Doctoral Dissertation
Doctoral Program in Architecture. History and Project (30th Cycle)

Reframing the role of public open space as a tool for urban restructuring.

The case of Cape Town

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Politecnico di Torino
March 15, 2019

Abstract

UN-Habitat states that the economic gap between the urban poor and the rich is very much on the increase. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and touch on many disciplines, affecting and affected by economic, social, cultural, political and spatial aspects of urban life. Therefore, within the urban disciplines, one of the greatest challenges of contemporary cities is growing spatial inequality. This thesis focuses on the spatial dimension of the phenomenon of inequality, and on the dichotomy of exclusion and inclusion. This objective is pursued through the analysis of the role of public open space as a tool of urban restructuring, as a way to foster spatial justice and inclusion and to combat urban inequalities. In order to investigate this topic, the thesis reflects on the *narrative of separation* as the dystopia of urban design and public space. This research aims to demonstrate that public space is not a panacea for spatial inequality, but it is also necessary to reframe the role of public space beyond rhetoric. The objective is to define a new urban narrative capable of reinterpreting the importance of designing the *voids*, the *empty space*, the public open space. Implicitly, the thesis also examines the relevance of the urban design project and the current role of architects within the current crisis in the discipline of urban planning.

The research involved a mixed methodology which included an extensive literature review and archival research and the use of a case study method that helped the author to test, verify and compare the theoretical analysis. Cape Town, South Africa, was selected as the case study since it is considered the most segregated city in the word where spatial aspects of separation are particularly evident due to the legacy of both apartheid and modernism. Geographical and theoretical frameworks were made explicit to define the lens through which public space has been examined, and to identify the frames of reference applied to the analysis of the case study.

Through the examination of policies of Cape Town, the thesis proves that since the 1990s a small but extremely significant amount of attention to public

space has been increasing in the city. Even if the overall organization of physical space has not changed according to these theoretical achievements, these attempts at inclusion have shown the possibility of an alternative way of doing things. These attempts were tested through a detailed study of one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city: Khayelitsha township. In particular, the author makes a critical analysis of the flagship project of the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) programme, locally promoted as *best practice* project for local and national public space intervention. Time spent on site, observation of reality and interviews with main stakeholders and simple local users was put together in this research in order to evaluate the project with an alternative perspective. In fact, a set of critical spatial lenses through which to reframe the public space were extrapolated from the analysis of the case study. The VPUU project works like acupuncture, providing quality public spaces in a marginal area of the city, demonstrating the slow progress of Cape Town desegregation. In reality, the influence of this kind of project is limited since it only has effect on the neighbourhood scale and it does not solve the spatial inequalities of the whole city. Nevertheless, it triggers a change of mind-set and it represents an element of discontinuity which has generated a different point of view. Even if it is small and partial, it represents a huge step forward in the process of restructuring the city.

In conclusion, the thesis provides an extensive review of the current process of inclusion through the analysis of public space in Cape Town and opens up to other future and interdisciplinary research. The author reframes the role of public open space: it is a tool not only to restructure the apartheid city, but also to reinterpret other fragmented contemporary cities.

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