

Enhancing suburban life with Victor Gruen

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Abstract

The essay deals with the theme of the prejudices that prevent us from designing vibrant suburban spaces and argues that we should rediscover Victor Gruen's lesson in doing so. The first part analyzes the consequences determined by the advent of the car and the urban explosion on public spaces. The second section of the essay develops a critical reflection on the way we look at suburban collective spaces and proposes a change of perspective. The concluding section of the essay contains some specific proposals, of a planning and normative kind, to improve the quality of collective suburban spaces.

Keywords: urban explosion; public places; collective spaces; non-places; Victor Gruen

1. The urban explosion and its effects on public places

The urban growth caused by industrialization and urbanization and therefore the subsequent crisis of the historical mobility networks has led to the inevitable abandonment of the traditional way of conceiving and designing public spaces. Much literature has been written on the functional separation brought about by the emergence of the principles promoted by the Modern Movement and urban planning based on zoning and on functional separation. This literature, with its often nostalgic accents, has not been followed by a similar discussion of the implications that the transformations described above have had on the relationship between public space and transport infrastructure and consequently on the character of new suburban public spaces. In fact, the separation of large traffic flows from urban centers entailed the almost complete decoupling of transport infrastructures and urban public spaces. The urban crisis took place at staggered times based on the level of industrialization and motorization of different countries and cities. In large American cities, such as Boston, Chicago and New York, it manifested itself as early as the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The solutions adopted in the different countries were diverse. In the United States the removal of large traffic flows from the Central Business Districts was going to damage huge economic interests, so it was tried to safeguard the accessibility of these through the creation of true urban highways. These entailed huge public works and massive demolitions inside city centers. The case of the Central Artery, built in Boston in the 1950s as the John F. Fitzgerald Expressway, is one of the most emblematic. Funded with \$100 million worth of bonds, it involved the destruction of large parts of the city's most central neighborhoods and was met with enormous opposition by residents and businesses that were being harmed (Tsipis, 2001). In the mid-1970s, due to its devastating effects on urban livability, plans were already being made for its undergrounding. At the beginning of the 1980s the first plans were drafted and after seventeen years of work, in 2007, the new underground freeway was inaugurated. This further titanic work of engineering had cost, at current values, the gigantic sum of 24 billion dollars (Moskowitz, 2012). Despite these huge investments, however, the attempt to safeguard the economic and financial interests of the Central Business Districts was doomed to failure. Demographic, financial, commodity and mobility flows would have shifted inexorably to suburban areas, triggering ruinous trajectories of decline and of social and material degradation in the downtown areas. In some cases, these central spaces, once thriving business districts, would never again experience a real recovery process.

In Italy, these phenomena began much later. The rate of motorization began to grow exponentially in the late 1950s. This, in turn, determined a real crisis in the now obsolete historical mobility network. Already in the mid-1960s, the first experiments in pedestrianizing some parts of the historic centers began. At the same time, large-scale programs for the construction of new infrastructures and for functional decentralization were conceived. These projects adopted different planning models. To remain in the Florentine area, the Detti Plan, adopted in 1962, proposed a model of decentralization organized along a major axis connecting Florence to Prato and hosting the main commercial and directional facilities. However, compared to the rapidity with which the 'suburban flight' reconfigured the economic and social geography of large American cities, in Italy the decentralization process took place in a much slower and incomplete manner, reaching a degree of completion only in the last thirty years.

In fact, until a few decades ago the regional system was still urban-centric. Each portion of the urbanized countryside gravitated towards a historic center where all services (commercial, directional, etc.) were located. Today, such a hierarchy has definitely collapsed and historic centers are just nodes, often peripheral, of wider regional systems whose barycenter is in the periphery. The main commercial, service, and directional functions, both public and private, have moved towards the edge of urban areas, close to major arterial routes. New social spaces have arisen in peripheries as well: from outlets to sports facilities, from multi-theaters to gas stations, from entertainment centers to parking lots. These same historic centers are used in very similar ways to shopping malls: you get the car, find parking in a multi-story garage, and plunge into a crowd of consumers. In terms of regional hierarchies we have shifted from a polycentric system to a centrality that is dispersed throughout the entire urbanized territory.

Although suburban studies made considerable progress in recent years, most scholars and politicians are still bound to a pre-modernist idea of the city. They go on conceiving the city and the country as two totally distinct worlds. Metaphors alluding to urban walls (urban boundaries, green walls, etc.) are largely used to symbolically or physically mark boundaries that only exist in our minds. Wachsmuth (2014) pointed out that these conceptions have strong ideological connotations. In most suburban peripheries such boundaries are simply impossible even to imagine. Aside from the fact that a sharp distinction between city and country never existed in the past (Bruegmann, 2005), the problem with this way of conceptualizing the territory is that it obstructs our capacity to solve real problems and to seize the many opportunities that contemporary suburban landscapes offer (Sieverts, 2003; Ingersoll, 2006). New social spaces are assimilated into the non-places of an alienated existence. The corollary of such an absurd postulate is that nobody takes up the task of controlling and guiding the production of these spaces in order to maximize the benefits to society. This is paradoxical even in historical terms: the shopping mall was invented in 1940s by a socialist utopian, Victor Gruen, in order to create a place for public life in the suburbs; in his visionary Broadacre City, Frank Lloyd Wright conceived gas stations as community centers. A paradigm shift is a prerequisite for better-balanced development: the shift consists of recognizing that the periphery has become the center.

2. The rhetoric of 'non-places': a way of looking that obstructs our view.

The concept of non-places, introduced by Marc Augé in his 1994 book of the same name, is often used to describe most of the spaces that characterize the contemporary city. This use is widespread among architects and urban planners, who often qualify as 'non-places' spaces ranging from shopping centres to airports, car parks, service stations, public housing districts, and the suburbs in general. I believe that the concept of the non-place is an ideological device that is both useless and harmful. Its uselessness derives from its inadequacy to describe any

social-spatial system. In fact, by qualifying a space as a non-place, a generic negative connotation is attributed to it and, in fact, its deeper understanding is precluded. The harmfulness of this concept is a direct consequence of its futility. By preventing us from understanding the complexity of the social dynamics that take place in space, the concept of non-place ends up by greatly limiting the design capacity of architects, urban planners, and politicians. This is particularly regrettable, since the spaces considered non-places by dominant urban thinking correspond to much of the contemporary city and its suburbs. Therefore, it stands to reason that the frequent use of this concept would manifest a widespread attitude that is unscientific, ideological and nostalgic to the study and planning of the contemporary city and suburban areas.

What Augé defines as non-places constitute the main social structure of the contemporary city. This social framework has been little studied by academics, and neglected by architects, urban planners and politicians, who have only in a handful of cases been able to plan and design it in a way that is appropriate to its economic and social function. I argue that by challenging Augé's concept of non-places, and proffering a theory that instead elevates and promotes these important spaces, it would be possible to manage and organize them appropriately as well as explore their full potential through architectural and urban design.

For Augé, non-places are the product of what he defines with the neologism 'supermodernity' (surmodernité), that is, the current condition characterized by three main figures of excess: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance, and the individualization of points of reference. For Augé, supermodernity, that is to say the present era characterized by excesses, essentially produces non-places, i.e. spaces without history, identity and social relations¹. The concept of non-place is defined by Augé in opposition to that of anthropological place. Of variable size, the anthropological place is such insofar as it is an entity invested with meaning. It is also concerned with identity, as a place of birth and of self-identification; relational, as the object of a shared identity as well as support of social relations; and historical, as it is stable over time and it is possible to find in it points of reference that are considered as fixed and immutable. On the contrary "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé, 1995, p. 77-78).

Although the title of Augé's book speaks of the 'anthropology of supermodernity', his definition of non-places – and his repeated classification of their features – is not presented as a research hypothesis to be verified through accurate anthropological work but is a kind of 'ideal type'.² It is interesting, therefore, to consider the concept of non-place in light of Max Weber's definition of ideal type: "It is a conceptual construct (Gedankenbild) which is neither historical reality nor even the "true" reality. It is even less fitted to serve as a schema under which a real situation or action is to be subsumed as one instance. It has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components." (Weber, 1949, p. 93)

If we assume that Augé's non-place falls into the category of the ideal type described by Weber, what is missing from the work of the French anthropologist is the comparison of this

¹ "[N]on-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself". Augé (1995, pp. 51-52).

² This is somehow recognized by Augé himself when he states: "Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten" (ibid. p. 79).

concept with the empirical reality of which Weber speaks in the above definition. Spaces that are identified as non-places are never described and studied by him except in a generic, abstract and atopic way. This is the case when he speaks of shopping centres, which he claims are experienced “through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; [and that are] a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (Augé, 1995, p. 78). Similarly, he imagines a hypothetical user of non-places as a “foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a ‘passing stranger’) [who] can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains” (p. 106). Also following this model are his descriptions of airports and stations, perhaps the spaces that are closest to the ideal type conceived by Augé.

Now, as we have seen, the non-place is defined as the negation and opposite of the place. The latter is such only if it is historical, identitarian and relational. Even this definition is questionable to say the least. In fact, by prioritizing the characteristics of history and identity, the concept of place thus refers to a narrow and potentially perverse conception of the relationship between space and community, one in which those whose histories and identities are not rooted in the place where they live – who make up a considerable and growing share of the population of every contemporary city – might in theory have no right to claim to belong to that community or territory. In my opinion, the notion of place defined by Augé risks interpretation in this narrow and exclusionary sense.

Being representative of the current era, non-places describe what Henri Lefebvre would have defined, albeit in different words, as the production of abstract space in contemporary capitalist society. Behind the concept of non-place, in fact, there is on the one hand a general criticism of urbanization, and on the other, a yearning for the pre-industrial city. In fact, Augé’s book is dominated by a clear nostalgic accent, which can also be discerned in works by many of the great critics of contemporary urbanization, including Lefebvre. It is important to give due attention to the persistent longing for the old city, as it continues to have profound effects on the way space is being produced today.

The notion of non-place developed by Augé in 1992 is part of a broader narrative characterized by nostalgia for the city of the past and by phobia of the contemporary city. Nostalgia for the city and countryside of the previous era has shaped the planning debates in Europe and the United States since their originations (e.g. Secchi, 1984, Boyer 1983). I will focus in particular on Lefebvre, an author who had a strong influence on the urban debate and policies in Europe since the early 1960s. In the Anglo-Saxon context, the scholar who most contributed to what we could call ‘suburbs-phobia’ is certainly Jane Jacobs (1961). Lefebvre’s critique of contemporary urbanization is based on the Marxist concepts of work and product, use value and exchange value. While use value is related to the utility of a good, exchange value refers to its selling price. For Lefebvre, contemporary urban growth has abandoned the traditional urban model in favour of abstract urbanization. Whereas the city of the past was a work (oeuvre) and was socially experienced according to its use value, contemporary urbanization is conceived as a product to be exchanged on the market as any other good. The shift from the traditional city to urbanization, determined by the advent of industrialization, causes the disappearance of community relations typical of pre-industrial societies: in fact, contrasting with today’s model, in the past the city was considered a work of art to be used and enjoyed without any consideration for profit.

This city is itself oeuvre, a feature which contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and products.

Indeed the oeuvre is use value and the product is exchange value. The eminent use of the city, that is, of its streets and squares, edifices and monuments, is la Fête (a celebration which consumes unproductively, without other advantage but pleasure and prestige and enormous riches in money and objects). (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 66)

In addition to being poorly supported in terms of historical research, this way of representing the old city is quite idealized. In contrast, the representations of the periphery provided by Lefebvre are strongly dystopian. Also, they have more than one point in common with Augé's descriptions of non-places.³

It is not difficult to take a contrasting viewpoint and see how, in many cases, the monumental splendour of historical cities had opposite meanings to the positive ones attributed to them by Lefebvre. For example, many of the old monuments were nothing more than the architectural and urban codification of a deeply hierarchical, unjust and authoritarian social and political order. Not to mention the baroque monumentality of Haussmann's Paris, that was produced by policies of social and spatial purification of the centre of Paris, to the detriment of the lower classes. Correspondingly, it is possible to find numerous positive representations of contemporary mobility as a symbol of freedom and emancipation, both at class and gender levels.

Such a perspective on the contemporary city is deeply rooted in the urban debate in the West, and has significant effects on the way we understand and govern it. In the United States, the condemnation and demonization of sprawl and suburbs commonly perpetuated by scholars (e.g. Davis, 1990; Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, 2001; Silverstone, ed., 1996) and policy-makers prevented them from grasping the complexity and diversity that certainly characterizes the American suburbs, in terms of social and ethnic composition, built environment and lifestyles. Only a small number of more recent studies have attempted to account for this complexity (Nicolaidis and Wiese, eds., 2006; Archer, Sandul and Solomonson, eds., 2015).

In Italy and Europe, the myth of the city of the past is even more deeply rooted. In the German context, Thomas Sieverts (2003) argues that the myth of the compact city of the past prevents us from correctly understanding and designing peripheries, i.e. the living space of most people. For this reason, he focuses his attention on the analysis and design of the *Zwischenstadt*, or in-between city, that is, that hybrid mixture of city and countryside which is one of the main features of most suburban areas. On a similar slant, Rem Koolhaas speaks of the historical centres of the past as symbolically strong apparatuses that are now completely inadequate to support articulated and complex urban systems. And yet, their cultural and symbolic weight prevents the 'new city' from being understood and designed for what it is (1994, pp. 1248-9):

Identity centralizes; it insists on an essence, a point. Its tragedy is given in simple geometric terms. As the sphere of influence expands, the area

³ "Urban reality, simultaneously amplified and exploded, thus loses the features it inherited from the previous period: organic totality, belonging, an uplifting image, a sense of space that was measured and dominated by monumental splendor. It was populated with signs of the urban within the dissolution of urbanity; it became stipulative, repressive, marked by signals, summary codes for circulation (routes), and signage. It was sometimes read as a rough draft, sometimes as an authoritarian message. It was imperious. But none of these descriptive terms completely describes the historical process of implosion-explosion (a metaphor borrowed from nuclear physics) that occurred: the tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means, and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space." (Lefebvre H., 2003, p. 14).

characterized by the center becomes larger and larger; hopelessly diluting both the strength and the authority of the core; inevitably the distance between center and circumference increases to the breaking point. In this perspective, the recent, belated discovery of the periphery as a zone of potential value—a kind of pre-historical condition that might finally be worthy of architectural attention—is only a disguised insistence on the priority of and dependency on the center: without center, no periphery; the interest of the first presumably compensates for the emptiness of the latter. Conceptually orphaned, the condition of the periphery is made worse by the fact that its mother is still alive, stealing the show, emphasizing its offspring's inadequacies. The last vibes emanating from the exhausted center preclude the reading of the periphery as a critical mass. Not only is the center by definition too small to perform its assigned obligations, it is also no longer the real center but an overblown mirage on its way to implosion; yet its illusory presence denies the rest of the city its legitimacy.

In fact, consolidated representations of historical cities and of contemporary suburbs strongly inhibit our ability to interpret and design peripheries. Augé's book certainly belongs to this type of polarized utopian/dystopian representation, and is widely used by architects and planners to describe the contemporary city in opposition to the city of the past. My thesis is that the so-called non-places (i.e. mobility infrastructures, shopping centres, multiplexes, service stations, etc.) that the French scholar speaks about and that are strictly connected to the new mobility networks play the role of 'squares' – understood as the traditional places of urban sociality – of the contemporary city. However, while the debate on the dialectics between the centre and the periphery is now quite consolidated, that on the relationship between traditional public spaces/mobility infrastructures and the new social spaces on the periphery is much less developed.

2. Learning from Victor Gruen: designing 'non-places' as the social infrastructures of the suburbs.

Our inability to understand the role and potential that so-called 'non-places' assume in contemporary society determines a more general incapacity to grasp the demand for sociality that exists in the periphery. What is it that obstructs our gaze and inhibits our planning? According to Sieverts, the persistence of the 'myth' of the old town is responsible. From Europe to the United States, suburbs and suburban areas are generally ostracized, because they do not fit with the traditional and stereotypical image of the city. To be seen in this way, a city must correspond to the urban canons of density, of mixed-use, of a certain relationship between solids and voids. These canons, codified in Jane Jacobs's urban theory and easily found in European and North American cities before the First World War, prevent us from considering as a 'place' whatever does not conform to them. From this perspective, only the square and the street possess full dignity as public spaces. Koolhaas, as we have seen, maintains that the centre, with its symbolic weight, continues to orphan the periphery and prevent us from appreciating its real importance and relative weight in contemporary urban systems. However, his analysis, just like Sieverts's, limits itself to providing an overview of the periphery as a whole without considering its social spaces. This consolidated view of traditional public spaces as the only legitimate social spaces of our cities has strong negative implications for the ways in which contemporary spaces are regulated at a functional, infrastructural and performance level, and designed at an architectural and social level.

Despite the recognized importance of shopping centres in contemporary society these spaces continue to be considered by many the enemies of the retail trade, the 'bad giants' who close the shops of the town centre. Polemicists of the 'small shops closing syndrome' do not acknowledge the facts that the majority of the population has been living in the suburbs for some time now, and that many lack the resources to go shopping in the city centre. However, in the United States, this rhetoric has been swept away by the advent of electronic commerce and by the subsequent phenomenon of 'dead malls'. Now that shopping centres are disappearing, their loss is also being lamented. These spaces, after all, have enjoyed considerable importance in the social and cultural history of tens of millions of Americans (Kurutz, 2017). The rapid evolution of e-commerce could quickly make Italian and European shopping centres obsolete as well. The fact remains that these centres have been and still are exclusively regulated as consumption spaces. For example, the legislation in force in Tuscany, drawn up on the basis of the national framework legislation, sets out the number of parking spaces that must be provided in relation to the selling surface. It also limits the number of large shopping centres that can be built. However, it does not give any guidance about the range of public and private functions that should be realized, the accessibility that should be provided for the various modes of transport (cycling, walking, driving, public transit), the necessity of creating some spaces of an exclusively public nature and that of providing adequate urban furnishings (such as seating areas and the like). For this reason we should rediscover today Victor Gruen's lesson, get rid of our prejudices on the suburban world and on their collective, most often privately owned, facilities. The Austrian-American architect, known as the inventor of the American mall, conceived his commercial suburban outlets as vibrant collective spaces, comfortably usable with their abundant seating, careful and meticulous landscaping, and ample space for collective and social activities (Gruen and Smith, 1960; Hardwick, 2004). Although privately owned and albeit not embedded in the urban fabric of the historic city, Gruen's commercial centers were real community centers and hosted concerts, festivals, county fairs, political events: they were much better than the anonymous and gloomy non-places imagined by Marc Augé.

Similar considerations, taking into account the difference in scale and the smaller radius of influence, can be made in relation to the planning of petrol stations. Although most of the petrol stations are exclusively technical facilities, some of them may well become, as recent research has demonstrated, small centres for the local community (Giovannoni, 2017). Urban planning and fuel distribution plans should acknowledge this reality and rework their regulations to recognize the difference between facilities providing simple petrol pumps and car washes, and the integrated service stations that could have a wider role in serving local communities. For the latter, functional hybridization with complementary social and commercial activities should be encouraged, and better accessibility from the surrounding residential areas should be ensured.

This reconceptualization should involve a much more varied set of 'types' of new public spaces, which would include outlet villages, airports, multiplex cinemas, service stations, large car parks and sports facilities. Outlet villages could be thought of as gates that connect the highway network along which they are located with the surrounding regions. By integrating commercial functions with tourist and social services, the economic and social benefits of these large magnets could be distributed over wider regions. The airports, usually conceived as negative elements that reduce the real estate values of the surrounding areas, could be transformed into generators of positive externalities, as places of attraction in which

to dine at night while observing the air traffic, to visit exhibitions and commercial spaces, to avail of personal services, and to participate in political and social events.

The transformations I have described above are in part already underway. However, they are almost exclusively led by big economic actors, without any capacity for control and direction by national and local political and administrative bodies. As I have tried to demonstrate, it will only be possible to develop an adequate regulatory framework and reach design potentials once the annihilating and obscuring rhetoric of the non-place has been overcome. This would involve deconstructing the consolidated and dominant narratives on this subject and basing our knowledge of these spaces on accurate socio-anthropological work that would allow us to grasp and appreciate their social relevance and functionality.

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