

ARCHITEKTURA

CZASOPISMO TECHNICZNE
TECHNICAL TRANSACTIONS

ARCHITECTURE

WYDAWNICTWO

POLITECHNIKI KRAKOWSKIEJ

3-A/2010

ZESZYT 6

ROK 107

ISSUE 6

YEAR 107

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OBSERVING THE LIFE IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE

PATRZĄC NA ŻYCIE W EUROPEJSKICH PRZESTRZENIACH PUBLICZNYCH

Abstract

This paper explores public spaces found in three distinct European cities. It illustrates how one experiences the spatial sequence of a city, what attracts people to a city, and how new types of space will arrive from new needs. Descriptions of public space are collections of personal observations while living and traveling in Europe. The goal of this discussion is to discover positive aspects of a city's character by identifying varying types of spatial arrangements and uses. Observations also take into account the mode of transportation used, the process of way finding, and the phenomenon of changing demands over time.

Keywords: public space, Europe, urban design, quality of life, way finding

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł zajmuje się rozważaniami na temat przestrzeni publicznych w trzech różnych miastach europejskich – Krakowie, Sienie i Paryżu. Pokazuje, jakiego typu doświadczenia oferowane są obecnie przez miejskie sekwencje przestrzenne, co przyciąga ludzi do miasta i jak nowe potrzeby wpływać będą na pojawianie się nowych typów rozwiązań. Zaprezentowane tutaj autorskie obserwacje poczynione zostały w czasie podróży i pobytów w Europie.

Celem artykułu jest odkrycie pozytywnych cech charakterystycznych dla poszczególnych miast poprzez identyfikację różnych typów organizacji przestrzennej i sposobów użytkowania. Przedstawione obserwacje biorą też pod uwagę dostępność środków komunikacji masowej, sposoby poruszania się po mieście czy inaczej "odnajdywania drogi" oraz zjawisko zmieniania się w czasie ludzkich potrzeb.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń publiczna, Europa, projektowanie urbanistyczne, jakość życia, "znajdowanie drogi"

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Cities structure our everyday life, providing space to meet our needs as human beings. Over time they transform to satisfy new ideas. I would like to share my observations of this phenomenon through my personal experience of such living, breathing, and ever-changing spaces. From my travels I will describe a variety of European public spaces, how they serve multiple users, and what the future may hold for these places.

On arrival to a city many things rush to my sub-consciousness. Observations are made internally, not to be fully realized until they are brought up in conversation or reflected upon in notes and sketches. The scale of the city is the first problem I try to understand. Depending on transportation this may be more or less difficult. By plane one can grasp the city visually but not understand its scale physically, and by train one can feel the distance physically while not understanding its composition as a whole. While flying into Paris at night I could view a large bump in the relative flatness of the city. Only later could I see the formation from a human perspective, and walk its terrain to realize that it was part of the city named Montmartre. From that point I could orient myself knowing that Montmartre is in the Northern part of the city and use its location to help guide me to other landmarks. So the process is cyclical, beginning with simple observations of the size, and shape of things.

Finding certain program in a city requires a similar process of thinking. I'm realizing more that in European cities the main square is the meeting place, a great starting and ending point on a journey. At this scale I'm imagining the user on foot trying to satisfy specific needs like finding food. Visitors and citizens alike use the market as a starting node to meet friends, orient themselves, and begin their adventure. Visitors will do more exploring simply because they are unaware of the location of amenities. Restaurants take advantage of this by locating themselves precisely where the journey begins in the square. I think of it as a smart and obvious business model. As I visit more cities I gain an insight that tells me to explore outside of the square. Each city is similar in that way. Now when I need a meal I look to the main public space as a springboard to launch me towards more secluded, and local eateries. Then the main square serves again as a way finder to whatever is next in the adventure.

Each city possesses a certain character as well. I find that's the most intuitive process of experiencing space in a city. No two cities are alike because each has a way of drawing your eye up to a parapet, or heightening your hearing through the sounds of footsteps on a hard surface. Simply walking is the best way to familiarize yourself with the personality of the city. By walking you encounter space first hand, and can measure distances both visually and physically. Each step you create a memory of place to quickly build a mental map of the city. I find it interesting how people recognize streets or landmarks in different place to help them way find. Each city has a unique way to direct the pedestrian. For instance, I was able to walk around Rome confidently only because well known landmarks terminate the avenues. This way of traveling from point to point is somewhat exclusive to cities with large street organizations. In Kraków I've learned street names to help me navigate through public space. As I spend more time in the Old City I'm learning to visually see the city in plan view. So rather than relying on a numerical address I can begin to describe a location as one block North, and two West. This is the difference between reading solid and void in the city fabric and is the most wonderful sequence of European public space.

It seems like this obvious arrangement of European cities with a main square that acts as the heart would become monotonous or overused. I've found the opposite is true because each city displays a unique spatial arrangement. Can this slight variation in city planning successfully serve different types of cities and users? We can look at three very distinct spatial organizations from cities varying in scale, topography, and population to answer this question.

Kraków, a mid-sized European city, boasts one of the largest squares on the continent. The Main Square is truly the heart of the city, not only because its central location, but because one can use it as a common meeting place. Luckily, Kraków is compact enough that people feel comfortable walking the distance of the Old Town. Kraków introduces us to the very formal Magdeburg Law. The streets are raised to one common height and extend from one another perpendicularly. Those strict guidelines divide each face of Kraków's Rynek with three streets; one left, one centered, and one right. The variation in the Southeast comes as a result of the original trade route now known as ul. Grodzka. The diagonal direction of the street in the regular grid acts as a horizontal landmark. The interior of the city serves as a node for

business, tourist, and social activities. The well defined perimeter of the Planty acts as a threshold, and serves the public as a park. A variety of public spaces enlivens the sequence of moving through the city. A richness and diversity of program in the city, clear organization of space, and space reserved solely as a park enhance the quality of life for both visitors and citizens.

Siena, Italy developed on the ridges of the Tuscan landscape. An internationally acclaimed campo serves as the main square, and streets grow organically from the center while riding on the crest of the hills. The campo's uniqueness comes from its irregularity. Undulations in the hills create gently moving streets, and a fan shaped square that slopes towards the town hall tower. The seemingly natural organization of Siena is comparable to a labyrinth but stretched linearly. Street names aren't well known, only the memory of sloping streets, and bends in the urban fabric are your guide. The lack of clear organization only helps the mysterious character of the city. Views of distant steeples and towers help to lead, but generally Siena is a tightly knit arrangement of narrow streets carved from the city fabric. Siena's small scale, like Kraków's, eases the walk ability of the city. Tourists and citizens alike are prone to wonder the streets locating restaurants, cafés, and small parks littered throughout the city.

Lastly, I will describe Paris, France, a much larger city with a very different spatial arrangement. Paris is vast, and its extents are not walk able like the previous two cities. Despite the Montmartre district, Paris is a relatively flat city. History shaped Paris' urban fabric at varying points. Paris grew outwardly from an island in the middle of the Seine River. As time passed the city expanded, was remodeled when Napoleon cut axial avenues, and unified with Le Notre's Tuileries. As a visitor in Paris the best way to get from point to point is not an intuitive journey like in smaller cities. Here the underground metro directs your journey. Metro stations placed at important meeting points across the city create a network layered beneath the street arrangement. Traveling on the metro confuses the senses because there are no visual cues to landmarks, and lacks a sense of physical distance. If one would like to explore the city it would be best to grab a metro map to carefully plan routes to specific destinations. The largeness of the city makes the metro a necessity, and despite its flaws in spatial experience it is a successful system. The metro allows all Parisians to commute further distances in less time. As the future progresses we may see more of these kinds of trades in quality for efficiency.

From the three cities previously analyzed it is easy to say that successful public spaces come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and scales. The character of each city develops from the experience of moving through its public spaces making each city unique in terms of way finding and exploring. The Magdeburg layout of Kraków, organic sprawl of Siena, and the long triumphal axis of Paris are all successful examples of providing the public with free space to live out their daily lives. One can shop, eat, talk, watch, rest, and simply participate in society equally in each city even though each is so drastically different. This observation reveals that humans are most comfortable in spaces that allow them to interact with other humans. The recent tendency of mass housing is proving that quality of life requires this interaction, and that the isolation felt in these designs are spatial problems. What does this mean for future public space?

I propose we look to the past. By looking and analyzing how a medieval city can still serve current needs will provide us with new answers. An urban fabric with mostly solid and little void typically resonates with our human understanding of space. It's an easy diagram to understand, and explore without getting lost. While the abstract thought of this plan is rooted in history the contemporary approach to it should respond to current thoughts. This way of building upon the past provokes a dynamic quality of what is inherently human spatially, while providing new amenities. New arrangements will come as a result from studying the past, and as discussed earlier there is no clear right or wrong in city planning as long as the city unites its citizens.

People need a reason to be in the city so our cities should provide homes, parks, entertainment, and food. With these basic functions satisfied we can dream of new needs. Our current culture gives us lots of insight into new activities that have only recently surfaced. Much like the early 20th century when film and television created a need for spaces in the city to watch movies, today we have new technologies that need space in our cities. The problem of the automobile will continually be faced; how to store them, how to give them space to maneuver, how to limit their access. Today the internet so easily connects us to the rest of the world. As a result many new spaces have become available like internet cafes. Even regular

cafes and restaurants try to provide this service as an attraction. Not only do we need space for new technology, we also need space for new activities. Special space should be dedicated to Generation X to practice their alternative sports. A "skateboarding plaza" recently opened in Kettering, Ohio in the United States. This business idea gives skateboarders the freedom to practice in a real street setting and has rentable building space as well. Here skateboarders are the main focus, and then leasable space generates an income. Not only is this a new idea of combining program but a new way of thinking about how people use space. Here vertical, diagonal, and concaved surfaces are as important as flat ones. Pedestrians enjoy the space as well because watching the action is a new form of people watching that typically takes place at street side cafes. I believe these bold ideas will dynamically shape the public spaces of the future.

We can enhance the quality of life, and contribute contemporary ideas to society only after careful examination of the past. By analyzing three spatially diverse cities I've found that what makes a city great is subjective. Cities of varying size and layout can equally excite, enliven, and unify its inhabitants. Spaces designed for resting, playing, reading, exercising, and socializing give a city its greatness. This wide range of activities taking place in modern cities gives us opportunities to design new types of public space. We look back to these cities that work well so that we can move forward, ever-increasing the happiness of citizens and visitors.