SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY: ARCHITECTURE OR LANDSCAPE?

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Some foreigners depict Mexico as the country of beans, chili and maiz, pyramids and temples. Some others have the cartoonist image of a desert full of cacti and people with sombreros having siesta. In general, most visitors feel disappointed when the vibrant place with multi-coloured buildings and towns turns into a grey city. A city where car horns are swearwords, a place where public transport is packed not only during peak hours, a metropolis where streets are converted into endless flows of cars. A city with an air so polluted that it blocks the sunlight. This is Mexico City, where I was born and lived all my childhood.

When I started my Masters research in landscape architecture, I felt like an outsider in my own country. I analysed parks as an ideal case of public spaces in Puebla, and I realised that the image I had of them did not match what I was told during my architecture undergraduate time in Mexico. In order to identify the characteristics of public spaces, I selected a few examples of parks in Puebla. They all shared a conventional design that divides the block in six triangles by linking pedestrian circulation through the corners. Footpaths are clearly divided from lawns by the use of curbs or small metallic fences. Centrifugal design in paths leads to a fountain or statue in the middle of the garden. The larger area is for sitting and watching.

My observations about Mexican parks revealed that children do not play with the fountain’s water; instead of that, car washers bring buckets and collect water for washing cars. Parks have many benches on both sides of the paths, but people do not use them; they prefer to sit on tree jardinieres, or on the metallic fence. If those elements were designed for a specific function, why do people not use them for that? Was that a failure in the architectural design? As William Whyte affirms, ‘sitting should be physically comfortable. It is more important, however, that it be socially comfortable.’ A bench is physically more comfortable than a metallic fence. But this latter is socially more comfortable than the bench: it is under a tree that provides precious shade, especially during summer time in Mexico.

I was indeed not the first one who asked why public space designs did not always work, and as I was trying to answer it, a conversation between Philip Johnson and Heinrich Klotz came to my mind:

PJ – We designed those blocks in front of the Seagram Building so people could not sit on them, but, you see, people want to badly that they sit there anyhow… We put the water near the marble ledge because we thought they’d fall over if they sat there. They don’t fall over; they get there anyhow.

HK – Well, it’s the only place you can sit.

PJ – I know it. It never crossed Mies’s mind. Mies told me afterward, ‘I never dreamt people would want to sit there.’

Coming from an architecture background, I have to admit that this is the way in which architects work (or most of the Mexican architects I worked with do). We are restricted to a program and a limited list of requirements to fulfill, and no more. If one of the users or activities is not included in the program list, then it does not exist. I agree with Walter Hoods when he says that ‘social injustices are created when certain uses are ignored or not provided in the park, sometimes causing conflicts when unprogrammed uses occur.’ The unprogrammed users’ needs challenge the park’s program, and architects usually do not see them. They are unnoticed, and their right to use the space is the same as any other ‘programmed user’. Who are these ‘invisible users’? How to find them? Hoods answers by quoting landscape architect Randy Hester: ‘observation is the single best technique for discovering what people do and how people interact with other people in neighborhood space.’
Street vendors are very common in Mexican parks, but they are not the only unprogrammed users for parks. The next list describes some of the 'invisible' users found in Jardín El Carmen, one of the parks I analysed in Mexico:

- Pushcart vendors' sell fruit with chilli, icy poles, chicharrón (a popular snack in Mexico made of the pork skin fried in lard) and flavoured water.
- Asphalt vendors' stand by heavy traffic intersections, and sell anything they can carry: bags of fruits, calculators, plastic toys, chilled drinks, etc.
- Tent vendors' set a small stall usually in the corners, and sell fried food, bread, tamales and atole (a thick hot drink made with water, milk, maize and fruits).
- Tray vendors' are six-to-ten-year-old kids, that sell chewing gum and frollies. They carry their products on a small tray.
- 'Girl watchers' are small groups of men who choose strategic paths to watch girls passing by.
- Car washers' choose the parking spaces under the trees, and hand-wash the cars by using water from the fountain.
- 'Car watchers' – an official car washer is usually a man dressed in a blue suit that looks after the cars and helps with parking. The unofficial kind is an opportunistic kid that lives nearby and gets some money by looking after the cars.
- Religious image sellers' habitually stand at the church's exit and sell small statues of saints and virgins.
- Shoeshiners' may push a cart with a sitting chair and an umbrella for better comfort of the client.

This list corresponds to the local activity found in Jardín El Carmen, and changes according to place and specific needs. James T Rojas' description of commercial activity in East LA includes los moscos ('the flies' day labourers), mariachis, carriers, asphalt vendors, pushcart vendors, tent vendors, auto vendors, roach coaches and food trucks.

I have called these users and the 'programmed' ones the social choreography of parks. They transform conventional park design into a particular place during its occupancy by establishing reciprocal relationships between the park and its inhabitants. Is the 'invisible' part of the social choreography what differentiates architecture from landscape?

The social choreography concept is not a static program or list of users; it is a dynamic set of relations which result in the changes in that program not only in time, but also in other scenarios like social, political, environmental, etc. An example of this was the proliferation of bottled water in Mexico during the early 1890s. During that time it was fashionable to carry a bottle of water. As a consequence, a type of pushcart vendor, the flavoured-water vendor, almost disappeared from Mexican parks and plazas. People were not buying flavoured water anymore. This changed the existing 'program' in the park, and its social choreography evolved as the society did.

As an architect, I deliberately ignored these users as part of the program. They exist in real life, but they disappear in the project. As a landscape architect, I know they must be considered in the design, but it is not granted that they will appropriate the space. This is the challenge for a landscape architect, and here is where the questions arise: how to reflect social choreography in the design of public spaces? If social choreography changes constantly, how to make a design that embraces those changes? Is social choreography in landscape what program is in architecture?

The concept of social choreography does not attempt to solve one of the differences between architecture and landscape, but to make them visible.