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SU INSEDIAMENTI E AMBIENTE  
RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE  
DI CULTURA URBANISTICA

10

che "genere"  
di città  
per il futuro



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## **"Dance, dance otherwise we are lost". A reflection on the times of the city from an Urban Design perspective**

*Luisa Maria Calabrese*

### *Abstract*

With this article I propose to address the issue of 'constructing space in time' from the perspective of urban design. Which means essentially to shift from being an observer of city life to being someone responsible for drafting sensitive and resilient public spaces. Urban designers, perceiving the city mainly as a morphological phenomenon, are primarily concerned with the sensory, and particularly with the visual, qualities of urban space. This view of the city as a spatial-physical structure requires abstraction, to enable



*Fig. 1 Le Sacre du Printemps (choreography by Pina Bausch), in Wim Wenders' Pina. 2011. Shooting on set.*

abstract

comprehension of the complexity and continuity of the urban space, its transparency and its indeterminacy. However, this abstraction too often fails to take into account the properties of the city as a place of habitation, ignoring the sociocultural specificities of its different users. The reflection I propose attempts to take urban design beyond this abstraction, which is so indifferent to the human element, towards a more concrete and specific approach. It calls for a shift in the rather theoretical postmodern interest in the urban space, important though it is in its morphological inclusiveness, to embody a pluralistic subjective perception of the space and its use, bearing in mind fundamental relationships between space, time and social processes.

### **“Danziamo, danziamo, altrimenti siamo perduti”. Una riflessione sui tempi della città da una prospettiva di Urban Design**

Questo articolo affronta il tema della costruzione di relazioni spazio-temporali rappresentative per la società contemporanea dal punto di vista del design urbano. Il che significa essenzialmente passare dall'essere un osservatore ad essere un progettista dello spazio pubblico, responsabile della analisi, progettazione e realizzazione di spazi pubblici. I progettisti urbani, che percepiscono la città principalmente come un fenomeno morfologico, si occupano principalmente del sensoriale, e in particolare delle qualità dello spazio urbano. Questa visione della città come una struttura spaziale-fisica richiede astrazione, per consentire la comprensione della complessità e della continuità dello spazio urbano, la sua trasparenza e la sua indeterminatezza. Tuttavia, questa astrazione non riesce troppo spesso a prendere in considerazione le caratteristiche della città come luogo di abitazione, ignorando le specificità socio-culturali dei suoi utenti diversi. La riflessione che propongo tenta di portare la progettazione urbana al di là di questa astrazione, che è così indifferente all'elemento umano, verso un approccio più concreto e specifico. Richiede un cambiamento nell'interesse postmoderno piuttosto teorico nello spazio urbano - importante anche se nella sua inclusività morfologica - di incarnare una percezione soggettiva e al tempo stesso pluralistica dello spazio e dei suoi possibili usi, tenendo ben conto delle relazioni temporali, spaziali e socio-culturali.

#### **Keywords:**

*gender, times of city, urban design*

## **"Dance, dance otherwise we are lost"<sup>1</sup>. A reflection on the times of the city from an Urban Design perspective**

**Luisa Maria Calabrese**

*"To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other...Kandinsky dreamed of a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation."*

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)

*"I'm not interested in how people move. I'm interested in what makes them move".*

Pina Bausch (2009)

### **Introduction**

At the outset there are deep noises of gallops. The brown earth covering the floor reveals hundreds of tracks of wild animals in stampede. Instead, it is a set of dancers what appears on the scene. Their presence is heavily felt through their turbulent footprints. The rhythm of their steps defines the space. The sound of the bodies, whether they inhale, breathe, run or fall on the floor turns space into a place. Bodies encounters are celebrated both in their power as well as in their fragility. Depending of the matter it is composed of, the environment reacts more or less visually to those encounters. Earth, sand and water are tangible examples of such human/spatial/temporal interactions. These materials embody expressively the effect that the environment has on the body and vice versa.

What I describe here is the amazing opening scene of Wim Wender's documentary "Pina"<sup>2</sup> (2011), which I propose as the starting point to reflect on the times of the city from an urban design perspective. The stampede of dancers on stage is similar to a crowd of pedestrians crossing the street. On stage as in the street flying dust materializes air. The void weighs. Water drops densify the emptiness amid the bodies in movement. The lightness of matter clashes over the presence of the ephemeral. As dancers move across the stage their bodies construct space. Similarly, people crossing each other in public space construct common ground and create the space they cross. As Jane Jacobs puts it: "Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance — not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts

which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any once place is always replete with new improvisations.” (1961; 76).



The street – and public space in general - is where ‘placeness’ and ‘timelessness’ come together because of the presence of people inhabiting it. This is of course nothing new. From Benjamin’s flaneur to Lefevre’s Right to the city, from De Certeau’s Everyday life to Virilio’s Landscape of events, understanding the urban by analyzing and theorizing street life has been one of the core discourses in urban philosophy and theory across the Twentieth Century. What I propose in this article is to address the issue of ‘constructing space in time’ from the perspective of urban design. Which means essentially to shift from being an observer of the urban to being a designer, someone responsible for drafting sensitive and resilient public spaces. Urban designers, perceiving the city mainly as a morphological phenomenon, are primarily concerned with the sensory, and particularly with the visual, qualities of urban space. This view of the city as a spatial-physical structure requires abstraction, to enable comprehension of the complexity and continuity of the urban space, its transparency and its indeterminacy. However, this abstraction too often fails to take into account the properties of the city as a place of habitation, ignoring the sociocultural specificities of its different users. The reflection I propose attempts to take urban design beyond this abstraction, which is so indifferent to the human element, towards a more concrete and specific approach. It calls for a shift in the rather theoretical postmodern interest in the urban space, important though it is in its morphological inclusiveness, to embody a pluralistic subjective perception of the space and its use, bearing in mind fundamental relationships between space, time and social processes.

*Fig. 2 Wim Wenders’ Pina. 2011. By introducing her dancers in various landscapes and urban settings, thus perpetuating the emphasis on the relationship dance creates with a terrain, Pina Bausch has deeply understood and celebrated the power of our bodies, when moving collectively, in constructing meaning of the everyday.*

### Time, space and place

'Time', 'space' and 'place' are some of the most used and misused terms in urban theories, and they have been defined differently and from different theoretical perspectives, constituting rather nebulous keywords in the field. In outlining the conceptual framework of these terms, time is defined as 'natural time, abstract time or experiential (phenomenological) time', with the latter being conceived as 'my time: time as experienced by me-or-anyone, my own here-and-now, my situated being-in-the-world, me as a real someone someplace sometime now' (Scannell, 1996; 152). Space, in turn, 'is amorphous and intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analyzed' (Relph, 1976; 8). In relation to the often intermingled concept of place, 'there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place' in a way that 'it seems that space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places' (Relph, 1976;8). In this sense, place 'is a concretion of value ... it is an object in which one can dwell', whilst 'space ... is given by the ability to move' (Tuan, 1977;12).

Time and space constitute intrinsically inseparable elements of our physical reality. Time engages space and space requires time, as 'we have the sense of space because we can move and of time because, as biological beings, we undergo recurrent phases of tension and ease' (Tuan, 1977;118). On the one hand, space exists in time, changes through time and it is depicted differently at different temporal points in history, whereas distance often involves time length. On the other hand, the sense and measurement of time are heavily dependent upon space and spatial distances. Consequently, time is associated with the spatial dimensions of the world and vice versa, while these two structural aspects of reality 'coexist, intermesh, and define each other in personal experience' (Tuan, 1977;130). Space becomes place when it acquires symbolic meaning and a concrete definition, marking the whole spectrum of identity and sense of belonging. Thus, place is also associated with the concepts of time and space. These close links and their crucial importance for the evolution of reality bring forward the issue of the role of urban planning and urban design in conceptualizing, materializing and experiencing time, space, and place within the context of the contemporary city.

Since the 1990s time, space and place are involved in a heated discussion of continuity and change in relation to virtual and physical (urban) space. 'Time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990, 1993), 'compression of the world into a "single place"' (Robertson, 1992;6), 'stretching' of social relations across distance, namely 'action at distance' (Giddens, 1994), 'no sense of place' (Meyrowitz, 1985), 'placelessness' (Relph, 1976), are some of the prominent approaches to the concepts of time, space and place and to the ways they are experienced in an age of postmodernity and electronically mediated communications. Before the advent of electronic communications, people were bound by oral communication and physical travel, whereas today people are able to cross and adjust temporal and spatial distances largely because of the usage of electronic media and communications.

The experience of time and space has significant implications for people's physical

mobility and sense of identity. Thus, the changes in time and space under the influence of media technologies have provoked a heated debate between theorists. 'Time-space distance' (Giddens, 1994) and 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990, 1993) are two key theses in this debate. Central to Giddens' theory on globalization is the notion of 'time-space distance', namely the process of a separation of time from space. This notion stems from, on the one hand, Giddens' (1973) sociological criticism of Marx's argument that 'even spatial distance reduces itself to time' and, on the other hand, the significant influence on Giddens by McLuhan's (1987) problematic concept of the 'global village' and its teleological doctrine that technological advancement allows people to interact with each other as in face-to-face interactions. Giddens (1990) argues that technological evolution has driven a universalization and liberalization of time and space, which he considers prerequisites for globalization in an age of postmodernity. He argues that globalizing dimensions of interactions create 'stretched' relationships between 'local' and 'distant' media forms, with 'local happenings' being, for instance, 'shaped by events occurred many miles away and vice versa'. These practices and flows of exchange separate time from space, facilitate social interactions that are disembedded from spatial and temporal contexts, and establish stretched and distanciate communication patterns and relationships.

Close to the idea of time-space distance, Thompson (1995) argues that 'any process of symbolic exchange generally involves the detachment of a symbolic form from its context of production: it is distanced from this context, both spatially and temporally, and re-embedded in new contexts which may be located at different times and places'. Like Giddens, Harvey (1990) identifies postmodern conceptions of space and time as the historical starting point of his theorization. However, diverging from Giddens' idea of a separation of time from space, Harvey formulates the notion of 'time-space compression'. He uses the notions of universalization and liberalization of space and time differently from Giddens, arguing that universalization and liberalization allowed time to annihilate space. In this sense, what takes place, according to Harvey, is a shortening of time and shrinking of space, so that time has the potential to diminish the constraints of space and vice versa.

Harvey understands time-space compression as a chain of changes concerning an increasing rapidity of time and a decrease in physical distances in an age of post-modernity: 'the general effect, then, is for capitalist modernisation to be very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, in social life'. He argues not only that an increasing rapidity of time breaks down barriers of space, but also that media technologies have played a significant role in this change, among other technological innovations: 'innovations dedicated to the removal of spatial barriers ... the railroad and the telegraph, the automobile, radio and telephone, the jet aircraft and television, and the recent telecommunications revolution are cases in point'. Thus, for Harvey the advent of new global communications have made it possible for exchanges to take place compressing the units of time and space needed in the past. Harvey defines the new situation of compression as 'disruptive spatiality' where aggregation of spaces,

cultures and symbols redefine, but do not make extinct, the temporal and spatial order of social life we have known so far. Hence, the notion of compression aims to illustrate the shifting terrain of temporal measurements and spatial distances, a terrain that defines the terms under which communications are carried out today across the globe.

More recent work on mobile technologies (Link & Campbell, 2009) argues about a 'reconstruction of space and time', as mobile technologies influence time and space in many realms of social life, such as the transformation of public into private space and vice versa, the blurring of lines demarcating work and personal life, and new patterns of coordination and social networks. Here it is argued that spatial distances are less important due to the personalized nature of communications across geographic regions developed through mobile technologies. However, mobile technologies allow people not only to detach communication activities from external spatial boundaries but also to re-structure such boundaries, as they set more technological criteria for defining space and its boundaries.

Thus, mobile technologies influence the ways in which individuals position themselves in space and time, determining degrees of spatial and temporal flexibility in everyday living. Although mobility creates a sense of fluid and shifting temporality and spatiality, the user has the potential not only to re-conceptualize but also to re-shape and re-structure the time and space boundaries that matter for his or her communication, without time and space becoming unimportant.

All these theoretical and research reflections on time and space in the era of information technology and communications synthesize a complex and often controversial picture of how different media technologies influence, negotiate and define personal and societal understandings of time and space in different modes and in diverse contexts. By problematizing and synthetically examining such discourses and research arguments, I argue that time and space exist through social mediation, re-mediation, restructuring and negotiation, which essentially take place in public (physical and/or virtual) space. It is therefore relevant to understand what kind of public (in our case physical) space is nowadays suitable to endorse such social processes. How do we 'design' a resilient public space?

### **From objective governance to subjective (urban) design**

On the level of governance the urban time policies developed in Italy since the early 1990s, those developed more recently in Germany and France, and policies for planning daily times in The Netherlands, provide a significant answer to the above question by anticipating at local level when thinking globally. Such policies broadened the field of urban analysis and action beyond the enterprise and working time alone. They include spaces where temporalities are experienced and shared. They cover the improvement of quality of life, equality between the sexes, age groups and social categories, the reconstruction of social bonds and even urban renovation as equal objectives. They are

based on an approach to daily life that is related to real narratives of real city-users. These narratives include the difficulty of combining daily activities, principally those related to working hours and those located in the family and social sphere (taking care of children for instance). These policies also result from the multiplication and diversification of time use, as well as from an increased sensitivity with regard to temporal questions understood as much as in quantitative terms, for instance the reduction of working time, as in qualitative ones as the control that each individual has over his/her own temporal structure. It is important to notice that these policies cannot be developed outside their territorial contextualization. They are therefore conducted at the local level, but linked to a process that associates local initiatives with higher-level authorities at the regional, national and even international scale. The interest in such approach is that it makes possible to think about the dynamics of time use and temporal patterns alongside international, national and regional developments such as globalization and decentralization processes, whose effects in reconstituting time and reconfiguring space are potentially important. However, the crucial question (in determining time policies) is to measure not just objective changes to everyday time, fragmentation, acceleration, inequalities, but also the representation and values attached to different social times. 'Temporal prosperity' (Garhammer, 1999), or 'temporal well-being' understood as the capacity to manage one's own temporal structures, are achieved among other things by means of a harmonization between the social organization of time and the arrangement or structure of lived times and spaces.

Planning policies governing 'smartly' the times of the city have proven to be an extremely important step towards creating a better liveability and upgrading the quality of urban life for citizens; however governance by itself is not enough. Contemporary public urban life, contested between socialization and 'capsularization' (De Caeter, 1998), asks for innovative urban design approaches able to harmonize the socio-spatial organization of urban life within pluralistic time perspectives. It is not an easy task. Chronotopic analysis, developed by Politecnico in Milan (Bonfiglioli e Mareggi, 1997) provides an interesting tool to better characterize the spatio-temporal dimension of an urban area by analyzing the different flows and levels of occupation of space through different temporal sequences. A given space is used differently at different times of the day, of the month, of the year. It may contain different types of users that contribute to generate these flows and levels of occupations. The 'chronotope' is therefore defined within the context of urban analysis as a physical zone, characterized by modes of use by different groups of users, but also by the same group of users using it in different ways in different times. This method of analysis integrates the findings of urban sociology, which divides city-users into four categories: residents, commuters, tourists and business (wo)men (Martinotti 1997). On that basis, chronotopic analysis is characterized by two basic features, namely: (a) physical networks in a given area are linked to the rhythms of life and modes of use of their city-users; (b) the description of the time-space relationships takes into account the point of view of the city-users, integrating their constraints and their expectations.

The example that follows<sup>3</sup> shows an application of the chronotopic analysis of space to Urban Design. It shows as well a participatory practice, which attempts to understand and construct the urban space by taking into account its users, subjective and collective temporalities and different cultures of space.

The project is the design of the main public square in Den Hoorn, a small village (8000 inhabitants) at the outskirts of Delft (The Netherlands). Because of its linear morphology alongside a canal and because of its history the village lacked a proper main public space. The so-called main square of the village - 'designed' after WWII - was in fact a mid-sized parking lot on which different conflicting activities took place. For instance, twice a week a public market took place on the square, not allowing the use of the children's playground as well as the jeu-de-boule for a large group of elderly. However, despite the limitations brought by the weekly market, the lack of facilities and the unpleasant atmosphere brought by the large amount of parked cars, the square was still an important place of encounter for different social groups in the village. The assignment given to us by the municipality was to develop a new, more balanced (in terms of activities and social interactions) and representative scheme for the square so transform it into the missing beating heart of the village.

The methodology applied to develop the project is based on the assumption that time and space exist through social mediation, restructuring and negotiation, which essentially take place in public space. Therefore our main objective was to research what kind of public space could be suitable to endorse such social processes in the context we were operating.

In order to implement the idea of improving relationships between space, time and social processes in the first phase of the project we combined three lines of research, namely: chronotopic analysis, morphologic analysis, participatory design.

Through a series of charrettes with the main users of the square (market sellers, retailers, elderly, children, young families and teen agers) we charted the different possible/desired/conflicting uses of the square and arranged them in spatial, functional as well temporal schemes. We then combined those schemes with the results of the morphological analysis, which brought us to define the guidelines for the new scheme of the square.

Based on a composite presentation of individual accounts (collected during workshops and design sessions with the residents and users of the square), the new scheme of the square achieves two goals: first, it defines flexible possibilities to construct individual experiences in a collective space-time sequence through a fixed spatial setting; second, because of the strategic positioning of functions it guides social processes towards an enhanced interaction among users in space and time. In other words, the project introduces a subjective urban reading of public space based upon the voices of people living in the village as related to their everyday life experience. It extends the information derived from an objective reading of the urban space to include (and represent) the perspective of actual people (non-designers) as they talk about their experiences of it.

The following one is a clear example of how the layering and filtering of the results of the three lines of research (chronotopic analysis, morphologic analysis, participatory design) brought us to define the design guidelines for the new square that improve relationships between space, time and social processes. From the morphological analysis of the existing context some interesting elements emerged. Alongside the old square there where 24 majestic sycamore trees planted when the square was first built in the late 1940s. The importance of those 24 trees clearly emerged as well from the interviews and workshops with the citizens. As a matter of fact, different groups of users often referred to the 'beauty' of the trees, showing some pride as well. By matching the results of those two layers of the analysis (morphological and social) we came to the conclusion that the re-interpretation of those 24 trees as the 'collective memory' of the village was essential to enhance relationships between space, time and social processes. We then came up with the idea to transform the square into a solar clock. These 24 trees form a year clock: 24 trees, 24 hours a day. Each tree is representative of an hour of the day and has its own "shadow line" of the relevant time projected as a decorative line on the pavement of the square. The four seasons are addressed in the shadow play as each sycamore tree has four 'shadow lines'. These 'shadow lines' are materialized in the pavement of the square by means of drive over ground spots - which light up at night - and provide lines in the pavement.

The temporal mapping of the daily and weekly activities of the main users of the square revealed both strengths and weakness of the original scheme in spatial as well as in social terms. By solving the weaknesses (extensive parking) and by taking the strengths into account<sup>4</sup>, the new functions on the square are located strategically in order to enhance social, spatial and temporal interaction. Those functions include: a bowling alley, a basketball court, a playground, sitting facilities and a life-size chessboard.

The new square has been completed in 2009. Since then it has regained a social function in the community. It has become a truly lively public space, a place for everyone, where much happens and people enjoy together.

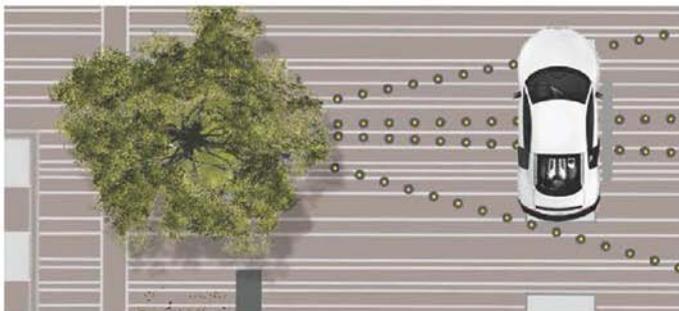
### Conclusions

The understanding of the public urban space in terms of 'times of the city' proposed by this article goes beyond the objective reading of urban space towards a more subjective reading, related to people and their perspective of the urban environment. This subjective reading does not necessarily offer an urban understanding that is 'good for all at all times'. Experience with short-sighted modernist attempts indicates that what is ostensibly good for all is in fact good for no one. The subjective reading of public space is concrete, and therefore offers an urban understanding that is conscious of the real-life circumstances of specific population groups, hoping to lead towards urban design that is able to create pluralistic urban spaces.

The urban design project (Den Hoorn, 2009) presented here, as an example of such

Fig. 3 Urban design project for a public square in Den Hoorn (The Netherlands). Commissioner: Municipality of Den Hoorn. Designers: Calabrese L.M. and Caso O. (Goudappel Coffeng BV. Realized in 2009)

an approach should be regarded only as the 'opening round' in a debate concerning the equipment and facilities needed to design postmodern urban space. It calls for planning frameworks that recognize the complexity of the spatial urban system, but at the same

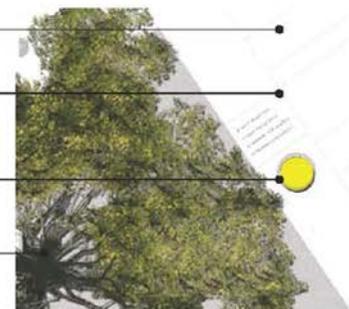


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time take into account and are adaptable to the requirements of particular groups of residents/users, in different times. These frameworks should account for the nature of the urban design process itself, starting as an abstraction of the urban space, but always relating to real concrete places as inhabited by real people.

#### FOOTNOTES

1 *"Dance, dance otherwise we are lost"* Pina Bausch (2009)

2 The homage documentary *Pina* by Wim Wenders (2011), movie about the sign that her teachings on performative space left behind after her death (2009). The scene I'm referring to belongs to 'The Rite of Spring', one of Pina Bausch's most celebrated choreographic pieces.

3 Urban Design project for a public square in the Dutch village of Den Hoorn. Commissioner: Municipality of Den Hoorn. Urban Designers: Luisa Maria Calabrese and Olindo Caso (Goudappel Coffeng BV). Realization: 2009-2010

4 Which include a high level of social interaction between social groups that otherwise are not interacting

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## IMAGES SOURCES

Le immagini 1,2, utilizzate nel presente articolo sono pubblicate sul sito:

[http://www.theasc.com/asc\\_blog/thefilmbook/](http://www.theasc.com/asc_blog/thefilmbook/) (consultato il 29.04.2013)

La fig. 3 è realizzata dall'autore.

La fig. 6 è pubblicata sul sito: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/provinciaalhistorischcentrumzuidholland/3637832609/> (consultato il 27.04.2013).

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