Reclaiming the urban space

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Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space.

Henri Lefebvre [1]

The importance of the city nowadays is increasing since, for first time in history, the bigger part of the human population lives in urban spaces and the city's economic role is at its peak. As Antonio Negri suggests: *"the city is itself a source of production: the organized, inhabited, and traversed territory has become a productive element just as worked land once was. Increasingly, the inhabitant of a metropolis is the true center of the world…"* [2]*.* That's why it has been referred to over and over again in debates over political, economic, social and other strategies for the future.

Modern urban landscape is often being depicted as "dark" place [3]: as a place of alienation, of gray and repetitive architecture, with high suicide rates, expanding psychological disorders and widespread metropolitan violence. It is being presented as prison and its inhabitants as prisoners, deprived by the state and capital from the right to intervene in its creation and development. This is actually true for most contemporary cities. Reshaping of urban landscape is taking place, which sometimes leads to the violent displacement of people from areas, whose value has risen, to others with lower one (such as the infamous *slums*)[4]. And this "game" with real human lives is being played in favor of capital and power accumulation – in the "cleared" lands are being erected shopping malls, office spaces etc. in the name of economic growth. Henri Lefebvre calls this type of city an oligarchy, managed for its inhabitants by an elite few state experts and

corporate managers, thus ceasing to be a public space [5].

The common people, who become victims in these “schemes”, on their part, are powerless to resist these processes, at least through the officially recognized legal procedures – neither through the judicial system, nor through the so-called political representatives, all of whom in position of authority and thus intertwined with capital. So amongst the grassroots are appearing different forms of resisting, reclaiming and recreating the urban public space. A colourful palette ranging from urban rioting to self-organized market spaces for product exchange without intermediates and neighborhood deliberative institutions (assemblies, committees etc.).

The loss of “meaning”

Big obstacle for people taking back their cities is the contemporary societal imaginary, viewing, as Richard Sennett suggests, the public space as ‘meaningless’ [6]. Sennett points at the nineteenth-century, a period of rapid urbanization and economic growth, during which the outcome of the crisis of public culture was that people lost a sense of themselves as an active force, as a “public” (Sennett, 1992:261). Sennett suggests that during this period an important role in the process of depriving the public space from meaning was the adoption of more uniform dress and behavior codes, more passive demeanor and less sociability, all of which can be seen as byproducts of the emerging consumerist culture and logic of representativity of that period. As Peter G. Goheen says: “*The street became the place for illusion rather than exposure to the truth*” [7]. In a sense, the public man was supplanted by the spectator who did not so much participate in the public life of the city as he observed it.

In order to overcome this point of view we are in need of new significations, which to give back meaning to the public

space. And such can emerge only through practices of collectivities of citizens (i.e. the public), that would have positive and practical effect in the everyday life of society. Such processes already are taking place in the countryside and the village. Because of the crisis many are leaving the city life behind, returning to the villages, that once their parents and grandparents fled [8]. In the countryside the city youth rediscovers communal ways of life, sharing of common resources, traditional and ecological agricultural practices etc. But for the majority of those, who undertake such steps, the village is an escape route from the uncertainty of the city, a form of escapism rather than part of political project for social change.

As for those who remain in the cities, living under conditions of growing precarity, unemployment and stress, the future does not seem so bright, with harsh austerity measures still on the horizon. This discontent is producing uprisings and mass mobilizations in urban areas, ranging from the Istanbul's Gezi Park, Ferguson's uprisings against police brutality, the anti-World Cup riots in the Brazilian cities and the Occupy and Indignados movements in the squares of every major city around the World. In all of these cases, in one way or another, the question with urban planning is being posed: can the city square obtain the role of main cell of public deliberation, i.e. simultaneously *agora* (meeting and exchange point) and basic decision-making body; should a global festival of consumerism, such as the World Cup, have the right to reshape urban landscape, regardless of the 'human' cost; and who should decide if an urban green space (such as Gezi Park) is to be covered with concrete and transformed completely.

For cities of interaction

We can detect a direct link between these attempts of citizens at intervening in the urban landscape and the broader project of direct democracy (i.e. broad public self-management beyond

state and capital). Actually in many of these uprisings and movements, the demands for participating in city planning and for participating in political decision-making in general were highly intertwined, because of the broad mistrust of authority, so typical for our times, and the rising interest in authentic democratic practices. According to Henri Lefebvre:

Revolution was long defined […] in terms of a political change at the level of the state [and] the collective or state ownership of the means of production […]. Today such limited definitions will no longer suffice. The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation of 'the interested parties' [the inhabitants or users of space] [9].

The demand for broad public intervention in the creation and recreation of the urban landscape can easily be positioned at the heart of the project of direct democracy, since as David Harvey describes it: "*The right to the city is […] a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.*" [10]

Already social movements are engaging in endeavors aiming at intervening in the reshaping of urban landscape. In the center of the city of Athens (Greece), on Notara Street [11], different individuals decided not just to propose, but to practically initiate alternative solution to the refugee crisis. For years now arriving migrants were forced to seek shelter in open spaces such as parks and squares, exposed to police and fascist violence, rain, cold, etc.[12] What this group of activists decided to do was to reclaim their right to the city. They occupied an abandoned office building, previously used by state bureaucracy, and turn it into housing space for migrants. And they did that through democratic procedures: the

building is being managed through general assembly, open for both Greek activists, maintaining the space, and migrants, living in it, and through various working groups, subordinated to it. And this very project is being designed as exemplary for the possibility of reshaping urban landscape according to human needs and desires.

Something similar is taking place in the city of Manchester, where an empty office building was occupied by activists for housing rights and redesigned for being able to accommodate homeless people[13].This is their answer to the contemporary housing crisis in England, which left on the street 280 000 people so far [14].

Another example is the so called *Guerilla Gardening* [15].This is the act of people reclaiming unutilized urban space and turning it into botanical gardens in which they grow food. The term *guerilla gardening* was used for first time in the case of the Liz Chirsty Garden [16] but as practice can be traced back to the Diggers [17]. Nowadays such gardens exist in many cities around the world (London, New York etc.). Usually the produced food is being distributed equally amongst the gardeners and their families and the gardens are being managed democratically. It is another case of people directly transforming urban landscape for the satisfaction of real human needs, beyond and often detrimental to state bureaucracy and market profiteering.

The right to the city is the right of citizens directly to manage their urban environment in ways that differ in scale and manner: from general assemblies being held on public squares to switches on the street lamps, so lighting could be placed under direct public control [18]. However, it is not just the right to place the city in service of physical human needs but to make it reflect the very mindset of its inhabitants, i.e. the citizen’s interaction to penetrate every sphere of

urban space: such as the architecture, as was the case in the free city-states of medieval Italy where the citizens were participating in the urban planning through deliberative committees [19].

In conclusion, we can say that the urban issue is really becoming a central question today and the qualities of urban life are moving to the forefront of what contemporary protests are about. But in order the city to acquire again meaning as public space, it have to be linked with the project of direct democracy, since in it there is a real public, i.e. society consisted of active citizens. The greek-french philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis points at two stages in the pre-history of modern society in which such a public space was created: the Athenian *polis* and the medieval city-states [20]. We can also see the seeds of it in the Paris Commune, Barcelona of 1936-39, the New England Town Meetings and many more. Only by linking, both in theory and in practice, struggles for the right to the city with the broader project of direct democracy, the modern city can acquire a truly public meaning, instead of the one it has today as temple of economic growth, consumerism, alienation and oligarchy.

Notes:

[1] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991. p. 59.
[2] Negri, Antonio. *Goodbye Mr. Socialism,* Seven Stories Press, 2006. p. 35.
[3] For example in Bifo's book *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso, 2015) and Proyas's movie *Dark City* (1998)
[4] See Mike Davis. *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2006.
[5] Mark Purcell on Deleuze, Guattari and Lefebvre
[6] Sennett, Richard. *The fall of public man,* 1976
[7] Goheen, Peter G. *Public space and the geography of the modern city.* p. 482.
[8] Spain is good example for this "Neo-ruralisation"

[9] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991. p. 422.
[10] Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities,* Verso, 2012. p.4
[11] New occupations in solidarity with the refugees
[12] The Battle For Attica Square – Greece
[13] Homeless rights activists occupy empty city centre office block
[14] The homelessness minority: England 2015, p.vii
[15] Guerrilla gardening, examples
[16] The Liz Christy Garden is a community garden in New York, USA, started on 1973.
[17] The **Diggers** were protestant radicals in England, often viewed as predecessors of modern anarchism (see Nicolas Walter. Anarchism and Religion, 1991. p.3). They were aiming at social change through the creation of small egalitarian rural communities.
[18] Simon Sadler. The Situationist City, The MIT Press 1999 p.110
[19] During his service in the Florentine Committee, Dante participated in the preparation and planning of the widening of the street San Procolo (Christopher Alexander, The Oregon Experiment , Oxford University Press, 1975. pp.45, 46).
[20] See for example The Greek Polis and the creation of Democracy (1983) and Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town (1993)