

*Cynthia Echave*

# USES OF PUBLIC SPACES AND URBAN REVITALISATION

## **ECOLOGICAL URBANISM**

Cities are bringing together activities and services that define a particular urban life. The morphological characteristics of the urban structure, the distribution of activities, socio-economic capital and mobility are some of the main aspects that condition life styles and have an impact on the wider urban context. Ecological urbanism has arisen as an alternative management process for cities, with emphasis on both efficiency and liveability in guiding urban contexts towards less environmental impact and greater quality of life.

Applying sustainability criteria in urbanism has become inherent to planning and urban management in many cities. These cities have devised sustainable urban policies and are in the process of implementing them. Most of the measures are focused on reducing environmental impacts and improving quality of life.

A holistic vision of applying sustainability criteria means that planning is focussing on prevention and adjustment in response to fundamental issues: sustainability and impacts due to climate change and resource consumption, as well as requirements derived from the information and knowledge society.

Regarding the adjustment to climate change, measures applied to improve urban mobility are having a substantial repercussion on the need to reduce energy consumption and toxic emissions to the atmosphere associated with transport. Mobility also affects concerns about citizen's health, not only in terms of accidents but also because of pollution which may lead to respiratory diseases.

## **Urban ecology as conceptual reference**

Urban ecology is a discipline based on the study of urban environments and ecosystems. An ecosystem characterises the presence of

living organisms which require a physical structure and a series of processes that regulate and allows functionality. Together they produce a certain degree of organisation which can acquire greater complexity (Rueda 1994). When an ecosystem reaches a higher level of information per unit of consumed energy it increases its level of organisation and hence its complexity.

If cities are conceived as ecosystems organisation is influenced by urban planning and urban management processes and how they regulate land use, mobility, delivery strategies and waste resources or how they issue guidelines and governance policies for urban living. In this sense, ecological urbanism sets its own criteria based on the general guideline to achieve maximum system efficiency and to ensure adequate liveability conditions.

## **PUBLIC SPACE**

Public space is a catalyst of society because it reflects economic, sociological and cultural characteristics of a community. History shows that since the early civilization the built environment had been stratified, and relationships within a given society were regulated between the private and public spheres as well as between individuals, families and communities.

This stratification has been consistent throughout the evolution of cities, but perhaps the use of public space has become more rigid in the twentieth century with the introduction of the motor vehicles. As a result, the use of public spaces by citizens has decreased over time and been reduced to a frantic coming and going of pedestrians with people moving through rather than interacting.

However, policies aimed to revitalise historic districts or to consolidate commercial areas, have led to a gradual re-conquest of public space. Europe it has a long history of

the recovering old town centres. While until recently such approaches were focused on traditional areas or on tourist value they are beginning to happen in ordinary neighbourhoods. It is therefore important to establish measures to increase liveability for citizens in all public spaces. However, some factors are limiting this purpose, such as motorised mobility, social exclusion and regulations regarding the occupation of public spaces.

## **Constraining car mobility**

At present, urban mobility is characterised by allocating a greater occupation of public space to the functions of motor vehicles (see Figure 1) than to other users. This brings about several environmental and socio-economic impacts, ranging from emissions of pollutants, noise, loss of liveable space and biodiversity, accidents and visual impact. In most urban contexts, the private motorised vehicle tends to occupy nearly two-thirds of public roads space, leaving only a third for other transportation uses of the population<sup>1</sup>. This discrepancy makes public space not coherent to main needs. For that reason it is necessary to reorganise mobility networks to organised space more comprehensively by diversifying uses of public space.

## **Superblocks as a strategic planning tool**

The superblock is a management tool (Rueda, 2000) whose main goal is to halt and reverse the trends of the current mobility model based on the private car and to create a new kind of public space to increase its habitability<sup>2</sup>.

The superblock is a new urban cell of about 400m x 400m, enabling mobility networks to adapt to the morphological characteristics of the restructured urban fabric. The perimeter of this cell is constituted by a basic network which accommodates the circulation of passing

vehicle, including public transport and, where appropriate, cyclists on segregated lanes. The combination of superblocks results in a basic network of roads adapting velocity and continuity to the urban fabric. With this measure the functionality of the system is guaranteed, reversing the current hierarchy of road occupation into 60% and 70% in favour of non motorised uses.

Inside superblocks speed is restricted to 10 km/h to create calmer environments. All vehicles such as residents' vehicles, urban freight, emergency and urban services are allowed to circulate through the interior of the superblocks, but not passing vehicles<sup>3</sup>. Economic activity, play, party, stay, etc. are possible when the right of way it is inverted and with it comes the revitalisation of the environment (Gehl, 2006).



1. Barcelona, contrast between streets with different configurations related to cars.

Source: Googlemaps.

## Uses of public space

Uses and activities within public space depend on the socio-economic profile of the users (Delgado, 1999), the morphology of urban spaces, the presence of motorised vehicles and the set of spatial entities. According to this, uses of public space can be classified into types of activities and related functions.

Each use has a different temporal and spatial requirement. Some uses are occasional and others occur daily in the streets, squares and parks of the city. Some of these uses have to be identified through fieldwork because there exist only few statistics about this kind of data. A general classification of these uses is:

1. Stay uses
2. Sport & leisure uses
3. Popular & cultural uses
4. Lucrative & exchange uses
5. Political uses

Stay uses represents the occupation of public space and activities related to walking, conversation and contemplation. It is linked to the provision of benches and playgrounds in areas of Stay.

Sport & leisure uses refer to the occupation of public space for play and some physical activities. This type of street activities is mainly related to sports, such as marathons, racing, soccer games, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, even yoga, tai chi, capoeira, and the provision of children's playgrounds.

Popular & cultural uses refer to all activities related to the promotion of art and artistic expression, such as concerts, art exhibitions, workshops, painting, sculpture, theatre performances or circus. They require large areas to accommodate a larger number capacity of people and they are usually aimed at the general public. Some of the most common cultural uses are festivals, gastronomic fairs, wine-making, crafts, including religious traditions.

Lucrative & exchange uses refer to the use of public space to make room for a permanent business, such as terraces of bars and restaurants, fast-food stalls, etc. Exchange of second hand items are included in this group of uses. This category is sub-classified into formal and informal activities, the latter including the illegal sale of products and services on the street (see Figure 2).

Political uses refer to the spatial occupancy of public space by people who aim to demonstrate and express an opinion or an ideology. Political uses in public spaces become visible as collective manifestations, electoral campaigns, referenda and discussion assemblies.

These sets of uses are present in any public urban contexts, and their frequency depends on the existing social and cultural characteristics. In order to increase interaction among people and to create a dynamic and inclusive society, it is important to identify the existing uses and to try to diversify them.



2. Barcelona, lucrative uses of open space in streets.

Source: Cynthia Echave.

## EXAMPLES OF REVITALISATION

Revitalisation processes occurs in different manners. Sometimes they are a consequence of urban planning that carries out a specific transformation of a public space, and sometimes they are the fruit of ephemeral interventions. The aim here is to think about different dynamic processes in public spaces and what impact

they have on community and society, either through dignifying common space, revitalising the local economy or communicating ideas.

Some examples of revitalization of public space are described which have derived from different strategies. Each of the cases corresponds to realities in European cities which contrast from one another.

### Northmoord Homezone, Manchester 2003

This is an example of a marginal neighbourhood in Manchester, UK where the revitalisation strategy focused on improving the city's image and security. The strategy consists of improving streets and pavements by changing traffic regulations (see Figure 3). Security was improved by optimising and improving street lighting and through the provision of playgrounds and a community centre as a means to promote social cohesion among neighbours. The programme includes the post of a guardian to monitor social aspects of the neighbourhood, especially youth concerns. The project and the work took place between 1997 and 2003 and John Delap, Urban Solutions Team, Manchester Engineering Design Consultancy (MEDC), Ian Finlay Architects were in charge.



3. Public space transformation in Northmoord.

Source: [www.publicspace.org](http://www.publicspace.org)

### Rebskoven. København, Denmark 2010

This example refers to the transformation of the old parking space of the Factory Carlsberg brewery in København, Denmark into a game park for public access. The initiative has



#### 4. Transformation of the parking plot into a playground use.

Source: [www.visitcopenhagen.de](http://www.visitcopenhagen.de)

#### 5. façade and interior of the solar roof in Figueres.

Source: <http://caceresarquitectes.com>



been promoted by Carlsberg to compensate the neighbourhood for the dismantling and removal of the factory. The result is the reuse of the cover of the parking spaces to support a series of ropes hanging from it (see Figure 4) to be used as a climbing park for children and adults (25,000m<sup>2</sup>).

#### Solar roof. Figueres, Spain 2009-2011

This example is the installation of a photovoltaic roof in one of the squares of the city of Figueres in Catalonia. The new ecological cover creates an open space with public access to various activities, such as markets, book fairs or concerts (see Figure 5). This is an example of revitalisation whose added value lies in the incorporation of photovoltaic solar collection for the production of electricity for public lighting. This transformation constitutes also a strategic element in the energy policy of the municipality as a means of introducing renewable energy into the public sector. The roof has been promoted by the city of Figueres and the authors of the work are Xavier Rafael Caceres and Caceres.

#### Magic blocks, Bucharest 2010

This project is located in Bucharest in Romania and consists of a series of ephemeral interventions whose concept is based on countering the grey image of soviet architecture by adding

orange colour. It is an initiative promoted by the Institutul Cultural Roman - Programul Cantemir , ERSTE Stiftung and by a group of artists (Zeppelin , Point 4 , Studio Basar, Hackenbroich Architekten, Berlin Archis Interventions ) whichm together with inhabitants managed to formalise funding in four spaces in the area Calea Mosilor .

The installations are called “A passage between two worlds”, “A place for the community”, “Please step on the lawn” and “A living urban” (see Figure 6). Each claims to evoke a better use public space by people and to humanise this message by emphasising some elements with orange colour (chairs, benches, floors or walls). This is a good example of society involvement. It also has the particularity that the authors had asked for perceptions and reactions by those using these spaces.



#### 6. Magic blocks.

Source: [www.publicspace.org](http://www.publicspace.org)

### Flatspace. Chiinu, Moldova 2008 - 2010

Here the revitalisation of public space is provided by the installation of a small theatrical space (see Figure 7) called temporarily flat space. This cultural initiative aims to reclaim cultural activities in neighbourhoods where cultural and public spaces are emerging from existing characterless spaces which are not conducive to human relations and contacts. The name pays homage to the story that during the Soviet regime cultural activities were carried out clandestinely. The project is sponsored by the European Cultural Foundation and the authors of the idea are Stefan Rusu, Vladimir Us, Oberliht Young Artists Association.



7. Flatspace installation.  
Source: <http://chiosc.oberliht.com>

### Campo de la Cebada. Madrid, Spain 2010

This example of revitalisation consists of the temporary use of a brownfield site in the middle of Madrid. The empty site is located in the neighbourhood of La Latina, after the demolition of a public sports centre. Since the local government had decided to delay construction of a new facility, local inhabitants and associations took the decision to make a formal proposal for a temporary use of this site.

This case is characterised by a strong social component of representation. The formal administration has overlooked the capability of local organisation to initiate and manage a space for their own use, making this an example of civic responsibility within urban administration. At present, this brownfield site is an active forum (see Figure 8) where several cultural activities are performed, such as exhibitions, workshops, plays, among others.



8. Plaza de la Cebada, cultural activities organized in a brownfield site in Madrid.  
Source: [www.elcampodecebada.org](http://www.elcampodecebada.org)

### Puerta del Sol Square. Madrid, Spain 2011

The final example is the temporary use of one of the most representative and symbolic public



**9. Politic use of public space in Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid**

Source: <http://www.publicspace.org/es/obras/g001-acampada-en-la-puerta-del-sol>

space of Madrid, the Puerta del Sol Square (see Figure 9), where citizens had established camps for massive demonstrations, demanding a better democratic system. This temporary camp exemplifies the political use of public space.

On this camp, the protest itself against crisis and the current economic model led to the organisation of this space into a small neighbourhood where different services and uses were located. People improvised services for the protestors, such as the sale of supplies, kindergartens and libraries. The social effect that 15-M movement had in Spanish society was blunt and generated multipliers. The movement was replicated in many other cities in Spain making history which earned it the European Prize for Public Space 2012.

## CONCLUSIONS

The revitalisation of public space is a key element in the transformation of the prevalent urban model, and in particular its impact on social cohesion. Based on experiences so far we can say that the revitalisation of public space requires three strategic areas (see Figure 10):

- Urban planning and design. It is necessary to design attractive spaces with lower priority for the use for the car. It has been shown that reorganisation of the mobility pattern and recovery of public space for citizens by diversifying the uses has improved urban quality of life. Urban planning based on ecological urban planning criteria is improving the degree of liveability and efficiency.
- Governance. There is a need for cross participation of all actors involved in planning, management and use of public space. Partnership between the public and private sectors for funding and responsibility are key elements for the proper regulation and functioning of temporary and eventually permanent use of public space.

- Observatory. The creation of information and knowledge through monitoring and tracking applications in public spaces, especially those that are the result of actions of revitalisation is considered essential. This is a good way to learn from cases through recording users' experiences over time and deriving indicators.



## 10. Strategic elements for public space revitalization.

Source: Cynthia Echave

1. According to studies developed at BCNecologia, most of the Spanish cities intend for 60% of the road space to cars, and sometimes until 70%.
2. Echave, C. and Rueda, S. (2008) 'Habitability Index in Public Space', Walk21Barcelona.
3. Currently, Vitoria-Gasteiz and Barcelona are examples of superblocks' implementation: the neighborhoods of Gracia and Ciutat Vella in Barcelona, and the central neighborhoods of Vitoria-Gasteiz.

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