

## On Public Space

"Cables, both visible and invisible, have riddled the roofs and walls of private houses as if they were emmenthal cheese and grown through village streets and squares, so that we cannot distinguish between public and private spaces, between a house and a square, between the secret and the public. Those who stay at home have access to all cultural information and those who move outside their homes expose themselves to the risk of missing information. This is what is called the communications revolution, the essence of which is the change of the information flow. It no longer holds true that information is acquired in public space, processed in private space and then re-exposed in the public space from which it is retrieved for further processing. Today information is acquired in space that is no longer called private, transformed by devices linked through cables and transmitted by media to other receiving spaces. Politics, squares, towns and, even more so, temples can be seen as surpassed in principle", wrote Vilem Flusser in 1991. Is it true that the phrase "public space", with its immediate connotation of a square, a town (politics should perhaps be avoided in the Czech Republic today) is out of date? We may live in a rather medialized world but, in spite of our roofs riddled with visible and invisible cables, not yet in a world of media. Our public lives are still lived in the public spaces of squares and towns, even though schemes for perceiving it, in the broadest sense of the word, are less and less acquired from its material "equipment" but more and more from patterns adopted from the other reality of the media. We are moving away from the primary public space, but I am afraid that we are following other paths.

For ages the town was taken as an *imago mundi*, a constructed symbolic image of how man understood himself and his world. It was a legible and intelligible image and inhabiting it meant reading it and hinting at it, a constant elucidation and reaffirmation of the meaning of all its material elements and their spatial relations. Among the single horizons of this image there was also a multi-level testimony on the arrangement and relations of the urban community, which has its elementary grid in the articulation of the public-private relation. Integrity, which has pride of place in our cultural space and was invented by the medieval town, was based upon the cultivation of the sphere defined by the pairs: sacred-profane and public-private. The second dimension of integrity can also be easily defined by the relation of the town and the house as two poles of the same order: town as an *imago mundi* and house as an *imago mundi*. The relation between a large, over-sized square (for instance the square in the medieval Lesser Town in Prague took up one eighth of the whole city area) and a house, facing the town with the narrow side of its long plot, could not be a more legible expression of the public-private relation. Analogically, the double town enclosure was also comprehensible, the doubled outside-inside relation: the basic constitutive relation of inside (town) and outside (out of town) as expressed by town walls and gates was completed by the other enclosure of house, that is to say that of privacy. For the house, the town inside meant the public outside. The border between them was clearly defined even on the juridical level: the facades of houses, the zone of contact and permeating between the public and the private, and relatively independent of the rest of the house in terms of construction, were subject to the public and to restrictions from local authorities. Only behind and beyond the semi-private halls, was the private sphere, but in spite of the status of the facade, the owner of the house could still address visual messages through the facade to the public space. It was as if the ancient Greek custom was revived here, in which the articulation of the private-public relation is best illustrated by the habit of banging the door even before leaving the house when going outside, onto the street.

The integrity of the public-private relation fell apart along with the loss of the integrity of the house. The original house was a set of all the fundamental functions of living, but some of these functions, previously performed within the private sphere, were gradually delegated into the public sphere of towns. The house was no longer the place where work was done, the garden situated within the house plot and for a long time fulfilling the role of the Classical peristyle, was substituted by public parks; the house's function as a treasury was taken over by public institutions; and even a part of the household catering was transferred into the public space, as well as cooking and some activities connected with relaxation. The private sphere attacked public space without opening itself to it. The defensive potential of the private sphere did not dwindle, even though its territory grew smaller and smaller, eventually reduced by avant-garde experiments into the space designed just for sleeping and secreting individuals, unified by minimal physical needs and even devoid of family bonds. In the end, the family proved to be a more reliable protector of the private than these experiments had presumed and the camp life of communal houses did not become the final model, even though people now are neither born nor die at home. Does not the loss of the private also entail the loss of the public?

If the unstable polarity between the public and private is taken together with the disintegration of the other polarity, that is to say of the sacred-profane relation, only an unstable and chaotic formation is left from the initial clearly defined relation. There is no difficulty in situating art in the initial stage and thus using the public-private, sacred-profane coordinates, but we cannot do much with a blurry field without the coordinate net. Of course, it would be interesting to observe changes in the status of "public" art, the issues of the public institutionalization of its expressions belonging to the private sphere or the tendency of art to fill in the empty space of the sacred and search for substitute coordinates, but for now it is enough to mention the loss of a firm anchorage of art.

The state of the natural integrity of a town with a clearly defined and articulated relation between the private and public spaces is, of course, also that of the natural integrity of art and public space. The ways in which we are slowly moving away from them were clearly described by Camillo Sitte in 1889: "Many things have been irreversibly changed in our public life and many old architectural forms have been stripped of their original meanings -- there is nothing we can do about it. It is no longer as in ancient Rome or Greece when it could be written what should be announced in the baths and on columns; today we have no power over what is written in the daily press. We cannot change the fact that market places are transferred from squares into non-artistic functional buildings or are replaced by home delivery. We cannot change the fact that public fountains have been reduced to mere decoration and cut off from the colorful crowd because the modern water supply brings water comfortably into homes and kitchens. Artworks have moved from the streets and squares to the cages of museums, as have the artistic hustle of popular folklore ceremonies, Shrovetide and other carnivals, Church processions, performances in market places and so on.

Over the centuries and especially lately, public life has been constantly receding from public places, losing a substantial part of its unique meaning. This can explain why our understanding of pleasant squares has suddenly begun declining on a large scale. Our ancestors' way of life was more favorable to the artistic treatment of town environment than our precisely calculated contemporary life, in which man himself has become a machine. The basic conception has changed both in its entirety and in many details. Our cities are growing to gigantic dimensions, crushing the older forms of art. The larger a city is, the bigger and wider are its squares and streets, the higher and more massive are its

buildings and it becomes impossible for art to cope with the new dimensions of multi-storey buildings and rows of houses running out of sight. Everything is growing enormously and the constant repetition of identical motifs is itself benumbing so that that only extraordinary effects can generate any kind of interest."2

Camillo Sitte had a far reaching vision but he could not see behind the horizon where the architectural language lost its ability to communicate and where architecture intentionally denied itself as an art and departed from other art forms. Behind the other horizon lurked a paradox: when an artwork, which is simply attached to a plain and non-communicative architecture to a place saved within a space without a face, should "generate interest by some extraordinary effects". The connection of a language lacking grammar and syntax with one possessing often a very primitive grammar and syntax meant yet another stage in our break with our own material environment. The combination of the urban space offering too little for self-identification, degradation of public life into several empty rituals and the present that one can identify with only at the cost of growing indifference is the culmination of this process. From the point of view of outside conditions, the process has moved through the grimace of the "aesthetisation of the workers' environment" to a turning point and today it is concerned with a renewal of public space and of arts place within it. In recent years, the results of socio-cultural research have shown that bonds to the material environment, including its cultural and artistic values, are steadily weakening, regardless of changes in the appearance of towns, of the shifting of architectural language to a higher communicative level and the revival of some traditional elements of urban festivities. Even a more rapidly falling curve represents a relation between the local public and art.

This is not a reason for scepticism and resignation but definitely a reason for patience. Art without a public context has only a very limited sense.

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#### Notes:

1. Flusser, Vilem: Fotografie jako umeni ve verejnym prostoru (Photography As an Art in Public Space). In: Vytvarne umeni 3-4/96, pp. 122-127, p. 125.
2. Sitte, Carlo: Stavba mest podle umeleckych zasad (Urban Construction on Artistic Principles), Prague 1995, p. 71.