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Against banalising urban planning

From the “Post-It” city to putting the city in its setting

Cities and cityscapes need to be seen in the context of globalisation. The untrammelled growth of cities throughout the 20th Century has spawned vast metropolitan areas. This has clearly given rise to the city as landscape. The old divide between town and country has gone –one only need gaze out of a car or plane window to see a patchwork of built-up areas and urban sprawl where traces of the natural landscape and farming can still be seen.

One of the many drawbacks of this urban sprawl is the way in which cityscapes are fast losing their singular features to become ever more homogeneous. Little by little, our experience of the cityscape can be likened to travelling the length of a vast Möbius Strip. This is what Edward Relph (1987) was getting at when he spoke of “repetitive standardised discontinuities”. Paradoxically, these discontinuities foster a more uniform cityscape, not a more diverse one. That is because easily-repeatable buildings and urban layouts are simply cloned regardless of the lie of the land or the local landscape. Rather than “urbanisation” one should speak of “urbanalisation” (*sic*) [i.e. “urbanisation” + “banalisation”] (Muñoz, 2008). Urbanisation is one of the driving forces behind globalisation’s impact on local settings.

The real-life application of such ideas can be seen in the complete indifference to space that characterises current urban development. That is to say, the “sameness” of today’s spaces is growing apace –spaces that until relatively recently were thought of as different. In the past, distinctions were drawn between: city and countryside; city centres and their outskirts; cities and towns. The forces driving urban growth have changed to the point where one can say they now constitute a system for transforming land into cloned layouts and settings. The system delivers a mass-consumption product that has no link whatsoever with the original landscape.

“Take-away” cityscapes. The new kinds of cityscapes are defined precisely by their *placelessness* (Muñoz, 2003; 2004). In other words, “cityscapes” that have no vernacular architecture rooted in local social and cultural traits. The new built-up areas are wretched affairs that are gaudy and superficial in the extreme.

Just like the theme parks that uniformly reproduce far-off places in bygone ages –Marco Polo’s China, King Arthur’s Britain, colonial New Orleans– shopping centres can be cloned around the world *ad nauseam*. The roof tiles, windows and lattice screens found in Islamic towns have been reproduced on thousands of tourist housing estates across Southern Europe. It is easy to choose the quaintest visual features of old Mediterranean town centres –for example, façade colours, wooden doors and even public space – and clone them into new “historic” settlements.

The townscapes are cloned independently of place because developers do not have to reproduce the landscape and socio-cultural setting in which they were rooted. Accordingly, such urban landscapes are mere stage sets which, as I have explained on other occasions, gradually become both less representative and functional (Muñoz, 2006; 2007). This is why we find it increasingly hard to appreciate the true identity of places through their landscapes. Put another way, it is becoming more difficult to appreciate which features stem from local history and culture because those traits are becoming ever more generic and similar. In some cases, city dwellers live the same kind of metropolitan lifestyle, giving rise to a similar, standardised use of the space available. In other cases, cities undergo such radical changes that the cityscape ceases to reflect historical and cultural roots. Instead, cityscapes become fleeting, to be replaced by new ones. In much the same way as everything else we consume, these cityscapes become throw-away items to be replaced by others almost at whim. Thus the settings that link our identification with place become a sequence of images that accompany us everywhere we go and which increasingly characterise the cityscape in which we happen to be. We can therefore speak of “take-away” townscapes that are placeless.

“Urbanalisation”: The urbanism of common cityscapes. There is therefore a levelling process at work that creates what might be called common cityscapes. The formula’s success over the last few decades has led to the appearance of generic urban settings in which the similarity of design programmes has gone hand-in-hand with a convergence in uses and behaviour patterns. However, it is also clear that there is no one process of spatial homogenisation. That is to say, although the globalisation of cities and regions is often linked with the cloning of certain kinds of spaces (for example, franchised shops, tourism areas, shopping centres, urban development around major airports), it is also true that differences are to be found between both cities and regions.

As I see it, the management of these differences forms part of a universal process that I have termed *urbanalisation*. In reality, the urban spaces are not identical but are as similar

as management of the special features of each setting allow. This tension between global and local features leads cities to tend towards one extreme or the other. Global and local forces thus combine to give rise to similar urban forms over different time scales. All these forms can be considered as merely co-ordinates within an overall urban framework. Paradoxically, *urbanalisation* does not stem from the spread of a homogeneous approach to urban planning

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but rather from the way differences are managed. Instead of differences being treated as expressions of place, they are merely used for marketing purposes or are belittled and torn from the complexity that gave rise to them so they can be packaged within the simplifying discourse of the global order. The new urban visual order, far from ignoring differences, assimilates them within a simplifying global discourse and providing a sequence of images that are treated as though they were souvenirs of the local history and culture. The result is a series of vulgar "snapshots". The differences are there but lose their roots in "place" and hence lose any local character

they once had. That is the case with Victorian factory chimneys. They are surviving fragments of the old industrial urban fabric and in many cases form part of a rich heritage. However, the fact that they are meted out the same treatment within generic planning schemes means they merely become another predictable part of the iconography of urban renewal.

The same happens with the preservation of vernacular architecture and the restoration of old dwellings. The differences do not disappear but are rather treated in a way that robs them of both place and history. The problem lies not in homogenisation but in standardisation and measure. In other words, differences neither vanish nor are swept away by globalisation. They continue to exist but the wider global discourse makes them comparable and measurable because the same yardstick is used for interpreting them. In this sense, *urbanalisation* can be understood as efficient *transformation* that renders urban and regional differences easier to understand and assimilate. That is why *urbanalisation* simplifies the built environment and entails a loss of the diversity and complexity that any urban setting and landscape should contain.

From the "Post-It" city to putting the city in its setting: what the visions

of globalisation did not foresee. Over the last thirty years, the links between globalisation and the city have been explored from various perspectives: Geography, Economics, Anthropology, Sociology and Architecture. This analysis has led to two opposing positions regarding both the origin and the consequences of the problem. In doing so, it has given rise to varied tensions and contradictions. There are those who believe that the vast reach and breakneck speed of global economic and political changes are sweeping away local features. Yet others point to the singularity of place and regional differences. The latter have stressed the importance of place, arguing that it still holds sway in a "globalised" world. These say that local character found in special cultural and anthropological features is

strong enough to withstand the tide of globalisation and the things driving it (world-scale capital and technology flows, global consumption patterns). This difference of views is both impossible to resolve and utterly sterile. Furthermore, it has made it hard to grasp either what constitutes “globalisation” (which is seen as a levelling process) or the nature of the tension between local and global forces. In any event, the balance between both forces varies in each place. The experience of shopping at IKEA is interesting in this respect. It is true that all IKEA stores are the same the whole world over. Yet IKEA also furnishes intriguing local elements: references to the company’s origins and the lifestyle in the Småland region of Southern Sweden –to which the Swedish flags in the store and the names of the products all make rhetorical allusion. There is even a “Swedish shop” which invites shoppers to taste Swedish food: salmon, hamburgers, cereals and a host of other delicacies. IKEA’s restaurant offers further opportunities to try Swedish dishes. Similar hybrids between globalisation’s cultural codes and the singular nature of place, falling betwixt the global and the local, are in fact part and parcel of our daily urban experience. Examples of this phenomenon are:

- McDonald’s restaurants, where there is a local siting and design strategy on the one hand and a clearly global offer on the other. We can not only be sure of finding a McDonald’s on every major street in tourist-thronged historic town centres but we also know the behaviour and consumption code as soon as we spot the logo. In addition, in some urban settings, these establishments become public places with a strong local character. They might be cafés first thing in the morning, catering to nearby workers and the less well-off or between 5 o’clock and 7 o’clock when grandparents pick up their grandchildren from school and take them for a bite¹.
- Phone and Internet cafés on the other hand are technologically specialised outlets where e-mail and international phone booths have global connotations. However, they are the nearest local meeting places for poorer immigrants and provide support, information and services. They are also places where global technology-based behaviour patterns are strongly present, covering everything from e-mail log-in to manners. On the other hand, interaction with others makes phone booths the equivalent of the village green or local pub.
- Low-cost flights make it much easier and cheaper to reach far-off places for holidays and weekends. Yet air travel for the masses is akin to commuting by train. Here, local cultural behaviour spills over to air travel (for example, passengers taking food for the journey and even sharing their provisions with others).

When one considers these myriad combinations of global and local elements, the debate on the two models of globalisation mentioned earlier is of little interest. What is noteworthy is that both visions coincide on one thing: globalisation and the forces behind it are having a levelling effect on places and this is linked to two main drivers behind how we see tomorrow’s global world. One is the massive deployment of new transport, information and telecommunication technologies. The other is the way capital and property investment flows are making places more uniform.

Thus the image of a global city is not only linked to transport but also to its cityscape, rendering both the visions of the globalised city and of the “local” city equally illusory. Both visions saw economic and technological globalisation leading to cityscapes dotted with glass towers and international waterfronts, airports and TGV stations, computer terminals and “smart” buildings.

■ ¹ Translator’s note: This refers to customs in Spain.

The towers and glass blocks that globalisation was supposed to usher in are a perfect metaphor for the cities which authors such as Paul Virilio characterised in the nineteen eighties as *transparent* and continually *over-exposed* to technology and telecommunications. These cities were in the global spotlight to the extent that their divisions and walls were no longer barriers. This was because information could flow freely through such cities like water through a sieve.

At the beginning of the nineties Saskia Sassen used the term “global cities” to denote the places where such processes held sway. During those years, the city of the future was imagined by both philosophers and architects to be one where urban spaces would be open to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the economic, political and cultural flows arising

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from globalisation. The truth is, our cities have changed in both appearance and substance since then but not in the way the pundits envisaged. Today’s cities are neither a blank slate on which globalisation is writ large, nor are they hangovers resisting change.

Quite the contrary, our cities have become places where the wider world meets the nitty-gritty of place. This has given rise to forms and behaviours that few anticipated, full of paradoxes, like those revealed by trans-national migrations, the way urban spaces are clothed with imaginary apparel, taking on more

local features that often clash but which either maintain or strengthen the city’s singularity. Globalisation, far from sweeping away the differences between places, only accentuates them, creating unforeseen mutations in both urban spaces and local lifestyles. In other words, places have changed forever and thus trying to rescue iconic historical and modern cityscapes is a pointless exercise in nostalgia. However, these mutations do not level regions but instead introduce new differences rooted in the urban globalisation process itself.

Thus the place does not “melt away” in the “global air” –in the sense meant by Marshall Berman in his well-known essay²– as some expected, nor for that matter does it always stay the same, as others thought. Cities are the crossroads where global and local meet and have given rise to a new “local” cosmopolitanism which is strangely imbued by globalisation. Such places are somewhere between the “Post-It” city (ubiquitous and interchangeable, lacking any singular sense of place or culture, and fluid) and the traditional city, an expression of urban processes and a vernacular image of *civitas*, and which is now grappling with the new cosmopolitanism but in a clearly local fashion. After thirty years of speaking of urban globalisation and world-wide flows, of technological utopias and global levelling, what we see today are cityscapes that combine both local and ubiquitous features. It is true that in some cities, the differences that characterised place are mere leftovers in a global mindset, almost like souvenirs of a lost past. *Urbanisation* now characterises

■ ² Translator’s note: The book referred to here is *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, published in 1982.

many cityscapes. However, in other cities, local features foster dialogues and create tensions with globalising forces, giving rise to new urban forms and cityscapes. Local and globalising forces combine, revealing cities' great ability to re-invent themselves. Perhaps this is why, despite everything, cities remain the prime setting for human relations II

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