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Reflect! Visual communication for a new social "third space".

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Abstract

Oldenburg (1989) suggests that for a Health existence, citizens must live in a balance of three realms: home life, the work place, and the inclusively sociable place (the french "rendez vous"). A kind of "Third Place"- where people can gather and put aside the concerns of work and home, and hang out simply for the pleasure of good company and lively conversation - are the heart of a community's social vitality and thr grassroth of democracy.

This concept can be extended and filled with deeper objectives, aimed at single or shared "laic meditation", but more widely toward the spiritual dimension, to compensate for the alienation fostered (especially in young people, for example) by the white nights and the happy hour or situations of stress and conflict. We must therefore return again to reflect, to find ourselves and others.

For these spaces, the visual characters may confirm - metaphorically - the trend that from history (Candy, 2011 and 2012) evoke and actualize the use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, in the art (Zeky, 2007) and in architecture: from Jan van Heik Escher and Pistoletto, to English Mark's House (study Two Islands) or Mirror Houses in Bolzano (Peter Pitchler), or the Marseille Vieux Port (Foster) until Lucid Stead in Joshua Tree in California (of Pillip K. Smith III). Methodologically, the contribution will start from a careful and systematic review of studies, including theoretical and traditional, to arrive at examples and design experiments, visual in nature.

Keywords: urban therapy, social exchanges, informal socializing, enhancement, life quality

1. For a definition

Ray Oldenburg, American urban sociologist, is known for its scientific attention to places of public gathering - more or less formal - for a more informed civil society, for a more interactive and participatory democracy. Degree in Social Studies at Minnesota Mankato State University (master and Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Minnesota) is currently Professor Emeritus at the Department of Sociology of the University of West Florida in Pensacola. He is a consultant for entrepreneurs, planners, institutions and communities (secular or religious) that seek to create quality places within their facilities.

He defines the "Third Places" (TP) [1] as intermediate places between the familiar space of the house (*first place*) and the place of work (*second place*), which allow to forget worries and enjoy relaxing in company of others, or to do in group "spontaneous" activities, in a more educated and committed level. And even more, according to the principle of "no-substitutability of places", he argues the need of the three "kingdoms": home, office and "social". From the agora in the ancient Greek democracy; to the *café* during French Revolution; to the London one during the Enlightenment; up to the tavern during American Revolution. Open to an informal socializing, such places can be the heart of the life of a community, to promote and encourage greater social balance, mitigating status differences among various people; as well as they can increase the public aggregation and provide psychological support to people and organizations. Oldenburg argues that these places are born from the need to build "infrastructure for human relationships".



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The author addresses the analysis to America (to the city whose social and economic characteristics differ, in part, from ours, while for other aspects include similarities). For everyone, it may be also a need of a value character, rather than physical: the one of spirituality in contemporary toward space for secular meditation and places of speech and silence.

2. Characterizing aspects

We can briefly list here some characterizing aspects: the new forms of "urbanity" tied to territoriality; spaces "for the discursive togetherness"; pleasure, and sociability, neutrality and equity.

The "democratic" sociability, mentioned by Simmel [2] was once targeted to intellectual circles familiar to him, confined to restricted social classes by wealth and culture: today can be interpreted as a broader effort to create a thread in the fragmentation of experiences and social identity. While for someone (ex. Jürgen Habermas [3]) public sphere is a discursive space where citizens can meet and discuss freely about everything that is part of the community life. These are places where you can shape public opinion through proper information and debate. Although public sphere and public places are different, they join in a moment when, in accordance with everyone's opinions, the people in the place give birth to speeches who contribute to direct and stimulate public opinion.

Since it is not sure that sociability is linked only to the public sphere, as formation of political activities, it is essential to expand the research to places that produce new forms of "urbanity" and aggregation [4] and analyze what are the places and their emotional experiences that contribute to interactions, supportive or not.

From ancient times, to the Nineteenth century when they have been defined, up to the contemporary society, third places have changed over time (without forgetting the role of web) but the characteristics defined by Oldenburg are still valid: "neutrality", for example, offers a "*neutral ground*" where participants are at ease, enjoying it freely and increasing the possibilities of relationship between equals. If friendships and other informal acquaintances are limited to private life, the city loses potential. Neutral ground makes possible more informal relationships between people, avoiding the feeling of isolation that someone may experience. Third places must be able to satisfy the need of relax, distraction and sociability that people have before, during and after the daily tasks and routines; therefore the activities that take place there will not be rigidly organized, planned and structured; "equity" confirms that to Oldenburg "*The third Place is a Leveler*", the third place is a leveler. It provides equal treatment for people who access and interact freely, the social status is not important and people of different culture and socio-economical origin can meet and socialize. The concept comes from *Levelers*, the name of an extreme left British political party, born during the reign of Charles I (1625-1649), who argued the need to eliminate all differences in position and rank among people. From the Seventeenth century the concept has passed the political referring to the pursuit of equality between men: it is the time (as we said before) when the first cafés were born, intended as a meeting place and image of democracy.

Even the concept of *togetherness* (as union and solidarity) contribute to the definition of TP: Ash Amin [5], for example argues that such public spaces are places of encounter and exchange, regardless of their established and ruled function, for different experiences much inclusive, cooperative and confrontational. To Habermas *togetherness* includes forms, in a minor way, of "getting together" in public.

3. Third place as urban and social therapy

Among the potentially critical aspects that TS could potentially improve, there are urban stress, overcrowding, noise, insecurity.

"The stress" (from Lat. *strictus*, "tight") has a purely negative connotation in the popular imagination, a mental and physical status of a person that prevents to deal with everyday situations with clarity of mind and serenity: "stress of modern life; driving across town during rush hour has become a significant stress". But within certain limits it is not negative because it may foster a personal



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development. It has been widely shown that city dwellers are more stressed than the ones in rural areas: this difference is because of the large amount of stimulation of the urban environment and the rhythm of a more vibrant life. Some causes are: crowds, noise, limitation of individual freedom, less customization, crime and insecurity rate [6].

"The crowding" can have positive effects, creating a sense of security, or negative, causing anxiety (*overcrowding*). To assess the effects it is necessary to distinguish between wanted and suffered. In the first case crowding has positive effects: a person often tries situations with high social and spatial density wanting to "forget oneself" within the group. Examples of this type are concerts or sporting events, where the emotional involvement increases in contact with others. In addition to the desire to be in that situation it is aware that it will have a limited and predetermined duration.

Overcrowding is considered a facilitator when a person has to perform simple physical tasks (walking or running). In case of complex and cognitive tasks, it can be seen a decrease of performance and mechanisms of *cut-off*. In crowded places a person feels canceled as an individual, this causes a minor sense of social responsibility and a greater tendency to illegal behavior, even if not criminal.

The architectural elements of a building that help to increase the feeling of crowding are: single spaces without partitions, low ceilings, curved corners, poor views to the outside and walls painted in dark colors.

Taking in consideration buildings in its whole, those with low horizontal development are perceived less crowded than those with vertically development.

"The noise" is "an unwanted sound." It is a discomfort, physical and psychological, based on the position of a person which must suffer the acoustic stress.

Determinant factors for the severity of the effects of noise are: lack of control on the sound source, predictability, volume, stability. The first consequence of exposure to noisy environments is the loss of hearing sensitivity. Noise acts on the physiological level causing high blood pressure, due to vasoconstriction of peripheral blood vessels, headache, nausea. Psychologically it causes anxiety, irritability and emotional instability. To overcome these problems it can be used *masking*, covering unwanted noise with background music (ex. the music in shopping centers to cover shouting, register's sound, etc.). Of course, such tricks are inconclusive to ensure a good night rest, compromised in pathological terms with pseudo cultural initiatives such as the "white nights".

Noise affects the social aspects of life: in noisy environments you are less inclined to have relationships and conversations.

4. Silence and word

In a picture by Louis Khan, school is represented by two people arguing under a tree, and by Oldenburg communication, speaking, is the essential "game" of the third space. The vision of a sociologist and an architect is focused on word as reason of togetherness and sharing: dialogue has always been the most direct form of confrontation, and even in conflict is often a healthy debate. In the globalized world we live in today, constantly at the side of other, stranger, new, it is clear that communication is even more useful than in the past.

It is often clear how dangerous the opposite is and how many misunderstandings the inability to communicate and mediate create, in all circumstances, in all ways.

The synthesis of this argument boils down to two factors, the first is that we live in a present with continuous sounds, noises and words, practically in an absolute and eternal acoustic pollution, the second is that there is an open question on the close proximity between believers who profess different religions exploited for political ends.

5. Ideas for a meta-project: Reflecting!!!

Regarding visual analysis in this area between analysis and design approaches we can confirm some consolidated methods, as the Chicago school one, that among the Twenties and Thirties deals with the relationship between the city and membership forms. Park, Burgess and McKenzie define the city



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as the sum of emotions, habits, feelings and traditions that have stratified during the course of time, from generation to generation. The city is split into areas and groupings of people and each one has its own characteristics and define a particular type of citizen.

In complementary terms, the New Look school sees the perception and knowledge of the environment influenced by social relations and consequent values. Ittelson and Proshansky have defined the environment as the set of physical, symbolic, cultural and social aspects in which a person moves actively. This is the transactional perspective in which person and environment are to be considered together and have a constant exchanging relationship. The conclusion is that individuals perceive the environment on the basis of activities and behaviors, and different environments lead to different perceptual experiences.

From the Gestalt tradition, Kurt Zadek Lewin [7] proposes to deal with the issue in terms of "holistic", considering the user based on the actions, personality and daily life in response to an environmental stirring both psychologically and socially.

The resulting "Field Theory" (comparable with Marcolli) allows to identify certain categories of first reference:

- *Living space*: is a subjective and personal vision, in the set of perceptions, knowledge and emotions, values and meanings that attribute motivations and needs;
- *Border area of the living space and the external environment*, with a continuous exchange between them, in which a person is affected by physical and social world. Two activities of this category are the perceptual process and the execution of an action;
- *Area across the border in which life takes place without influences on living space* at that time because the current facts are not perceived.

These studies can be supplemented with consolidated contributions by Kevin Lynch and Gibson in some ways, but also by Mario Botta and Paolo Crepet in other way, with the query "where emotions live" [8].

From this it is evident that perception and understanding of psychological characteristics (and not) become fundamental environment to reclaim the places and live better [9].

Consequently, as we stated at the beginning, an integral part of these possible new urban realities will be formed by places of speech and silence, for a new spirituality in the contemporary, with new spaces for secular meditation: new spaces for reflection. So it can be taken into consideration - not only in a metaphorical sense - the mirror that, while reflecting, visually replicates the world: duplicating it reversing right and left; showing an environment that looks real, but it is instead, as defined by Michel Foucault, a space 'heterotopic' where we see where we are not, an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface but, at the same time, it absolutely is a real place, connected to all the surrounding space.

Mirrored surfaces are increasingly used for art installations and contemporary architecture, dressing city and ideas with light facets. Because of the reflective capacity and the irresistible trick aimed at broadening the spaces, mirror becomes the star of many projects playing with his qualities to distort the perception and create amazing visual effects of camouflage.

Among the works of architecture that have made this material its main design element, there is **Mark's House**, a Tudor-style house by the British studio Two Islands, that has upholstered with reflective panels, putting it atop a stand of mirrors, to simulate a structure that seems to float in midair. Of the same principle are **Mirror Houses**, two houses projected by the architect Peter Pichler, in an apple orchard, in the South Tyrolean Dolomites. In this scenario, a large glass mirrored faces outward capturing the surrounding landscape.

In Marseille, the reflecting surface is **Vieux Port**, by Foster + Partners studio, that realized it as a simple reflex cover: a canopy covering a public space in the ancient port area causing passers-by to look up discovering their images reflected.

Phillip K. Smith III in Joshua Tree, in the California desert, has created **Lucid Stead**, transforming an existing shack with mirrors that make transparent the structure around as if there were nothing. To adapt to the rhythm of the desert after dark, the house aligns with the desert and follows the natural mutations of light, revealing a play of shadows, reflections, projections and changes.



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In artistic field, mirrored surfaces are customary, such as sculptures by Jeff Koons and Anish Kapoor or the works of Michelangelo Pistoletto, the "lord of mirrors": his **Etruscan** is the emblem of the relationship between man and his picture, the main character comes from the past, just to stand in front of a mirror, he touches it as he wants to keep it up and enters into the future coming from the past.

Unlike performances so fantastic and imaginary, a mirror (with particular attention to the third space) will be the bearer of metaphors (visual and not) of the strong need of reflection - both personal and collective – that is increasingly urgency?



Fig. 1: "House of the People", Brussels, Victor Horta. Image taken from website <http://charmingclutterlivejournal.com/930.html>.

This building, realized in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century, was demolished in the 60's with no scruples, initially with the idea of rebuilding it elsewhere; in reality the parts were disassembled and scattered in the outskirts of town. Of the "House of the People" remain only a few vintage pictures and pieces of iron bitten by rust.



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Fig. 2: The chapel “La Tourette”, Arlesle (France), Le Corbusier. Image taken from website <https://www.pinterest.com/raldana88/modern-chapel/>.

The example of a place of silence in “Third Place”, shielded from external electromagnetic waves and noises to prevent that cell phones and networking devices may disturb the peace. The main stress for those who live in the city is noise pollution, and this is true for the Christian and the Muslim, the rich and the poor; together in a secular chapel everyone will talk to their God, but meanwhile will save the soul from daily hell of city life.



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Fig. 3: Officine Grandi Riparazioni, Torino. Image taken from website <http://www.nuovasocieta.it/metropoli/alle-officine-grandi-riparazioni-nascera-il-centro-nazionale-big-data/>.

Torino has large covered spaces to be rediscover and revalue, who have an enviable history in the name and on behalf of which it is necessary for urgent action to relaunch the project of an open and inclusive city. The OGR are one of the most important examples of buildings that are demanding the return to life, to the meaning of their lives in the vicinity of high population density places and high concentration of cultural institutions, academic and research sites.



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Fig. 4: Cavallerizza Reale, Torino, installation. Image taken from website http://www.delfinadepietro.altervista.org/delfina_web/colonne.html.

Another example of space - in the city of Turin - which can create interconnections within a broad and heterogeneous social stratum that needs to encounter, dialogue and expression. Cavallerizza Reale has become a symbol of protest by young artists against special interests aimed at the subdivision and the privatization of the building intended to luxury residential use.



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Fig. 5: the Feltrinelli Red, Milano. Image taken from website <http://www.s-notes.net/2013/10/feltrinelli-red-read-eat-dream.html>.

Unity is strength, in this case more than ever. Where it is needed there is the meeting and exchange between entities that we perceive distant, but not at all, a museum could integrate with the free workshops of art and craft, or a theater with an acting school, or a school of design or fashion. As in the example shown here, the libraries have become literary cafes, with reading rooms, consultation, discussion and refreshment, for read, talk, and also consume at the bar without any obligation to purchase in the library.



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WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE?

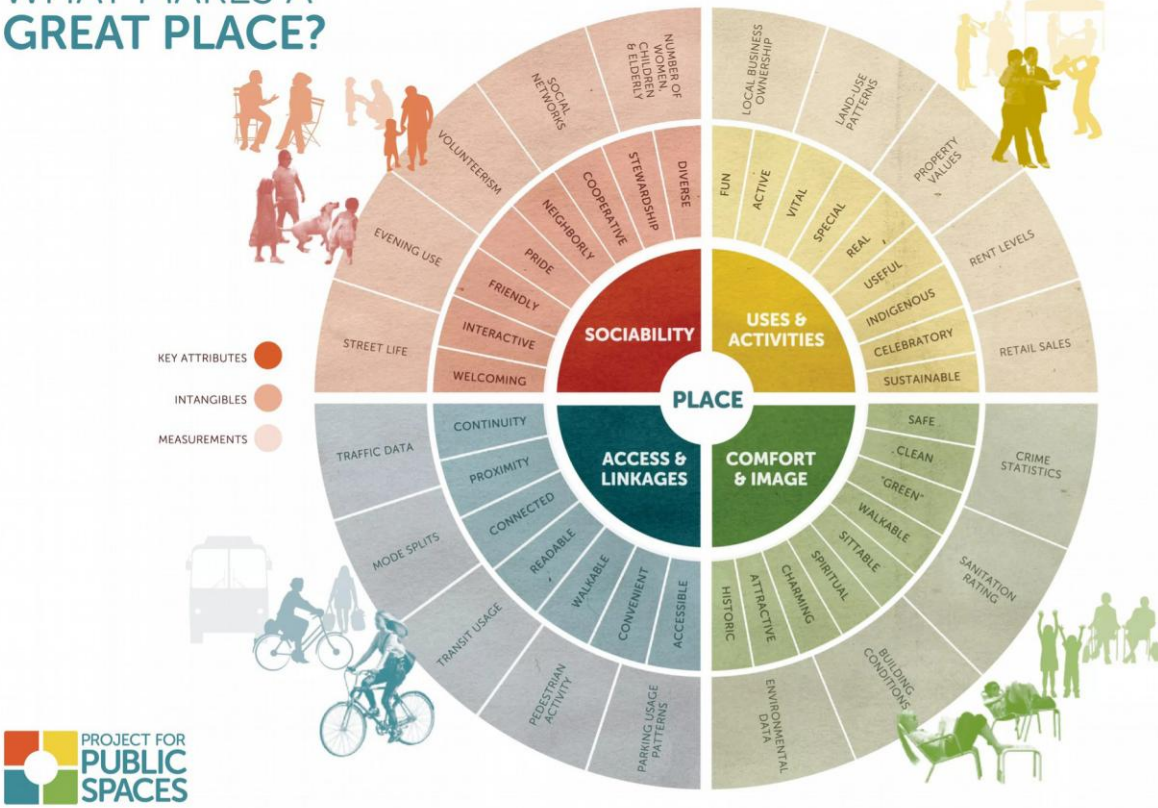


Fig. 6: Project for Public space, *What makes a great place?*, digital elaborated. The diagram illustrates the directions for the creation of pleasant places. At the center there are the keywords, then the intangible qualities and finally how to measure the quality of a space.

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[2] SIMMEL Georg, *Forme e giochi di società. Problemi fondamentali della società*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1983. Georg Simmel (Berlino, 1858 - Strasburgo, 1918), German sociologist, is considered one of the fathers of sociology. He became an author of reference for the School of Chicago. He is among the first scholars of sociology to deal with phenomena associated with large cities and metropolises. According to Simmel for the man who lives in the metropolis, the spheres of the family and the neighborhood, typical of the community, lose their importance, and they are replaced by a multitude of superficial contacts. The metropolitan individual lives a nervous life, because a frantic succession of images affect his nervous system, causing a decrease in the ability to react to stimuli. The individual is thus forced to seek refuge in the interstitial spaces in search of an "elsewhere" where the rigid conditioning of the social context is absent.

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