

Space of exposure: notes for a vertical urbanism

Lorenzo Tripodi

Abstract

This paper introduces some considerations about how the processes of *spatial production* and *image production* are increasingly intertwined and similarly managed in the urban field, and how images affect the way we think and experience public space. Starting from the assumption that the contemporary conception of public space is shifting from an idealistic vision of space for contact and mutual exchange to a more pragmatic *space of exposure*, a fluidified and mediated space where *city users* (as the citizen's post-modern personification) are exposed to flows of commodified images, the term *cinematic space* is proposed here in order to describe this transformation. An evident convergence is taking place between architecture and cinema production processes, perceivable not only in the phenomenology of everyday life, but also in the similarities between the languages used to describe them. In other words, digital media are not only essential tools for describing the contemporary urban landscape, but they are becoming more and more constitutive elements of the emerging urban reality. Some aspects appear relevant to this general dynamic, such as the increasing mediation of the urban experience by means of digital devices, the asymmetry of power between who is exposed to flows of images and who controls them and the increasing mobilization and fluidification of individual behaviours and lifestyles imposed by development models. These phenomena concur to determine the emergence of what can be defined a *vertical urbanism*: a structural transformation of the urban

economy where the exploitation of the semantic use of vertical surfaces becomes as important, if not even more important, than the logistic use of horizontal surfaces in determining real estate value.

The ineffable nature of public space

The concept of *public space* is a phantom increasingly crossing the current discourse about city, a discourse that often leans towards nostalgia. Like lovers often discovering how important they are to each other at the moment they separate, it seems that we began to be intensely concerned about public space starting from a general perception of its disappearance. But what is really disappearing? Not a physical reality, as in fact public spaces are evidently increasing in terms of surface and facilities, but probably a relationship between people and space, a way of living and experiencing urban space. It is not the purpose of this paper to tackle the complex theoretical debate about the nature of public space; rather, as a consequence of a long-lasting practice of exploration and video/photographic documentation of the globalizing urban landscape, it will be argued that the way we experience public space today tends towards a passive, "ocular centric"¹ attitude, flattening the identity of the citizen to that of the voyeuristic incarnation as spectator, as *audience*. The concept of public space, in the common sense as well as in the literature, evolves in the modern era parallel to the *bourgeois* public sphere as described by Jürgen Habermas²: a discursive arena universally open to citizens, originating at the end of the Seventeenth Century from the diffusion of printed press and cafes.

The sequence of pictures (fig. 1a–c) is emblematic of this conception. A man climbs on a chair and starts to address the people. Suddenly, people group around him in circle, a strongly symbolic form.³ At his feet, a bunch of notifications attesting the many times he has been legally prosecuted for exercising the right of free speech in public. Public space appears here in its essential nature of site of struggle for representation.⁴

Personally, I doubt if a more participative and interactive sphere ever developed in the past, defying to excessively romanticize what has always been substantially space for conflict and negotiation,



Fig. 1a–1c: Bologna: free speech in public

subject to fluctuations, expansions and repressions according to geographical and historical contexts. Nevertheless, today the idea—if not the reality—of public space as a civic arena, as place of contact or as place of formation of public opinion is collapsing into different visions determined by the widest dynamics related to globalization. Such a fracture participates to the paradigm of an epistemological shift generally individuated as post-modernism, or preferably, *late modernism*. Phenomena such as the decline of nation states,⁵ the privatization of public goods, the dominance of the symbolic and cultural economy,⁶ the dramatic diffusion of information communication technology,⁷ the dissolution of traditional familial and social categories, the emergence of new forms of communities weakly dependent on contiguity, migrations,⁸ terrorism and surveillance policies,⁹ radically renovate the conception, the design and the management of urban space.¹⁰ The combined influence of such phenomena produces a new vision of public space that can be defined *cinematic*. Here it is not the nature of site for representation to be denied but the balance of powers among players, the reciprocity in the capacity to produce representations. By re-designing the essential embodiment of the citizen's post-modern figure as spectator, that which emerges is a substantial asymmetry between who broadcasts and who is exposed to flows of produced images.

The cinematic space

The cinematographic metaphor is strictly fitting here: concepts like *frame*, *exposure*, *running time*, *palimpsest*, *spectacle*, *audience* are appropriate to describe contemporary urban structuring and restructuring processes. But in such a conceptualization, the use of the term cinematic has a double motivation. It refers to the current English meaning as a subject related to cinema, interpreting the conception, the perception and the physical construction of urban space as a substantially passive and contemplative experience for the citizen. But it also refers to the original etymology deriving from the greek *Kinein*, to move, denoting *kinematics* as the branch of physics dealing with the motion of a body or a system: a meaning as well reflected in the more colloquial term *movie*, asserting the strict interdependence of visuality and motility in determining the urban configuration.¹¹

As a cinematographic experience is produced through a combination of three fundamental features—a photographic sequence of images or frames, a conveyor determining the *frame rate*, and a lens acting as mediating surface allowing to focus (fig. 2)—so the renovated urban public sphere manifests itself as a combination of three ideally overlapping functional spaces: a *space of exposure*—where images are produced and reproduced; a

space of flows—where constant necessity of movement is unceasingly fostered and managed; a *space of mediation*—where protocols of exchange and codification are defined and controlled by the market. These three aspects, or functions, concur to define the *cinematic public space* as a new identity of the civic urban form. They can be seen as different vantage points, different perspectives from which to look at an interdependent concurrence of factors: the increasing technological mediation of every human interaction, the increasing velocity of most societal and productive processes, the increasing relevance of the visual perception and production in the everyday life experience. Looking at contemporary literature on urban life, we could hardly escape from categorizing any contribution as adherent to one or more of these three visions. Let's have a closer look at these three phenomenological spaces, focusing on the one called *space of exposure*, a perspective specially fitting to this conference topic.

The Mediated space

Other than normative or property status, public space is inherently defined by human behaviour. Human behaviour is increasingly mediated by digital devices (fig. 3). In this perspective, public space is mainly conceived as *interface*, where the face to face contact between individuals is substituted by interactions with or through digital devices. This general process of mediation belongs to what we can call a *networked sphere*, acting at the same time as an extension of private sphere in public space—let's think of mobile phones, PDA or mp3 players building portable private bubbles in public—or as an intrusion of the public sphere in the private physical domain—as for example the uncountable windows opened the internet into almost every house allowing a certain level of mediated public life.

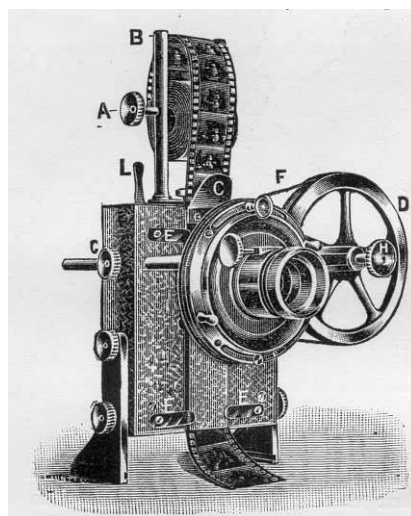


Fig. 2: Cinematographic projector

Mediation concurs to dissolve the traditional categories of public and private and promotes new ways of experiencing urban space as an extensive interface environment. The mediation process generates a *representational space* that surfaces in the physical space mainly codified as flows of images. Codified images are the main means through which interaction happens in the mediated space and tend to produce a slight transformation in the way we interact with the morphology of urban space.

Historically, the intrinsic quality determining public space's existence was its potential horizontal use as space accessible to everyone, substantially characterized by emptiness that can be socially filled. If its classical nature is that of open space, of urban void, of the *arena* where gathering and copresence can have place, the new embodiment of public space takes the substance of the *membra-ne*: it is a mainly vertical articulation of surfaces and portals filtering and regulating the shift between private and public life. Porosity, selectivity, traceability, capacity to act as filter are some qualities of an emerging urban landscape assuming an increasingly complex, fractal and dynamic character. The design of such an urban morphology follows access issues more than property rights: as Paul Virilio¹² pointed out more than two decades ago, the doors of the city have been substituted by access protocols.

A relevant aspect of this process is that public life is increasingly filtered, tracked, registered by digital devices, contributing to the construction of a parallel *city of data* which forms and decays at an incredibly faster pace than its physical embodiment, "the" city. It is a meta-city where velocity, connectivity and time of decay are becoming parameters almost as relevant than form, mass, property and other traditional values in determining economical value and power relationships in the physical world. It is the *space of flows* as described by Manuel Castells,¹³ as opposite to the *space of places*.



Fig. 3: Digital monitoring device in entrance

The Fluidified space

Second main characteristic of the contemporary urban space is to be space of flows, or *fluidified* space, where immaterial flows of data and money are directly connected with an increasing mobility of bodies and goods.¹⁴ The city is no longer the site of *staying*. Historically, the settlement was the primary figure of the urban, essential constitutive values of which were intimacy, appropriation, defence, circumscription and cohesion; with late modernity, there has been a definitive shift towards an ontology of movement. The nature of the city is defined essentially by the capacity to attract movement, to interweave trajectories, to manage traffic. Today the city is above all a node, an attractor, a territory of transit and exchange. According to this vision, public space is essentially planned as infrastructure. It is conceived, de-signed, managed and regulated mainly by the means of fostering mobility and charge capacity. This is an inherently modern conception, embodied with the idea that the maximum displacement of goods, capitals and incidentally people produces the maximum economical growth or development. The important role assumed by the renovation of Railway Stations in recent revitalization processes of urban centres is not an accident. Such primary nodes of individual trajectories, ultimate incarnation of urban public space in the age of mobility, are reorganized with an increased quantity of retail spaces, advertising surfaces and screens (fig. 4, 5). Beyond their status of public infrastructures, they are generally managed through private public partnership and considered key spaces for commercial exploitation, intensively seizing the attention of a huge number of commuters. Attention is exploited as a capital resource in the urban economy. The main measure of urban life is shifting from space to time, as distance is becoming less relevant and speed increases as the dominant value. Again Virilio, who has an education as urban planner, called for a new discipline in order to describe the contemporary state of being, which he de-fined *dromology*, the science of velocity, establishing conceptual links between visibility and time compression.¹⁵ Is this relationship that I'm interested in highlighting as a dominant character of the urban field. As in cinema the mechanical movement (*time rate*) of the film is causally connected with the time of exposure, both impressing or reproducing images, in the same way the *space of flows* determines a *space of exposure*, conceived and structured in function to maximize the city user's capacity to be exposed to flows of information, images and goods. More than existence, it is *persistence* that counts, in the hyperreality domain...



Fig. 4: Railroad network diagram



Fig. 5: TV screens at Milan railway station



Fig. 6: Branded landscape in Florence

The Space of Exposure

Thirty years ago, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour¹⁶ in their *Learning from Las Vegas* led a provocative study on the emerging American landscape. Aside from the effective value of the urban context they were depicting, we must recognize that their analysis of the Las Vegas strip can today be considered a far-sighted mode to analyze urban environment, in a way that could be fruitfully applied to most of the contemporary cityscapes. The importance of signs, and of architectures that

acts themselves as signs, designed in a functional relation to vehicles' speed, is recognized here as the primary feature determining urban form (fig. 6). The power to impress, to persist on the retina, to interfere with the trajectories of the city user becomes a substantial goal of urban planning. The citizen becomes a *vector* in an *economy of gaze*—where to catch the eye is the imperative.

Since then, this relationship between speed and image consumption has become a central node of the new "creative city" configuration. Urban space acts primarily as *space of exposure*: a functional, structured space where city users are exposed to the spectacle of goods, entertained, impressed by flows of images. Image manipulation or consumption is the increasing occupation of the contemporary citizen, at work as well as during leisure time. The production of images becomes a main production form in the age of the symbolic economy. It is a trend that affects the production of urban space, the way as the city is physically shaped. The management of imagery is more or less evident at the core of most phenomena affecting the urban world, and we can recognize this dominance in many forms and in many words inhabiting the current urban discourse. *Urban renewal* programs are conducted mainly by redesigning the image of the city as a way to foster physical transformation; *urban marketing* acts mostly through the production of seductive images for competing cities, in order to attract capital and creative and human resources, allowing the material achievement of what is planned (fig. 7, 8). Quoting Richard Florida's paradigm,¹⁷ the *creative class* arises: it is composed mainly of professionals of image production, painters, directors, graphic designers, and obviously architects, whose professionalism is increasingly connected to digital rendering techniques. Visual arts and digital representations are at the core of this production force. The *festivalization* is the tendency to program urban life as a *palimpsest* of cultural and entertaining events.

Gentrification processes in their typical form can be seen as strategic deployment of insurgent creative energies, that in principle can act as subversive, but generally end up providing a re-newed and fashionable *image* able to re-boost real estate value of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The biggest industrial sector in the global economy, beside the military one, is *tourism*, essentially based on the management of image consumption. *Cultural heritage sites* are attentively managed as exploitation of consolidated image resources coming from the past and offered to the leisure market. *Disneyfication* processes are a common phenomena in urban historical *milieux*, where traditional cultural values are reinvented and slightly subverted in order to fit in the stereotyped and commodified image expected by the tourist (fig. 9). Finally, and all over the

latter, *advertising* is colonizing every context of urban landscape not only as a residual use of available surfaces, but as a training force for the urban economy. Its diffusion is not incidental, but in a synergetic way connected with many building or restructuring operations, and it is often an essential prerequisite for financing new construction or renovation projects. All these processes are somehow distributed in delocalized networks, but emerge from production to consumption through an essentially vertical articulation of surfaces that constitutes the essence of the contemporary city, experienced as succession of frames on personal and public screens, on facades, billboards, signage, and through any other kind of transparent or opaque, passive or active surface.

The sequence of images (fig. 10a–c) helps to clarify the point of my presentation. We are near Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, a place that we can consider emblematic of many of the dynamics that are listed above. Speaking in architectural terms, the outcome of this huge urban project well represents the short-circuit between digital representation and production of physical space: if rendering techniques are intended to better represent the real world, here a paradoxical *renversement*, an overturn, seems to take place.

Moving across the physical space of the *Platz*, the hyper real sensation of being in a digital rendering surfaces in the passer-by... But this story happens just at the fringes of this fast transforming district, which became a valuable node in the urban asset of Berlin. In April 2006, I was passing over the new Leipziger Platz, which until recent times was just a circular sign on the map and where only recently buildings have been sprouting up like mushrooms. I noticed carpenters assembling a scaffolding, which I supposed to be the prelude for the construction of a new building. But as I came closer, something seemed strange to me: the scaffolding was occupying the whole lot, leaving no place for the supposed building. Curious, a few weeks later I went back to the scene and I found it wrapped in a plastic canvas, printed with *trompe l'œil* facades, detailed at the point to show the merchandise in the painted shop-windows: the scaffold had become



Fig. 7-8: Billboards advertising urban renewal programs



Fig. 9: Florence: a taste of the "renaissance disneyland"



Fig. 10a–c: Leipziger Platz, Berlin: Building "simulacra"

the *simulacrum* of a building. Before its effective construction, the image of the building was realized and inserted in the urban landscape, used as resource for advertising and advertising at the same time for its own future realization.¹⁸

A Vertical Urbanism?

What I semi-seriously call *vertical urbanism* is an emerging form of production that implies a massive use of tools and techniques borrowed from image production in order to determine and exploit value from the urban location, connected to the potential attention of the widest number of passers-by. It is a combination of advertising, graphic design, urban marketing, architecture and visual arts. The capacity to attract and maintain attention becomes a fundamental measurement unit of contemporary urban production. This capacity is connected with the progressive colonization of urban surfaces, expressly for dominating their communication potential. Urban design moves from *fields* to *frames*: land's logistic use of horizontal surfaces lose relevance in respect to the semantic use of vertical ones. If until now, the design of the city has been essentially drawing plans from an aerial point of view, distributing functions through the physical space in a primarily horizontal articulation, in this case we assist the prodromes, the premonitory signs of a *vertical urbanism* aimed at organising the visual perception of an urban palimpsest. Programmed flows of images constitute the core of the urban experience, the screen becoming the main morphological element structuring a city where to be visible is more important than what actually is done inside the architecture. The commerce as the historical core of the urban life¹⁹ is substituted by the display, the showroom becomes the evolution of the shop and the shop window overcomes the warehouse.

Maybe the most emblematic expression of this tendency is in the "overexposed" Times Square in New York City, perhaps the truly architectural embodiment of the Empire's Capital in the age of globalization (fig. 11). According to M. Christine Boyer,²⁰ *Light Units in Times Square*, or L.U.T.S., have been defined by a 1987 ordinance that mandates the amount of illuminated signage that new buildings in New York's Times Square *must* carry. It is not the excess of visual signage, but rather the insufficient brightness compared to a required standard that is in this case ratified by law, reasserting the eminently semiotic nature of this space. L.U.T.S. replace lots in a shift to an urbanism where the screen becomes the dominant morphologic element of urban landscape. Here, a dense palimpsest of moving images is programmed in order to obtain the maximum exposure to the densest mass of passers-by. It is a space dominated by the entertainment and media industry, and is also significantly a

space the parameters of which approach that of the internet rather than traditional architectural environment made of stone, the look of which alluded to solidity, consistence and endurance. Again, the capsizing of "real" in the face of the virtual is perceptibly crossing a physical space that is structured and experienced as a multimedia hypertext, organized as a layered cascade of windows, dominated by successions of pixels, information-overloaded and redundant.

Here we have the ultimate achievement of the *cinematic city*, where the *space of exposure* is totally integrated with the *mediated space* and the *space of flows*. It is an informational space, where the data-city comes literally to the surface showing its metaphorical nature; it is one of the most densely crossed sites in the world, although significantly lacking inhabitants, where the form of the space symbolizes the shift from a conception of public space as a place for staying, meeting and joining, to a site of flowing: despite the name, there is no *square*, it is just an X where the main arteries of the city cross and the hugest number of passers-by is pushed in the urban rhythm (and I won't deny the fascination that such a choreography undoubtedly carries).

Can it be objected that such a particular space as Times Square or other similar locations in the dense downtowns of capital cities are not a valuable example for the general evolution of the global urban landscape, that they are only a very partial



Fig. 11: Times Square

example of how cities look. But aside of such impressive, brilliant display of shiny power, the colonization of vertical surfaces by corporate industry has an evident diffusion in many other ambits and forms. Just to stay in NY, at the same moment I picked up the images shown in the previous page, I discovered an apparently odd campaign carried by a small organization based in the Lower East Side, called *localEXPRESSION* (fig. 12). In the general neglect of the public opinion, they denounced a new municipal law which was being promulgated, forcing all the sidewalk newstands of the city to be substituted by a standard model. With the new system the news-sellers would have been reconvered to franchise employees, not owning their newsstand anymore, and the variety of printed press would have been contained inside a standard kiosk. In the proposed solution, the whole external surface would have been given in concession to advertising agencies (specifically Viacom), suppressing the view to the public of the printed press. Struggling against this law, the activists of *localEXPRESSION* pointed out how this was going to represent a cancellation of a plural form of expression provided by the public exposition of the diversity of magazines, substituted by the monopolistic display of a corporate image. Similar processes are happening for bus shelters and many kinds of street furniture, as well as for every kind of residual urban surfaces or

**BYE BYE
NEWSSTAND**

**NYC = Diversity
not Mall Furniture**

**New law will destroy a proud 100 year old
New York City Tradition**

Help Us Fight This Unfair Proposal

PLEASE CALL

Mayor Bloomberg at 212 788 3000

Speaker Miller at 212 788 7100

and tell them to stop the vote

And Please Hurry -- the vote is October 15th

THANK YOU FOR CARING

more details at localexpression.com

Fig. 12: *localexpression.com* campaign "bye bye newsstand"

vehicles, as part of a rush for monopolizing the visual communication lead by strong powers.

On the other hand we can notice that also the resistance to hegemonic process increasingly assumes the form of a struggle for the right to urban surfaces: practices like graffiti, street art, sticker art, subvertising, urban scale projections and many others similar attempts have become a fundamental part of artistic and political strategies against the hegemony of global corporate power on the expressive potential of urban surfaces. To reclaim streets and walls and disempower commodified visual pollution are major issues for movements concerned with consolidated powers (fig. 13).

Conclusions

We live in the age of the symbolic economy, where an incommensurable mass of symbolic exchanges exists in a representational sphere. A process is occurring in the interstices of globalization, where the techniques of digital visual representation, supposed to expand the possibility to represent the fast evolution of physical landscape, are increasingly becoming constitutive elements of the emerging urban realities. Digital imagery is sensibly emerging in the architectural surface of the modern city, expanding the semiotic potential of urban space. It is not a hazard that the entertainment industry is becoming one of the most relevant actors in the real estate market and that techniques refined in the cinematographic industry are pervasively affecting the way urban space is managed and designed. Cinema seems now to provide a model for the production of lived space. Cinema is a wonderful discipline, a dominant culture in our times that has the dignity of a major art. But cinema is also far away from being a democratic process. It is a highly hierarchical and asymmetrical production process, directed through commercially definite purposes. Urban life is an infinitely more complex world, that is at risk of being affected in a dysfunctional way from the asymmetry of power generated in the context



Fig. 13: Subvertising campaign in Berlin

of global capitalism by the pervasive domination of digital means of production, reducing the citizens' role to a mere audience of a spectacle directed

from far away. We inhabit a representational space that is plastered with produced images. But control over these flows of images is an open issue.

Notes:

- 1 Bertram, *Visibility, Dromology and Time Compression: Paul Virilio's New Ocularcentrism*, in *Time Society*, 2004; 13: 285–300.
- 2 Habermas J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press 1989.
- 3 Simplistic maybe, nevertheless synthetic and suggestive, the opposition "horizontal circle vs. vertical quadrangle" could summarize the main point of this article.
- 4 Kilian, T., *Public and Private, Power and Space* in Light A., Smith J.M., (eds.) *The production of Public Space*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield 1998.
- 5 Fraser N., *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, in Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press 1992.
- 6 Zukin, S., *The culture of Cities*, Malden MA, Blackwell 1995.
- 7 Castells, M., *The Rise of Network Society*, Oxford, Routledge 1996.
- 8 Appadurai, A., *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minnesota University Press 1996.
- 9 Lyon, D., *Surveillance Society, Monitoring Everyday Life*, Buckingham, Open University Press 2001.
- 10 Low, S.; Smith, N. (eds.), *The Politics of Public Space*, New York, Routledge 2006.
- 11 I am tempted to push this metaphor further, recalling the difference between *kinematics* and *dynamics*. As the first discipline deals with "motion without the consideration of masses and forces that bring about the motion", I find interesting to associate it to a form of passive, uncritical experience of the urban motion, claiming at the same time for a more concerned, comprehensive, *dynamic* lecture revealing the forces producing it...
- 12 Virilio P., *L'espace critique: essai sur l'urbanisme et les nouvelles technologies*, Paris, éd. Christian Bourgois, 1984.
- 13 Castells 1996, see note 7.
- 14 Lash, S. Urry, J., *Economies of Sign and Space*, London, Sage 1994.
- 15 See note 1.
- 16 Venturi R., Scott Brown D., Izenour S., *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge Massachusetts, The MIT Press 1977.
- 17 Florida, R. *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community, and everyday life*, New York, Basic Books 2002.
- 18 On the facade, a web address links to the Viterra Developments, part of the Orco Property Group, a company based in Luxembourg and listed on both the Euronext and Prague Stock Exchange. "Orco operates in a number of different countries throughout the Central and Eastern European region including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Croatia, Germany and Slovakia. Orco is always on the look out for the latest opportunities in new territories. (...) Focusing on prime locations, Orco holds prestigious and varied assets that continually increase in value." <http://www.orcogroup.com/about-us>
- 19 Weber M., *The City*, New York, Free Press 1966.
- 20 Boyer M.C., *The Double Erasure of Times Square*, in Madsen P., Plunz R. (eds.), *The Urban Lifeworld. Formation, Perception, Representation*, London\New York, Routledge 2002.

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