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THE (RE) APROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SPACE(S)

ABSTRACT

I grew up in a small mountainous village. There, people know one another, information or gossips spread really fast. In a really small village, on a human scale, it is easy to develop real relationships and public space can be considered as an extension of the private space. It is quite common to see people invest the street in front of their houses to play cards, games, read a book, enjoy the sun...

When I moved to a bigger city, I noticed that, even though people live physically closer from one another, they don't know the people who live nearby. Moreover, the ways I experience the city, skateboarding, urbex or graffiti, have confronted me to a lot of «walls» and «barriers». That led me to think about our human relationships outdoors, in the streets, in public squares, parks. I wondered if we could really feel free of our actions and moves in public space.

SOCIETY HAS CHANGED PUBLIC SPACE

To try to understand how our contemporary cities work, we need to refer to the industrial revolution since the society really changed at that time. In fact, the industrial revolution brought about great improvements for transports and their democratization. A lot of urban planners and architects such as Cerdà, Haussmann, and later Le Corbusier or Oscar Niemeyer, designed modern cities as an ode to speed, optimization of flows and performance. Today, with the increase of the population and mass urbanization, everybodyknows what "city life" is like. Urban space has become a place of constant flows of information, goods and people. Those flows influence the ways we occupy public spaces. In fact, with the evolution of our lifestyles, our behaviors and the rules that run our society, public space tends to lose its human dimension. Hence the question: aren't there new ways to apprehend the city to make it ours again?

HOW CAN THE "MANIPULATION" OF BOTH INFORMATION AND CITIZENS BY PUBLIC AUTHORITIES OR/AND BY «ULTRA-CAPITALIST DECISION-MAKERS» LEAD TO AN URGE FOR (RE)APPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SPACE ?

PUBLIC SPACE...

A public space is a symbolic space, without geographical boundaries, where people can confront themselves to otherness and express themselves. In fact, it allows free access and freedom of opinion that shapes what we refer to as public opinion. Today the expression "public space" is used to qualify all sorts of places like streets, parks and even some of those which are privately owned like supermarkets, bars, malls... In fact, all these kinds of places can have different rules depending on their proprietors. That is why public space is different from public spaces. Public space has to have free access whereas public spaces do not have to. Those spaces are really important because they promote exchange of coded signs, communication in the urban landscape. Those exchanges are really important in so far as they are part of our «self-individuation» process. In fact, without such spaces, we can't be confronted with otherness and we lose sense of reality and our capacity to interact with other people.

... AND WHY WE NEED IT ?

Our society cannot be dissociated from the notion of public space. However, the latter is endangered as much as the free expression of public opinion. In fact, cities tend to become fragmented and excluding space. For example, public authorities and private owners install aggressive urban furniture, security guards, night watchmen, ultrasonic devices and security cameras to discourage those who "would make the place less attractive to tourists, companies and potential investors" from staying there. The "not wanted" such as homeless people, poor people, youngsters, migrants, ... are expelled far away from city centers. The society is changing and our behaviors changing too. In fact, a lot of things such as the merchandising of time and human beings or the proletarianization of know-how and know-how-to-be really influence our relationships and our interactions in the city. We can notice a loss of meaning in our lives which leads to an alienated population who feels powerless, who can't even participate in shaping their own environment. Today, more and more people feel like they don't live in a true democracy but rather in a plutocracy. In fact, it seems that the richest people have more and more power on public authorities and politicians.

A lot of factors threaten public space(s). The everlasting quest for wealth, the privatization of more and more areas divide cities into zones and reinforce segregation (gentrification) and isolation. To fight against that, it is necessary to find alternatives to make public space ours again, to restore a form of « common values», solidarity and a sense of community. Nowadays, we do not really invest public space anymore, that's why we have to find ways to solve the problem. Urban art and Applied Arts can help to create

collective communication spaces and these fields may solve or just bring to light new points of view on the issue. The goal is to propose a social design, closer to people and their real needs. In fact, everyone can contribute to design a new public space that would be more sensitive, more creative, closer to the needs of the local people. The point is to propose playful alternatives using games, conversations and collective thinking to create spaces to «re-enchant» our lives. Maybe, these fields can help to solve or just bring to light new point of view about public space issues. The goal is to propose a social design, closer to people and their real needs. In fact, everyone,can contribute to design a new public space more sensitive, more creative but also that responds to social issues of the local people. The point is to propose playful alternatives using game dynamics, conversations and reflexions to create spaces to «re-enchant» our lives.

FANZINES AND SOCIAL VALUES

As a graphic designer, I am really interested in creating fanzines. A fanzine is a sort of magazine, usually made by amateurs, for the fans of a particular form of entertainment, lifestyle, culture, ... It is also a good way to express ourselves and give our opinion about any subject we want. I think fanzines allow to gather people and make them think about contemporary issues in a creative process that is both playful and free. In some case, it is an opportunity to learn about the history of our own city, to discover its particular/typical places. A fanzine, as a group project, is a good way to socialize because all its contributors are also the producers, the makers and the broadcasters of the project. In fact, it is an opportunity for people to communicate and share personal opinion and knowledge. It teaches mutual help and team working.

A member of «La Cinégraphie», a tiny screen-printing house.

Claire and me riging one mor time the screen guide befor screen printing

Claire, a friend of mine, printing some pages of our last fanzine in «La cinégraphie»

Same people the same day but a litte more tired.

THE PROJECT

Working in groups can convey some really interesting values, that is why I think it can be interesting to propose collective workshops to debate about this topic. In fact, I noticed during my research that we all have difficulty in identifying the sources of our anxiety in our environment. These workshops can encourage people to tell their stories, to avoid the social pressure that can prevent some people from expressing themselves. Moreover it is an opportunity to pool know-how, manufacturing tools and "social skills".

For this project, my role as a graphic designer is to create a panel of tools with predefined shapes to allow people to express themselves graphically so that they can show their vision of their city life. At the end of the project, those stories may be gathered in a fanzine to engage a dialogue, to be debated with other people.

First prototypes of lynoleum stamps.

Geometrical stencils that we can use with pen or sponge soak in paint.

Screen printing frames made with nylon stocking , wood and vynie glue.

First test of stencils in front of teachers and collegues.

THE DIFFERENT STEPS OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop falls into two parts. First, a phase where participants walk the city through a track game. The goal is to find different markers disseminated in one (or more) districts. Each marker is a poster with a flash code, that sends to another marker, and a specific glyph that corresponds to a graphic tool for the second part of the workshop. The route they create has an impact on what their productions look like. The markers are placed in some strategic parts of the city to be discovered. The idea is to make people explore their city to see it differently and try to get off the beaten track. Thanks to this game I plan to raise questions linked to themes such as segregation, violence, sexual harassment, socio-spatial inequalities, etc in order to prepare them for what they will have to do later during the graphic expression process.

Then, participants gather all the glyphs they have collected and take their tools. There are four kinds of tools: lettering guides, silk- screen printing frames, stamps, and stickers. All these objects/signs are samples of what we can get in the city such as noise, moves. So, using what they have learnt and got from the track game, the participants have to tell a story or give their points of view about their feelings of daily urban life.

At the end, all their productions are gathered in a fanzine. The idea is to show what people have done during the Rebel Rebel festival in September 2019.

Rebel Rebel is an event created by the FRAC PACA that gathers freelance editors and fanzine makers to promote the activity to mainstream public as well as aficionados. I would like to participate in this festival to make participants communicate about their productions and maybe debate about the evolution and transformation of their city.

Graphic expression time in front of «Agent troublant».

A little group of participants searching the next marker.

Participants discover what tools they have unlock during the track game.

ONE WORKSHOP , TWO SITES

Workshop at Agent troublant (Marseille)

Agent Troublant is both a small fanzine shop and an art gallery based at the Cours Julien in Marseilles. This place is run by a team of volunteers who are all fond of fanzines and who want to share their passion. They organize a lot of events such as workshops, exhibitions or concerts to promote this kind of counterculture activities and philosophy.

I already knew the team because, with a few friends, I have printed a fanzine named "Le Chaudron" since 2017 and they sell our fanzines. I contacted them to present my project so that they gave me the opportunity to try it. It is a really good place to experiment my workshop because Agent Troublant is located in the middle of some popular districts of Marseilles such as La Plaine and Noailles. To my mind, these places can be a good start to launch the workshop because they illustrate very well the gap between what local people want or need and what public authorities plan for the city. It is a good overview of bad and good aspects of city life in Marseilles.

Workshops at the Spot, in Nîmes

The Spot is an art gallery, a concert hall, a brewery, a skateshop, a bar, a humanitarian canteen and a rental working space. I know this place because I had a full month internship there last September. At the Spot, there is always a lot of people with different artistic profiles. There, you can bump into a graphic designer, an illustrator, a painter, a journalist, a clothes designer and a photographer on the same day. This place is really lively, full of creative ideas and collectiveinitiatives. For the past five years, one of the most important aim of the association has been to try to develop a local economy in Nîmes' disadvantaged districts such as Richelieux and Gambetta that are abandoned by the public authorities of the city. For example, they created a local currency to try to have a better balance in community based economy. They often organize artistic/cultural events to make people from different backgrounds get together. The Spot has also rented for a few years a small space to a fanzine /book shop. I asked them if they were interested in my project and, fortunately, they agreed.

OBSERVATION AND FEED BACK

People are generally comfortable with track games. The fact they work in team avoid those who have the most difficulties reading maps to lost their path. It's interesting to notice that in every case (both in Marseilles and Nimes) people have discovered some part of their city. I tried to make them get off beaten track, walk small lanes and dead-ends.

However, I was surprised to see how difficult it was for them to express themselves. They always needed some kind of guide lines to create. In fact, without specific constraints they don't know how to deal with. It was important to have a huge debriefing before we start writing and drawing. They are also a little bit prude when they have to go deeper in their reflexion. Maybe if they have more time to think about the topic it would be better. If the workshop were two days long productions would be more interesting.

I was quite pleased to notice every route brought about different graphic productions. There was a wide range of topics debated. Moreover, I realized that the productions were really different from a city to another. I think it is due to cultural factors and also to the kind of place the workshop took place. For example, at Agent Troublant, participants were youngsters and they were deeply affected by what happened on Aubagne street with the collapse of a building or by recent marsillian political scandals… whereas in Nîmes people were a bit older and maybe more preoccupied by environmental and economical issues.

I spend a real good time with all these people and if I can do it again in the future I will repeat the experience whithout any doubt.

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