The Conversable Scale of Cities

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One of the usual criticisms of the contemporary metropolis is that it is fragmented by mega-projects run by private sector interests. In this provocative article, Castello notes the positive outcomes of this phenomenom as long as the fragments result in places of a type and scale appropriate for public engagement and social conversation.

In the history of civilization, the city emerged when humans realized the advantages of living together and engaging in mutually dependent activities. These relationships depend on communications, on people being able to talk to one another, and on the city having places where that may happen. Nothing is more revealing of this ideal than the 16th-century diary by the Portuguese Crown representative who founded the village that would become the mega-city of Sao Paulo (Martim Affonso de Sousa in Toledo, 2008). The diary reveals that his mission was to provide a settlement where people could enjoy a "secure and conversable life". In this context, "conversable" means "being with or living with" but also to be a dimension that a place has that allows people to talk to each other (Toledo, 2008). Whether a market, a plaza, a revitalized historic area, a seductive themed mall, or a simple street bench, a place is always a part of a city that is of a conversable scale.

Nowadays, urbanisation is seen as the constant addition of projects spread across great expanses of land. New places are promoted by public and private, local, regional and even transnational agents, with results that, at times, might be quite deplorable but, sometimes, may be acceptable or even admirable. While some are fascinated by contemporary urbanism and its success in promoting a fragmented city where parts are seen as "commodities", others are shocked by the conception of the city as merchandise and the social implications of market-driven uses. In the global context, the ever-growing implementation of this new type of urbanism leads to a world that no longer consists of countries but rather of cities and perhaps only of places. Lynch (1962) would probably call these places "districts", due to their structural power in the

image of a city, while others would call them mega-projects and categorise them as "invented places" (Sircus, 2001).

We live a new reality, a special moment in the history of urbanisation when one of the most persistent manifestations is the disparate ways of thinking of cities and how they are now shaped into a series of territorial fragments spread across extensively urbanised regions. In this essay I argue that, as professionals, we need to step back from our intolerance for such projects because, in a considerable number of cases, they efficiently provide opportunities to improve their cities, creating conversable places.

The Threat of Fragmentation

Where is the 21st-century city going towards? Which direction is urbanism taking? Where can we find the conversable scale of the city? A scale that enables spaces where people talk and engage with each other, even within the gigantic scale of a contemporary metropolis? Today's urban environments reveal a clear territorial fragmentation which fragments represent the demarcation and recognition of arising from social representations. We must admit, albeit reluctantly, that the current pattern of fragmented cities arises from the recognition of specific urban territories, and that their differentiation has something to do with their recognition as places, and as places of conversable scale.

The Fragmented City is a common jargon in the discourse of architects, urbanists, planners, and cultural critics. It represents the extreme in current urban scales, and it is almost always used with disdain, conferring a negativity associated with the postmodern condition of contemporary urbanization. However, one needs to reflect on the real meaning of such expression by first asking what is a "city" supposed to be, and then by discussing the intimidating idea of "fragmentation". After all, the city is a concept that describes a reality subject

to constant change. Is the traditional concept of a city still adequate to explain today's human settlements and their different types, scales, economies, and geographies? It seems that the imperative is to identify and investigate the possible "conversable" scales allowed by cities in their fragments.

In fact, the term "fragmentation" instils negativity and a greater concern than it deserves. What is customarily identified as fragments of the every day are generally connected to interesting urban phenomena (Castello & Bortoli, 2013). The fractions – or rather, the parts of a whole, the multiplicities of diverse things, the diversities – might reveal notable places, whether through the wealth of their particularities or the exclusive values of their heterogeneities.

Some urban spaces are clearly perceptible for standing out against the generic backdrop of the vast, fragmented fabric of their cities. These spaces may stimulate an affectionate perception of the population and are genuine "places of urbanity", engraved in the collective imagination of the people who use them. These spaces are ultimately perceived as "places" (Canter, 1977; Tuan, 1983). My main concern is to understand what places of "conversable scale" exist in a regionalised city. The following discussion illustrates some of the new settings where urbanisation takes place today and are moulding the contemporary features of the conversable scale.

Improved Urbanism

The changes that cities go through in different urbanisation periods inspire theoretical and methodological changes in the discipline of urbanism. Academic literature, therefore, makes use of particular jargons, some charged with a degree of emotion. Such is the case of "Postmodern Urbanism", the title of a wide-ranging and successful book (Ellin, 1999), and 'heterotopias' for the fragmented metropolis (Shane, 2011). Indeed, contemporary European and US literature includes a wide array of terms to define trends in urbanism and city planning: "invented places", "themed places", "generic places" "cloning places", "spots", "event cities", and "landscape of events".[1] It is not clear whether these terms are equivalent when referring to the new forms of territoriality that they represent, although they do seem to retain some analogy in how they define the social representations of the city, and in how they reflect the meanings of places. Furthermore, these terms are indicators of the multi-scaled players in the urban arena and their various cultural manifestations. They can also help in the manifestation of a conversable scale inside each of the different city fractions.

[1] This selection is from publications by B. Tschumi, J. G. Magnani, L. Castello, M. Carmona, M. Sorkin, R. Koolhaas, and P. Virilio.

Therefore, city planning is undergoing considerable conceptual changes as actions in urbanism are no longer based on a vision of a finished city and complete projects –as a set of inter-related objects integrated rationally such as Modernism envisaged for projects such as Brasilia and Chandigarh, the British NewTowns, and other centrally controlled environments. City planning that once tried to encompass the totality of an urbanised area has become infrequent and even discredited. If once city planning tried to define an a-priori vision of the city as a whole, nowadays a series of projects respond to different demands at different moments, defining a-posteriori visions of particular aspects of the city. Some call this project-by-project approach as the "Barcelona model", as a reference to the series of major urban projects and investments for the 1992 Olympic Games, along with pre-existing fractions and introducing a dynamic network of new urban places. This corresponds to the increase in the privatisation of economy throughout the developed world, to the extent that the public sector is restraining from being the major driver/controller of urban development and welcome privately run projects, giving them preferential support. Key ad-hoc projects of an episodic nature have resulted (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998 in Carmona & Tiesdell, 2007). The city acquires features on a new scale and with a polycentric structure and a diversity of events that occur simultaneously at a diversity of places.

Plans and Projects turn Somersaults

By the beginning of the 21st century, an abundant production of new urban patterns was accompanied by real reversals in urban plans and projects. "The 1970s and 1980s saw neo-liberal (…) arguments coming to prominence – particularly during the Reagan era in the US and the Thatcher era in the UK (…) reducing the state's powers and its role to provide room for market forces to flourish" (Carmona et al., 2003: 52). "Managerialism" was at the core of the reformatting of state actions, establishing an impressive turnaround at the core of city planning.

The expansion of economic liberalism affects the contemporary city leading to an accentuated liberalisation of projects and the state's management role. New perspectives and instruments have been successively joining the repertoire of urbanism and planning strategies. Examples are the public-private partnerships, investments in place branding and urban regeneration, attracting international mega-events, privatizing plus-values generated by public investments, and planning projects that can be sold as shares to investors.

No wonder why –even more than advances in information technology– Richard Florida's "creative economy" became a new planning paradigm, based on the creativity of people,

on what these people want, what they do well and know how to do well (Florida, 2004: 4). Such factors establish levels of competitiveness in cities of a globalised world; a competitiveness that is much like a sports championship where one only joins after carefully weighing up the opposition and the chances of winning. Local governments seek to put their cities on the world map, making them visible and competitive on a global scale. As noted by Sánchez (1999:120) "actions oriented by demand, urban attractions, competitive positioning, marketing, branding, and strategic planning," which until recently were confined to the business arena, have become commonplace in planning and among city managers.

Gaps for Conversable Spaces in the Fragmented City

Despite the multiple territorial fragmentations resulting from the current global production of space, a more durable scale persists the scale of place, or rather a symbolic scale for place, almost a metaphor for the traditional concept of place. Global cities maintain strong connections with place because "(...) many of the resources necessary for global economic activities are not hypermobile and are, indeed, deeply embedded in place, notably places such as global cities, global-city regions, and export processing zones" (Sassen, 2001; pp. 108). Sassen also points out the persistence of the centrality of current urban conditions, such as the Central Business Districts that resulted from modernism and still survive today. Today's CBDs are being reconfigured according to contemporary trends in urbanism practice; either revitalized or built innovatively in the manner of the recent post-suburban expansion. Typical examples of these two conditions are Paris and New York. In the former, the now classic project for La Défense, an area culminating the extension of the Champs Elysées Avenue, attracted several global finance companies to locate there and stay in Paris. In the later, the successful renaissance of Times Square as a tourist destination included a vast array of entertainment facilities. These two pioneering project types inspired many others with similar visions, scales, or programs.

If we narrow our focus to investigate more closely what happens in the everyday life of the fragments resulting from the contemporary city and look into people's perception of these places more clearly, we find unexpected and surprising situations. Contrary to what might be expected from fragments these areas contain places for manifestations one would find in a more "conversable" scale rather than one of conflict. In more mature examples, these "conversable" places are now considerably established, showing us the importance of a new and decisive dimension, the temporal scale, as the surging of a conversable place depends on its appropriation and use along time. This is what happened, for instance, with the redevelopment project for the Potsdamer Platz district in

Berlin and also for the vast area of London known as Docklands. Contrary to most critics who concentrate solely on complaining of mega-projects, we try to examine what empirical reality can teach us about them. These and other examples are discussed next and support our belief that the generalized criticism of the negative conditions of urbanity generated by the mega-projects is largely exaggerated.

Port Vell, Barcelona

The original contemporary model for mega-projects that ally business and development is probably Barcelona's Port Vell (old port, in Catalan) designed by Manuel Solà-Morales as part of the city's revitalization efforts strategically planned in conjunction with the 1992 Olympic Games. Located in the Molhes (or pier) d'Espanya, Port Vell creates a lively dialogue between Molhes de la Fusta and Molhes de La Barceloneta, and links to Maremàgnum, a mall designed by Helio Piñón and Albert Viaplana with numerous attractions such as shopping, bars, cafés, restaurants, and a multiplex, as well as to the L'Aquarium, considered by the Catalans as the "greatest" in Europe. Port Vell takes on the contagious dynamism typical of Barcelona's famous Ramblas into the sea. It quickly became one of the places with the highest level of urbanity in the whole of Europe, always filled with people enjoying the day and night lives. New places for a relaxed conversations and cheerful interactions are being added all the time, corroborating the effectiveness of a conversable scale that is now strongly established. Figure 1 shows the intensity of the public appropriation of Port Vell in 2006. This project generated a long genealogy of other public and private ventures that helped Barcelona become one of the most important global cities.

Figure 1: Port Vell, Barcelona, 2006. (photo by the author)

Figures 2 & 3: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin , 2008. The Sony Area (above) and the Marlene Dietrich Platz, Berlin (below). (photos by the author)

Figure 4: Canary Wharf, London, 2008. Park by the access to the subway station and shopping center. (photo by the author)

Potsdamer Platz, Berlin

The gigantic redevelopment of the Potsdamer Platz area is one of the most discussed mega-projects in planning and urbanism. Many critics have accused it of sins such as spatial elitism, social segregation and gentrification. And perhaps in its initial stages, the project did harm the resurgence of spaces on a conversable scale quite possibly because of the gigantic nature and newness of the redevelopment. Both Renzo Piano's Chrysler-Daimler-Benz and Helmut Jahn's Sony Corporation contain places of urbanity, even if their amazingly sophisticated facilities might cause some initial intimidation to ordinary users. However, nowadays these are places of a "conversable scale" as people gather and engage in simple, relaxed, everyday activities there. Like others, this mega-project phenomenon has to be observed on two quite distinct time scales (Figure 2). The everyday appropriation of the major structures leads to the population's perception of what'sd allowed, allowing a more relaxed interaction with the surroundings: even fishing is allowed in Marlene Dietrich square! (Figure 3). Meanwhile, in the nearby cinema museum in the Sony area, a poster of Fritz Lang's Metropolis remains on display, as if worriedly pondering the new directions of urban history.

Canary Wharf, London

Throughout the 1980s the public sector in London was severely criticized for its lack of vision and its neglect of urban design and, particularly, for not establishing a framework of guidelines for the quality of urban development (Carmona et al., 2003). This trend changed with the creation of the London Docklands Development Corporation in 1981 and its series of efforts to redevelop a vast area in east London previously dedicated to port activities, docks, containers, etc. The initial plan for the London Docklands was marked by major fiscal incentives and the liberalization of planning and land-use requirements. Although several of the resulting private developments were designed by star names from architecture and planning --such as César Pelli, Sir Norman Foster, and SOM-- the Docklands experienced financial, political and administrative ups and downs, enduring a difficult route through one of the most severe crises of capitalism in the early 1990s (Fainstein, 1999; 2001). The upturn came in 1999-2000 with the redevelopment of a business district known as Canary Wharf that, despite the adversities in its implementation, is considered the Docklands' best-finished project with over thirty multi-storey office buildings, various restaurants, parks, waterfront promenades, and a shopping/subway/light rail hub (Figure 4). The consolidation of Canary Wharf in so short a period is a rare achievement and proved the effectiveness of good planning. The success of this mega-project in the fragmented territory of contemporary

London largely depends on its recognition and use by the population, and its conversable scale of small-scale details and daily uses.

Dalian, China

With its strange amalgamation of a communist government-cum-capitalist economy, China presents us with numerous examples of the new mode of urbanisation. Chinese cities are experiencing rapid, ambitious, and millionaire ventures such as the Bund and Pudong, on what were rice fields just a few years ago, both in Shanghai (Figure 5). The same is happening in Dalian, a city of more than six million residents at the Yellow Sea, northeast of China. With an international port and an important industrial base, it shows all the conflicts of rapid urbanisation and is welcoming mega-projects that put the city firmly on a global scale. Nevertheless, alongside the gigantic buildings of major international brands, its CBD harbours small spaces permeating the commercial blocks that are openly receptive to the development of a dynamic conversable scale (Figure 6).

Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires

Located only a couple of blocks from the Argentinian's capital downtown and presidential palace, Puerto Madero is a paradigm of the successful revitalization of old port areas. Resulting from the amalgam of the top entries to a public competition in the 1980s, the plan had a slow start but took off from 1991 with the adaptive reuse of the historic warehouses, a series of modern buildings, the redesign of the promenades and public spaces, and a multiplicity of urban functions including residential use that ensure the 24/7 use of the area (Figure 7). Today, redevelopment continues spreading to the surrounding areas featuring projects by starchitects of global urbanism such as Norman Foster with an innovative residential building, Phillipe Stark with a luxurious hotel, Cesar Pelli with a landmark office tower, and Santiago Calatrava with one of his typical innovative structures, the Puente de la Mujer (Figure 8).

Sydney, Australia

Sydney contains inspiring examples of mega-projects, starting in 1973 with the daring voluptuous sailship-like Opera House, designed by the Pritzker Award Winner Danish architect Jörn

Figure 5: Pudong from the Bund, Shanghai, 2008. (photo by the author)

Figure 6: Commercial blocks, Dalian, 2008. (photo by the author)

Figure 7: An historic warehouse converted into offices over restaurants and shops in Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires, 2011. (photo by V. del Rio)

Figure 8: Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires, 2011. The public promenade and the Puente de la Mujer in the background. (photo by V. del Rio)

Figure 9: The Opera House pier in Sydney, 2009. (photo by L. Castello)

Figure 10: Darling Harbor, Sydney, 2009. (source: www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au)

Figure 11: Museum in Porto Alegre's riverfront, 2009. (photo by L. Castello)

Utzon. Initially, it was a controversial building on a prominent pier, but over time, the cultural importance of its performances, the progressive appropriation of the public promenades by numerous users, and the plurality pervading the surrounding area made it a valued public asset (Figure 9). In another city fragment, an old derelict port area, another private redevelopment mega-project named Darling Harbour became a huge success in placemaking. Comprising a large variety of food options, shops, waterfront promenades and uses, and entertainment attractions – many of which are public – it serves a huge clientele of residents and tourists attracted by the slogan "expect everything at Darling Harbour" (Figure 10). Both of these mega-projects became genuine places of urbanity and were unequivocally involved in creation of new urban places at a conversable scale.

Porto Alegre, Brazil

Porto Alegre, Brazil's southernmost metropolis stands out as one of its most conservative regarding mega-ventures and lacking in planning and urban design innovation, as noted by a recent study sponsored by the Lincoln Institute (Novais et al., 2007). Openly supportive of shopping-centres, the Porto Alegre community has hardly any experience of the real extent of the types of conflicts that customarily accompany large or impactful urban projects. However, things changed in 1996 when the state government decided to donate an area along the riverfront to the Iberê Camargo Foundation for a museum dedicated to his work. To pursue a building of great quality and strong identity, the decision was to hire Portuguese starchitect Álvaro Siza, another Pritzker Prize winner (Figure 11). The inauguration of the Iberê Camargo Museum in 2008 placed Porto Alegre in the restricted group of cities with projects by internationally famous architects. The museum became a huge attraction not only because of its architecture and art exhibits but also for re-valuing the riverfront and its views. Since then, the city included it in its repertoire of urban places for visitors and residents, such as the successful 'Museum Night', a Saturday night dedicated to the enjoyment of museums as places (inspired by the 'Lange Nacht der Museen' in Berlin).

Public Fragments in Private Domains

An important overarching aspect of all the above projects is that they depend on the increasing interpenetration between the private and public domains of the contemporary city. So much so that many authors have pointed out the narrowness of the traditional concept of public space (Avermaete et al., 2009). We need to recognize new ways of perceiving the public and private domains because, in many instances, a place's public nature is conferred by the social practices that are carried out in it. "It is still the passers-by who, through their activities and interactions, give the space its public character,

especially in their micro-practices of movements, games and bodily postures, and visual attention" (Ascher, 1995: 257-8). This implies important changes in the perception of the city since many spaces, such as shopping malls, must be recognized as about the public realm because of their intense public appropriation regardless of their legal status (Scott-Brown, 1990). Urbanism needs to accept the new historic order, abandon the nostalgia for the ideal European city-type with its dense continuous built environment, and accept the vision of a city that is at once strategic, pragmatic and opportunist, striving to combine the urban qualities that can use the market to preserve the old city's symbolic values (Ascher 2004, 2008).

On the other hand, it is crucial to note that the new mega-scale correspondingly demands mega-urban qualification. This means that we also need to qualify the field of architecture and urbanism as the quality of projects is decisive in generating places blessed with the sense of urbanity. This realization shines a light on another decisive factor in the urban context: the attention that has to be given to the temporal scale and how the conversable scale depends on and relates to it. This became clear in the projects discussed above which, although resulting from mega operations in disparate fragments of their cities, along time and daily use turned out to be conversable spaces: places that people refer, relate, and go to, enjoy, and are strongly embedded in their mental maps. "The level of justification and the criticism applied to these projects are ultimately confronted by the way that society (...) and its various social groups appropriate them" (Novais et al., 2007:12-13).

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