THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

Topos

85 2013

Open Space

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OPEN CITY OR THE RIGHT TO THE CITY?

Henri Lefebvre once postulated "the right to the city", which was a radical demand for a democratization of control over the collective means of producing urban space. But designed open spaces like the High Line Park in New York obey the rules of neoliberalizing capitalism and result in gentrification. Designers should think about their responsibility for a democratic redesign of the city.

Around the world, progressive, critically minded architects, landscape architects and urban designers are engaged in place-making projects that propose to create a more "open city" – one that can be accessed by all inhabitants rather than being reserved for ruling-class elites and the wealthy. While such initiatives are generally steered by state institutions, as well as by real estate developers and corporate patrons, they have often emerged in response to local struggles against the forms of privatization, gentrification, displacement and sociospatial exclusion that have been unleashed under post-Keynesian, neoliberalizing capitalism. In the context of an ongoing global financial crisis, in which market fundamentalism remains the dominant political ideology of most national and local governments, proposals to counteract the deep social and spatial divisions of early 21st-century cities are surely to be welcomed by all those committed to promoting more just, egalitarian and democratic forms of urban life.

But how can relatively small-scale design interventions, such as those catalogued in this issue of *Topos,* confront the monstrously difficult task – as Richard Sennett poses the question – of "heal[ing] society's divisions of race, class, and ethnicity"? Even the most radical designers are seriously constrained by the politico-institutional contexts in

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which they work, and today these are generally defined by the naturalized imperatives of growth-first, market-oriented urban economic policy and by approaches to urban governance in which corporate and property-development interests maintain hegemonic control over local land-use regimes. In practice, moreover, the interventions of designers concerned with "opening up" the city via project-based initiatives have often intensified the very forms of spatial injustice which, at least in rhetorical terms, they aspire to contravene.

This is because the conditions associated with "urbanism" – the effervescence of dense zones of centrality, interaction, exchange and spontaneous encounters – also frequently generate major economic payoffs, in the form of privately appropriated profits, for those who own the properties surrounding the project site. While many places have provisionally experimented with instruments of community reinvestment, local land trusts and profit-sharing mechanisms in relation to such newly created arenas of urbanism, the predominant global trend is for growth-machine interests – often linked to speculative, predatory investments in global financial markets – to reap the major financial rewards derived from them. Consequently, early 21st-century initiatives to construct an "urban commons" through site-based public design interventions all-too-frequently yield the opposite: a city in which the ruling classes reinforce tight control over the production and appropriation of urban space. As socially vibrant and aesthetically attractive as such newly constructed sites of urbanism may often be, they offer no more than a fleeting glimpse of the genuinely democratic, socially egalitarian urbanism that is consistently precluded at a larger, city-wide or metropolitan scale, often by the very politico-institutional forces and coalitions that brought such sites into being. The "open city" thus becomes an ideology which masks, or perhaps merely softens, the forms of top-down planning, market-dominated governance, sociospatial exclusion and displacement that are at play both within and beyond these redesigned spaces of putative urban "renaissance."

The case of the High Line in Chelsea/Manhattan exemplifies this quagmire. A brilliant, far-sighted design intervention, initially spearheaded through a community-based initiative, opens up a long-inaccessible, derelict space for public appropriation, to great popular acclaim. In so doing, it intensifies earlier, more sporadic forms of gentrification through a wave of new investment oriented primarily towards elite consumers in surrounding blocks – luxury hotels and housing; high-end restaurants, cafes and shops – that can only be accessed by the wealthiest residents and tourists. In this way, a design intervention that is putatively oriented towards expanding and activating the urban public sphere accelerates processes of gentrification, displacement and exclusion at the neighborhood and urban scales. The construction of a supposedly "open" urban space thereby creates new barriers to a genuinely public, democratic and egalitarian urbanism, not only within the site of intervention, but across the surrounding fabric of buildings, blocks and neighborhoods. With all respect to the specificities of national and local context, some version of this narrative could, alas, be elaborated with reference to a long list of prominent project-based design interventions in major cities around the world, including many of those in which quite imaginative, skillful and ostensibly progressive design schemes have been implemented.

To what degree, and in what ways, is the practice of design implicated in such retrograde outcomes? At first glance, such problems may appear to result less from the intricacies of the design scheme itself, than from the broader system of rules – for instance, regarding land-use, property ownership, financing, taxation, investment and public goods – that govern the city, region and territory in which the project-based design intervention happens to be situated. Surely the designers cannot be faulted for working as imaginatively as possible within the constraints imposed by such rule-regimes. After all, what other options might they have, since they generally lack control or influence over investment flows, property ownership structures and political decisions? And, even if the conditions imposed by the client are less-than-ideal, isn't it far better to see a good, creative, imaginative design implemented than a bad, derivative, boring one?

From my point of view, the above formulations offer an insufficiently critical perspective on the role of the designers, and the design professions, whose expertise, creative capacities and labor-power are recurrently harnessed to mask, manage or soften the sociospatial contradictions of neoliberal urbanism. The position outlined above implies, rather naively, that design is insulated, both as a professional practice and as a form of social engagement, from the broader political-economic contexts in which it is embedded, and which actively fuel and frame its everyday operations. Such assumptions are untenable – empirically, politically and ethically. Designers concerned with social justice – the open city in a genuinely democratic, egalitarian sense – can and must devise strategies to push back, with their full intellectual capacities, professional influence and political imagination, against the rules, constraints and ideologies imposed by neoliberal, market-oriented systems of urban governance and the forms of sociospatial injustice they produce at all spatial scales. A genuinely open city would be one in which investment is channeled to serve social need rather than private gain; in which public institutions secure and protect shared, common resources from private appropriation; and in which all inhabitants have secured equal capacities to influence decisions that effect the spaces, institutions and resources shared by all. Any design intervention that claims to promote the open city without pursing these core goals will be seriously incomplete, if not delusionary.

The fatal flaw of the interventions discussed above is thus not the exclusionary, undemocratic "external" context of design, but rather that the design vision is itself too narrow, both spatially and operationally. Spatially, there is a danger of circumscribing the site too modestly, and thus of stimulating urbanism only within a bounded "pocket" of activity that does not interrupt broader systems of market-based land-use, investment and displacement at larger spatial scales, across multiple sites, places and territories. Operationally, there is a danger of programming the design intervention using an epistemology that is fixated upon consumerism, "quality of life" and the provision of urban amenities, rather than opening up spaces to appropriation, self-management and ongoing transformation "from below," through the users themselves. To the degree that design interventions for an open city are restricted to formal, aesthetic elements or fetishize a narrowly consumerist vision of the public realm, their main impact may be to offer ideological cover for the urbanisms of injustice, displacement and exclusion that continue to be rolled forward in neoliberalizing cities around the world.

Writing in 1968, amidst the tumultuous events of May in Paris, French theorist Henri Lefebvre introduced a concept that continues to challenge such mystifications – the right to the city. This concept powerfully resonates with contemporary debates among designers on the open city, because it likewise envisions a city that is appropriated by and accessible to all inhabitants. But Lefebvre's concept pushes much further than this: it is not only a call for popular access to what already exists within cities; it is also a radical, militant demand for the democratization of control over the collective means of producing urban space. An open city, in this sense, is not merely a space that can be accessed and enjoyed equally by all; it would also be a realm in which the institutional capacity to produce and transform space has itself been radically democratized. Lefebvre referred to this capacity as autogestion – self-management – and he insisted that, "far from being established once and for all, [it] is itself the site and the stake of struggle."

The design of the right to the city, therefore, requires us not only to produce spaces of open access, whether within specific project sites or at larger spatial scales. More importantly, the pursuit of this right requires us to find ways of transforming the rules of urban governance so as open up urban space to democratic redesign, through an ongoing process of grassroots appropriation and reappropriation. By integrating questions of institutional control, political power and social justice into their vision of the site, the intervention and the program, designers can begin to contribute to the ongoing struggle for the right to the city.

For further reading see bibliography page 111.