. Hence the Pope's decision to adapt the city to pilgrims. It was dictated by ecclesiastical, economic as well as political motives and irreversibly changed the image of the city.

Sixtus V's wish was to make Rome "one great holy place." The plan was clear: there were to be seven major churches to be visited by the faithful on a one-day pilgrimage. Domenico Fontana's design looked to simply connect the various holy places by road, taking into account most of the existing road sections. The direction of the routes was

¹⁰ M. Nowak, P. Pluciński, Problemy ze strefą publiczną. O pożytkach z partykularnych rozstrzygnięć [in:] M. Nowak, P. Pluciński (eds.), *O miejskiej sferze publicznej*, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2011, p. 16.

¹¹ M. Dymnicka, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 39–40.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 44–45.

maintained regardless of the difficulties encountered. Buildings were demolished, valleys were filled in, and hills were leveled.¹⁴

The authors of the plan were also aware that the new streets, crowded with people, made it possible to build a large number of houses and shops, which the insiders took advantage of. The Pope's sister, Donna Camila, built several shops near the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, which she later rented out at a large profit.¹⁵

Sixtus V saw new opportunities and pursued his policy with unprecedented consistency. He adapted Rome to new needs and new recipients, making it accessible to everyone. He developed a system of public spaces that made the city attractive and its formality delights to this day.

Rome had no single, overarching urban center. City squares were hidden behind side streets¹⁶ and used as markets or places for carnival celebrations. The pope supported the construction of new, formal spaces and did not always situate them next to churches. To this end, he left numerous large vacant lots for later projects. He also placed obelisks at points where, over the centuries, the most splendid city squares were built. The last of the four was placed at the northern entrance to the city, in the place of intersection of three circulation axes that directed pilgrims inside Rome. Two hundred years later, the present Piazza del Popolo took shape around this spot.¹⁷

6. PIAZZA DEL POPOLO – FORMALITY

The reconstruction of the Piazza del Popolo, by Giuseppe Valadier, was based on the Baroque plan for the modernization of Rome. A visitor would pass through the Porta del Popolo and then two twin churches would appear. They made an impression as if they were guarding the three main arterials of the city. In the middle stood the aforementioned Egyptian obelisk. On the left was the Renaissance façade of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, which belonged to the Augustinian monastery. The high walls and small buildings and animal watering places gave it the appearance of a typical suburb. This was the state that Valadier found in 1794.

The architect demolished insignificant structures while leaving monumental buildings. He transformed the gardens on Pincio Hill, which belonged to the monastery, into a public park, which he connected to the square by winding ramps. On the hill, he designed an observation terrace, which became a part of the architecture of the neighboring buildings. Several residential buildings and green areas were also created. To improve circulation, he marked out two semicircles, which determined the transverse axis and formed the final shape of the square.¹⁸

Piazza del Popolo is proof of the complexity of the system of public spaces in Rome, not only in the scale of the whole city, but also in its elements. Great emphasis was placed on their formality with no regard to construction and maintenance costs. This also shows how much

¹⁴ S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń czas i architektura*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1968, pp. 119–120.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

¹⁶ Piazza Navona, for example.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 124–127.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 179–183.

the character of the entrance to the city has changed: from that of fortifications to an open, rich, awe-inspiring space that invites to choose one of the three roads that lead into Rome.

7. GREAT PLAN OF ROME – NETWORK OF PUBLIC SPACES

The complexity of the grid of public spaces is reflected in the eighteenth-century “Grand Plan of Rome” by Giambattista Nolli. The map was published in 1748 in the form of twelve engraved copper plates in which a drawing of the city was carved. It was one of the first to be oriented to the north and not, as before, to the east. It presents Rome in surprising detail and with unprecedented precision. Consequently, the cartographer indicated two thousand places of cultural importance.



Ill. 1. Giambattista Nolli, Fragment of *La Nuova Topografia di Roma* (1748), fragment of plate 5/12. Source: *La nuova topografia di Roma Comasco* [in:] Earth Sciences & Map Library, University of California, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/maps/nolli.html> (access: 30.06.2021).

He marked the private space and the mass with a dense hatch. He left the public space, inside and outside, unfilled. He distinguished vegetation and pavements with medium density hatching. In this way, Nolli did not separate the inner and outer spaces, only the private and the public.

The separation of public space embodies the idea of understanding the city as a series of interiors (streets, squares, courtyards, public buildings) rather than as a set of structures.

Private buildings were not fully separated either, as their courtyards and arcades turned out to be accessible to everyone, though probably under the watchful eye of the owner.

The map also includes church interiors and public buildings in the detailed plan. As previously mentioned, the space of the ground floors is filled with white, while their structures are defined by a dense grey color. Thanks to the applied graphic design, the internal space of the buildings was incorporated into the network of streets, squares, and markets. This fact is not surprising, as the public buildings of that time were mostly open to the public and free of charge. If a fee was due, it was a symbolic amount.¹⁹

8. MODERNISM – THE NEW FACE OF PUBLIC SPACES

Modernist urban planning arose as a protest against the crowded, dark, and stuffy residential development of industrial cities. The idea of tall buildings spaced far apart, freeing up land for spacious green areas, was undoubtedly progressive and promising.

In the first half of the twentieth century, many projects were implementing these assumptions. One of them was the plan for the redevelopment of Paris, Plan Voisin, by Le Corbusier, which suggested demolishing the existing historic buildings in favor of a new district. The architect attempted to reverse the proportions between public and private space. The project is a kind of an antithesis of a compact city with a continuous structure of buildings, in which historical heritage is the supreme value.

Two-dimensional drawings based on the figure-background scheme revealed the fundamental difference between the traditional historical fabric and modernist assumptions. In the case of historical cities, the figural shaping of public spaces can be observed. In contrast, the modernist plans showed the figural character of buildings, which resulted in undeveloped spaces. Despite noble intentions, this procedure led to the destruction of connections between individual elements of the city, breaking the continuity of spaces and dehumanizing their scale.²⁰ Wayne W. Cooper, basing his research on the analysis of Modernist buildings, put forward a far-reaching argument that space as a negative form had isolating properties for the local community.²¹

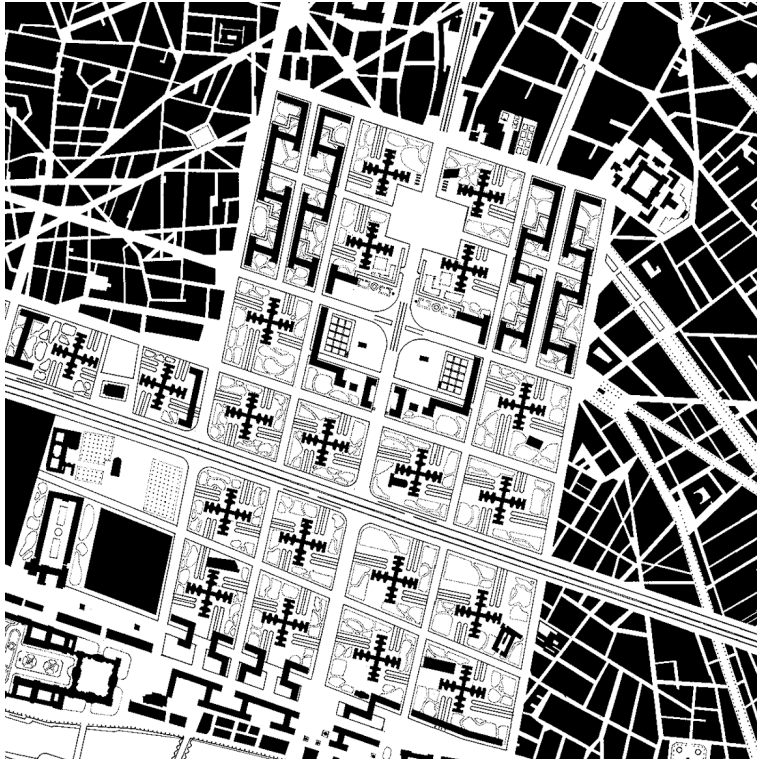
The extent to which proportions have been inverted is demonstrated by the example of the Modernist buildings of the Santurce district located in the largest district of Puerto Rico, San Juan. In the second half of the twentieth century, the city authorities commissioned a preliminary study for an urban plan from Leon Krier. The project involved dividing a large block of flats into smaller neighborhoods complete with plazas to distinguish and symbolize their mutual independence, and their services and infrastructure to ensure self-sufficiency.

¹⁹ One example would be the *thermae*, which were already available to everyone in ancient times. The usual entrance fee to the baths for men was a copper of the smallest denomination, the so-called *quadrans*, (1/4 of an *ace* and 1/64 of a *denarius*). Sometimes women paid twice as much, but children, soldiers, and sometimes slaves enjoyed free entry. Consequently, they brought together men, women, slaves and freedmen, poor and rich. K. Ashenburg, *Historia brudu*, Bellona, Warszawa 2017, p. 31.

²⁰ A. Palej, *Współczesna problematyka przestrzenna miast i jej historyczne tło* [in:] K. Bojanowski [et al.], *Elementy analizy urbanistycznej*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 1998, p. 37.

²¹ W.W. Cooper, *The Figure/Grounds*, *Cornell Journal of Architecture* nr 2, 1983, p. 42. After: M. Wąsowicz, *Wybrane współczesne i historyczne inspiracje Mapą Rzymu G. Nolli'ego*, *Środowisko mieszkaniowe*, 2015, no. 15, pp. 165–166.

The privatized areas were divided into parcels of traditional size and matched with existing buildings. New buildings, ranging from two to three stories, were designed to complement the resulting quarters. Consequently, the project proposed a radical reduction of public space (between the blocks) from 80% to 32% of the total site area.²²



III. 2. A fragment of Plan Voisin by Le Corbusier highlights the contrast between the contained, traditional urban fabric and the Modernist vision of the city. Source: Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris, 1925 [in:] Sixten Sason in wonderland, <https://sixtensason.tumblr.com/post/55731532475/le-corbusiers-plan-voisin-for-paris-1925> (access: 30.06.2021).

9. NEW URBANISM – RETURNING TO ANCIENT PATTERNS

In response to the Modernist urbanism that began to overtake cities around the world, an urban renewal movement called New Urbanism emerged. It was formed in the 1990s in the United States. Its founders were American urban planners Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. They attempted to find solutions that referenced the traditional city model with a clear division into public and private spaces, based on community values. They refer to the neo-traditional concepts of the city by Jane Jacobs, Leon Krier, and Christopher Alexander.²³

²² L. Krier, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

²³ M. Dymnicka, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

The postulates of the Charter of New Urbanism²⁴ indicate that public spaces should be the factors in shaping the city. It is crucial to integrate their functions with particular districts and zones (not isolated in distant, mono-functional complexes), to define streets and public spaces as places of common use, and to locate public buildings in key locations to strengthen community identity and democratic culture.

10. CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the question posed at the outset, we can risk making a statement that the public dimension of space and its accessibility is a great myth of modernity.

In antiquity, cities were hermetic and there were clear social roles associated with the way they functioned in public spaces. Baroque Rome opened its gates and its accessibility became a necessary element because it was crucial to the economy of the city, whose growth depended on the presence of pilgrims. Consequently, the formality of the public spaces of the Eternal City took on new importance and, until modern times, constitutes its efficient circulation system. At present, the scale of accessibility has changed, as witnessed by the inaccessible courtyards of private houses, which in the eighteenth century were included in the network of public spaces. Public space, as a system of open and publicly accessible places within the city, functioning as a whole, may shrink or expand. Not as a result of a change in its physical size but as a result of a change in accessibility.

Modernism rejected the principle of shaping cities that had been developed for centuries, changing the meaning of architecture and reversing the proportions between the public and the private. This led to a crisis of urbanity and a desire to return to the tradition of ancient models in public space design. The lesson learned so far has proved invaluable, and a further evolution of forms is inevitable. Given the challenges of the present day, attention to scale and the type of space is essential. What becomes crucial is the balance between public and private, their mutual relations, as well as the mechanisms of “making public” and “privatization.”

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