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# **Coronavirus, city, architecture. Prospects of the architectural and urban design**

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**Urban Space as Medium and Tool to share Narratives**

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Abstract

Understanding the already existing space as socio-cultural dimension, cultural capacity and atmosphere that can be approached in many different ways, is connected to the idea of using space as a medium that opens up discussions, fosters social connections and is able to reveal socio-political contexts, cooperative processes of planning, production and change, questions of everydaylife, the design and use of space throughout the past and visions towards the future of our cities. Changing the perspective on space and using it as a medium and tool for knowledge creation is addressed through the concept of cooperative architecture. This concept rethinks and reactivates the architectural and urban design discipline as social, creative and common practice as well as it defines new roles within the discipline and at the intersection with other disciplines.

Keywords

Reuse — Cultural capacity — Inventive methods — Design modes

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**Raising questions in a new context**

Thinking about how space in an urban environment is able to react to the users requirements and how we have to shape it in future to be able to permit enough room, flexibility, distance and possibilities for encounters, have been part of the big questions of architects and urban designers for centuries: How can many people live and work together and how should living, working and space for leisure be organized spatially? How can the wish for autonomy and privacy within an urban context, of having an own little island, be brought together with the necessary exchange in public space that prevents us from isolation and a high segregation of the society. How do we have to imagine the very basic concept of coming together, the “agora” of the Greeks – a common place for cultural production, political organization and social togetherness in the current Everyday life of our spaces?

All these questions have a new topicality and have received a rising and much more outreaching, also public attention across the world. The Corona Pandemic is forcing us to rethink the way in which we live together as well as how we as architects and urban designers act and create space – «addressing the intertwining of the systemic and the personal» (Roberts 2020, p. 10) anew. It asks for spatial ideas to distance people from each other, closing or sharply restricting many unsecure localities and events, especially the working places, but also others, that allowed unexpected encounters to happen (smaller cultural institutions, café's, sport clubs, workshops etc.). Employees are forced to work from home and to organize life in a different way, which rapidly has shown social differences through spatial division and distribution; a dissimilar access

**Fig. 1**

Filmic parts – atmospheres of the three spaces. Photo by Riccarda Cappeller.

to open spaces, mobility, and private refuges, just naming some of the constraints leading to a more and more segregated society. So, looking at the current challenges on a long term view, how do we have to design urban space and which kind of urban action is needed?

To answer, at first we have to reveal the very basic understanding of urban space as a place of physical encounter that especially in the digitalized network society of today, which Manuel Castells describes (2005) has become indispensable. Topics like the complexity and multiplicity of social and spatial relations (Boeri 2004), shown in the mix of heterogeneous aspects, programs and user groups (Cappeller in Schröder and Diesch 2020), as well as a spontaneous encounter of people in the Everyday, have to be highlighted more than ever as positive. They provide a huge variety of social, economic and cultural resources for their citizens, the “homo urbanus”, as the Filmmakers Ila beka and Louise Lemoine name the species. Working with these parameters to foster new connections, allows our spaces to adapt to changing requirements and grow and learn together with us – continuously transforming. It is connected to the aim of creating a space that reveals a philosophical idea of a democracy, which looks for political equality, allowing the same conditions – in living, working, education and access to public institutions – for everybody (Allen 2020).

### Unforseeable use in existing urban Spaces

As Jane Jacobs states «old materials are needed to reinvent the cultural life of innercity environments and seen to resist high speed capitalisation.» (1963) The existing spaces in our cities, the leftovers from a historic past and often former industrial sites within the city centre are important places to test out programmes and ideas and create new linkages, working on multiple scales and topics in relation to their neighbourhoods, fostering possibilities for unexpected events and allowing a creative engagement and inhabitation of space to take place, change and further develop the spaces through the people involved. Their material substance works as integrating element, as it brings together memories and stories keeping it alive and creating new kinds of communities for the Future that go beyond the material. They are *Lived Spaces*, socially influenced

and subjectively perceived spaces that gain their significance through practice and use in the everyday (Lefebvre 1974), were re-cycled, re-used and interpret in new ways that don't represent but enact the dependency of the social and the material. In this point I completely agree to and still find very relevant the statement of André Corboz in his article *Old Buildings and Modern Functions*, published in 1978. He states:

«If the work of a building [here understood as spatial situation] is considered from the start as a product in constant development created as part of a programme with an aim in mind, and provided with a cause of adaptability, the reanimator [architect or urban designer] is then dealing with objects open to modernisation». (1978, p.77).

Scaling this up, the idea of objects open to modernization becomes urban space that changes and further develops, which is not realized in a before and after but in a process which has to be read in its different facets and modes of production. It is a social, political and spatial process, an atmosphere and cultural capacity allowing and producing interrelations in-between the live and space matters always under construction as time goes on (Massey 2005).

Proposing this increasing attention to already existing spatial situations, their context and the to it bound communities, I follow the general idea of contextualism from the 1970s and relational theories that lead to a situated knowledge, a strongly contextually routed notion of space that reads and interprets the layers of palimpsest-spaces (Corboz 1983) before designing or realizing space. There are many spaces where one can see this kind of process, many spaces where different user groups merge and produce different kinds of happenings and many spaces where old buildings are re-used to produce something new. Nevertheless I would argue that there are very few spatial situations where all these aspects come together and are bound not only to a changed attitude of architects and urban designers, really engaging in situ and working with what they found in the place, but also to the actions happening in place, the spatial practice and active engagement of people living, working and being there, based on alternative models of ownership and organization that relate to a broader and cultural dimension of space connected to the will of its inhabitants to transform and change it.

### Introducing "Cooperative Architecture" as concept

Cooperative Architecture as conceptual idea brings together these multiple topics of the city and through the analysis of selected projects shows a different attitude in the social and spatial design and production as well as an understanding of space as ongoing process and sequence of situations that allow spatial differentiations. Derived from the latin "*cooperor, cooperaris*", whereas "*co-*" means *together* and "*opperari*" to be occupied by or work on something, it points out the active doing of architecture as an act of collaboration and co-creation. Another in the word inherent meaning is "*opus*", understood as a musical, artistic, literary or scientific work, a labour or composition – an abstract, conceptual but at the same time interpretative and intuitive compilation of knowledge. It refers to a work of art or product of labour, with a connection to the artistic that can re-view the practice of designing. Architecture is defined as the art and science of designing and making buildings or the style of a building itself. "*Opus est*", means it is necessary, so the act of co-creation in thinking and projecting space becomes compulsory.

Referring to this reinforces the mutual dependency of the social and the material, its visual experience and sensory perception as well as its “*Poesis*”, the mentally reflected theory and “*Praxis*”, the through action expressed concept or spatial and material realization, Aristoteles defined. Both have to be re-defined and re-integrated into the architects and designers education, which can be done, and this also lies in the nature of the wording, through artistic and interdisciplinary approaches provoking a change of perspective and a re-discovering and new invention of creative solutions and situation-bound ideas. So what is needed now is a shift of architectural and urban design (Nilsson 2013) towards an attitude connecting analysis and design, theory and practice more deeply and reflexively, highlighting a performative understanding of space. A shift that tries out new tools and modes of designing to propose innovative, promising, maybe even utopic ideas – turning the existing upside down. It is a new appropriation of space that allows improvisation (Dell 2019) and experimentation (Marguin 2019), the merging of bottom-up and top down strategies, temporary and enduring spatial interventions and the realization of frameworks allowing flexible and at the same time sustainable spaces in constant development.

Through looking at three exemplary spaces; the *Exrotaprint* in Berlin (Germany), *Granby four streets* in Liverpool (United Kingdom) and *Can Batllo* in Barcelona (Spain), my ongoing research on cooperative architecture reflects on spaces of multiplicity forming a spatial translation of a contemporary understanding of democracy and the changing role of architects and urban designers, addressing the complexity of thinking, projecting and realizing such composite urban situations. It opens up to the academic and the practice but also to people beyond the discipline, a broader public, that will take part in an active creation, production and discussion, stressing the how and why of spatial agency – the designerly action, public engagement as connection to plurality and the openness and freedom, referring to Hannah Arendt, that doesn't predefine everything in advance but allows to evolve in process.

The projects were approached through an inventive exploration – a material-based examination, using the fieldsite as device (Candea 2013). The Inventiveness of methods according to Lury and Wakeford, who collected a whole range of examples that investigate, engage with and try to «contribute to the framing of change» (Lury and Wakeford 2012, p. 6) is «the relation between two moments: the addressing of a method [...] to a specific problem, and the capacity of what emerges in the use of that method to change the problem» (Ibid., p. 7). So the challenge is to find a visual and narrative expression for the cultural aspects inherent in spaces, evaluating and transmitting the findings while reflecting both the practice and the theory, leading to a critical spatial practice (Marguin 2019).

The “As Found”, introduced as interdisciplinary movement by the Smithsons also increased attention on the existing, opening a field in between art and science, based on observation and reflection of the world as experienced. It departs from a spontaneous, unconscious, practical approach to space as inspiration and elaborates a theoretical background through its aesthetic reflection. Art in this sense doesn't mean the actual production of an artwork, but aims at an art of thinking and doing, which reaches much further than the basics of design (Bürkele 2012), often un-

derstood as aesthetical interpretation but also being a creative and active doing.

Working with «open-ended and socially engaged approaches» (Dodd 2019 p.11) and sensory methods like experimental film to visualize the tangible and intangible through an experimental approach creates textual interpretations of the space's capacities, the subjectively perceived and qualitative values as transformability, cultural capacity or atmosphere. This is important to “see” the potential of sharing a living environment where diverse knowledge is collected (Julien 2016), and shared as fundamental education – which is the opposite of the idea of social distancing.

