

Place with (out) Space: The Tale of Brussels and Colombo

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Abstract

Architecture of the west is engaged in an extravagant spatial discourse, sweating to design the perfect buildings and cities; spaces where humans can thrive. The extensive attention given to production and utilization of space, however, has distanced architecture from the fundamentals of the practice; making problems – thus the solutions – single dimensional. This paper revisits the fundamentals of western architecture, questioning the significance of space in its education. The notion of 'space' is then critically discussed with regard to 'place', where space is metaphorically identified as a stage for the drama – the place – to unfold. The main actors of this drama are the events – further elaborated as a sequence of moments – which enchant the audience – the people – in a seamless suspense. Ultimately, two cities, Brussels and Colombo, where similarities are far apart, are compared with each other, using a thought experiment which provides insight into understanding the urban public space (place) as an intertwined and interrelated – though independent- combination of events.

Keywords: *publics-space, place, time, moments, the object*

Introduction

Architects are said to be the masters of dealing with space. Since the ages of Vitruvius, architects have been meddling with space, trying to create spaces for humans to thrive in; and in a few instances for animals and plants to survive. The extensive attention given to 'space', in architectural theory, has distanced the practitioners from venturing into other realms, where designing in a fourth dimension might not sound utopian. Alas they are stuck, with neither the ability nor the desire, to escape from this three dimensional world.

Comprehension of the fundamental notions 'space', 'place' and 'time' is crucial in this particular discourse in architecture, thus a similar weight is given to the three paradoxes in trying to find a symbiosis. Albert Einstein (1916), in his special relativity theory, explains 'place' as an occurrence in a four dimensional space, where its location is given with a set of Euclidian coordinates. Henri Lefebvre (1995) and Michal Foucault (1986), meanwhile, denote 'place' as a 'social space'. The two fronts, physical and social, encourage a symbiosis between 'place and 'space'; however the true existence of both entities are still in doubt. The conception of 'time' on the other hand, both physically and psychologically, is somewhat ambiguous. In quantum physics (Folger, 2007), existence of time as a separate dimension is severely questioned; while in psychology (Block, 1990), human perception of time is understood as being highly personal. Architecture of cities, though deal with numerous constraints, i.e. space, place, time, economy,

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society etc; is always a combination of objects. Hence the objects, in the sense of both materialistic and spiritual, seemingly carry a huge significance in the outcome of architecture. Peter Eisenman (1984) contradicts this importance by misplacing the object in a forward moving time, where the objects origin is the start of its end.

Brussels and Colombo, two cities seldom compared in architecture, due to the obvious reasons of dissimilarities in cultures, climate, economies etc., are put against each other in the metaphorical form of a drama, to observe and to contemplate, on the issues of urban public place. 'Space' here is represented by a stage, where the drama—the place—unfolds; and the actors therefore are the events—the sequence of moments—which enchant the audience—the people—in a seamless suspense. The experience of the drama is multisensory, not only seen and heard, but also touched by all human senses, making it a holistic perception of our surroundings. With the aid of this paradigm, it is observed that there is no such thing as an independently existing space or time, where architects can nonchalantly meddle with, but a combination of complex eurhythmia.

Architecture and its education – a slave of spatial discourse

'..where there are forests in plenty, they lay down entire trees flat on the ground to the right and the left, leaving between them a space to suite the length of the trees, and then place above these another pair of trees, resting on the ends of the former and at right angles with them. These four trees enclose the space for the dwelling.'

(Vitruvius & Morgan 1960: 39)

Space is synonymous with western architecture; and its education. The common understanding of space, in relation to architecture, is based on the perception and feel of our surroundings; therefore it is divided into four main categories 1) public, 2) private, 3) semi-private, and 4) collective, according to the emotions we encounter in these particular spaces. (de Solà-Morales, 1992 & Scheerlinck, 2012) Perception of—and relating to—a particular kind of space thus, is determined by multiple factors, i.e. culture, environment, economy etc. These spaces however are not 'created', on the contrary, they already exist. Human beings—with or without the help of architects—convert them from one form to another to fulfil their needs. This conversion is neither permanent nor static; they interchange and overlap activities in a given moment of time.

Although there exist more detailed manuals about the tools of architecture, one of the earliest books on western architectural education still houses the most interesting concepts. Vitruvius explains, in his ten books of architecture, (Vitruvius & Morgan, 1960) the fundamentals of architecture education as, 1) education on a vast array of subjects, 2) knowledge on sketches and drawings, 3) geometry, 4) optics and 5) arithmetic. Architects should have an understanding about the study of medicine; neither to perform surgery nor to design hospitals, but to design healthy buildings and cities. They should know about music; not necessarily to sing or play an instrument, but to design for human emotions. Knowledge on physics is crucial in knowing how our surroundings (systems) are in perfect harmony; to know not to disturb this delicate equilibrium by adding improper elements, but to nurture the existing eurhythmia.

Vitruvius further explains (Vitruvius & Morgan, 1960) that architecture depends on 1) order 2) arrangement 3) eurhythmia 4) symmetry 5) propriety (style) and 6) economy. Order (in Greek) is the modules considered separately and then adjusted according to symmetry. 'Arrangement' is putting these modules in proper place, expressed in the form of plans, elevations, perspectives etc. Eurhythmia is the beauty of adjustment of the members when

they all correspond in unison. Symmetry is the proper arrangement of members of the whole work. Propriety is the perfection of style, which comes when the work is authoritatively constructed on approved principles, which arise from perception, nature or usage. Finally, economics denotes to the proper balance of materials and common senses in construction of works; where the architect does not demand materials or concepts which cannot be found or too expensive.

The explanation of Vitruvius on western architecture and its education suggests that there is more to architecture than meddling with space. Unfortunately, the extensive use of architecture as a spatial tool has distanced the profession from its original glory and has landed it in a stale territory which is neither art nor science. Stuck in his own imagination, neither with the ability nor the desire to escape from space and venture into new realms, the architect dreams on; designing in space—foolishly thinking that he has a god-given-ability to create space—adding objects at his will, breaking the delicate eurhythmia of our own surroundings. He forgets that he is human, before being an architect, losing all hope of ever becoming one, to design for his kind.

Place and space – a symbiosis

Geometry sets out form certain conceptions such as "plane," "point," and "straight line", with which we are able to associate more or less definite ideas, and from certain simple propositions (axioms) which, in virtue of these ideas, we are inclined to accept as "true."

(Einstein 1916: 6)

He who talks about a place, always gives reference to space. A space he thinks exists, permanent and true, captured by his senses and explained with geometry. Albert Einstein (1916) nevertheless, explains that the concept of “true” does not tally with the assertions of pure geometry; because by the word “true” we are eventually in the habit of designating always the correspondence with a “real” object. Geometry, however, is not concerned with the realization of ideas involved in it to objects of experience, but only with the logical connection of these ideas among themselves; making the reality and true existence of space a complete myth.

To designate a place, in this symbolized geometrical conception of space, we should apply a set of coordinates to a given body. If we analyze the place specification “Grand Place, Brussels”, we arrive at the conclusion that where earth is a rigid body to which the specification of place refers; “Grand Place, Brussels” is a well defined point, with a name which has been assigned, and with which events coincides in space. This emplacement of space was theorized by Galileo. Foucault (1986) explains ‘for the real scandal of Galileo's work lay not so much in his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space’. The idea of an infinitely open space gave rise to a new notion, where in such a space the place turned out to be dissolved. A given place in a coordinate system is no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of the object considered is only its movement in space.

Space is observed as three-dimensional. It is possible to describe the position of a place by means of three coordinates, where there is an indefinite number of places in the neighbourhood of this specific point. A second position, which can be described by a different set of coordinates, may exist as near as we choose to the respective values of the coordinates of the first place. With regard to the first place, we speak of a continuum where activities could occur, but it is not necessarily the only point which is active at the given moment in this three

dimensional space. Similarly, the world of physical phenomena which was briefly called "world" by Minkowski (Einstein, 1916) is naturally four dimensional in the space-time sense; for it is composed of interrelated and intertwined—though individual—events. These events in space are described by three spatial coordinates and a time coordinate. Here the time runs as a separate entity detached from the three coordinates of space. The events discussed here are also a continuum; for every event there are as many neighbouring events (realized or at least thinkable) happening simultaneously of whose coordinates which differ by an indefinitely small amount from those events originally considered. This understanding of the "world" treats space as a compilation of events, shifting instantaneously, giving birth to a new set of events even before the previous event ends entirely.

Grasping what 'place' is, in space, we venture into understanding methods of quantifying and describing the 'events' in space. The three dimensional space can be quantified by volume. The simplest measurement of space can be given as the distance between two points, with which it is possible to demarcate and quantify any given volume. Einstein (1916) explains that "distance" as being represented physically by means of the convention of two marks on a rigid body. The 'two marks' denote two places, existing within a given play, enabling the drama to unfold between them. The distance between these two places is crucial for a person to relate the matrix of a place; since there is always a distance from the stage, to the first row of the audience, from where he observes the proceedings. The motion in space, according to Einstein (1986) is relative to the position (the place coordinates in space) of the activity and the observer. I drop a stone—without throwing it—from a railway compartment window, while it is travelling uniformly, in full motion. Subsequently—disregarding the influence of wind resistance—I observe it falling towards the ground in a straight line, as if it is mesmerized by gravity. A merchant, stationed by the side of the rail road, observes the misdeed from his shop. He sees that the stone in question falls to ground in a parabolic curve. Meanwhile, an unfortunate spider taking shelter in a cavity of the stone gets agitated, fearing the huge object (earth) would collide with the stone and destroy its residence. I now ask; do the "positions" pervaded by the stone lie in reality in a straight line, a parabola or is it completely stationary? Moreover, what is the stone's true existence in space?

Henri Lefebvre (1995) posits that space is a social product; that the "spaces are produced". For Lefebvre, space is an entity experienced by people intersecting, interacting, producing and reproducing relationships with each other. This notion of "social space", when incorporated into a sequence of events, explains a place where both the interaction and its result can be understood as the social activities that occur in this particular moment that constitute—and are specific to—the establishment of a particular way of life. Both the place and the characteristics of the spatial relationships of any particularly defined group of people are—referred to by Lefebvre, as the group's spatial practices—determined by the particular social activity they are engaged in. The event itself is created by—and helps to create—social interaction in the form of a performance by a spatial language that can be observed, repeated and remembered from within the set, or from the audience.

A similar theory of understanding place as a social space is put forward by Michel Foucault (1986), expanding Lefebvre's interpretation by repositioning the social construction of space—the performed communication—on a larger context. He observes that the interactions are performed in multiple sites (places), where each site is in turn defined by the social interactions that exist within them individually.

Modifiers of urban public space

Urban public space, as they attract people from different social, gender, age, cultural etc., backgrounds, giving way to a combination of ruthless confrontation of dissimilarities, is undoubtedly the most controversial and hardest to handle spatial entity for architects. Gender inequality, cultural differences, age gap and social class difference, are all bundled up in urban public space, giving rise to topics widely discussed in western architecture such as city gentrification, gendered city, contested urbanism, urban political economy etc.

As discussed in the previous section, the 'space'—understood as a combination of coordinates – is only a stage for the actors—the events—to perform. The actual drama unfolds as the events take place. These interrelated and intertwined—though independent—events are a constant modifier of the urban public space.

A public park or a garden, in whichever historical or social context it is found, is an example of pure urban dynamics. Foucault (1986) in his description of Persian gardens, "The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its centre..", demonstrates usage of symbols to elevate the space to a spiritual level. Whichever form they take, cultural, spiritual or just plain visual, symbols not only modify space but also indulge in a coherent dialog with the users of urban public space.

Aging is a natural process which is common to both organic and inorganic matter. The speed of aging however is dependent on numerous factors of the matter itself and also of its surrounding. Pallasma (2000) explains that the inevitable processes of ageing, weathering and wear are not usually considered as conscious and positive elements in design; thus the natural change is always negated by an artificial change. However, this continuous confrontation is a constant modifier of the urban public space.

Politics has been in the forefront of urban discourse, for its power of persuading and creating laws with regard to design and use of urban public spaces. However the involvement of politics in the modification of urban public space is argued by Harvey (2006) with relation to urban planning in Paris by Haussmann.

The character of public space counts for little or nothing politically unless it connects symbiotically with the organization of institutional and private spaces. It is the relational connectivity between public, quasi-public and private spaces which counts when it comes to politics in the public sphere. It was Haussmann's genius to orchestrate this symbiosis on the ground while fortuitously facilitating the stronger presence of the commodity as spectacle in the new Paris that his works helped create. The bourgeois could thereby assert their hegemony in politics as well as in economy at the same time as they claimed privileged access to and control over the public spaces of their city.

(Harvey 2006: 31)

Understanding time – time as a sequence of events (moments)

The existence and perception of time is twofold. We experience time differently to the regular tick-tock beat of the clock. Sometimes time seems to run slower, sometimes faster. It is believed that the universe starts as a very simple, extremely compact ball of energy (Folger, 2007). The time, as we know it, starts with the explosion of this ball of energy; before which, time ceased to exist. Although it is argued whether time has a direction—whether it is moving forward, backwards or in multiple directions—the ongoing expansion of the universe suggests time has a forward direction. Time, in this view, is a part of the universe; thus part of space. Before this, in the Newtonian belief, time is absolute, true and flows equably, without regard to anything external.

Since Einstein's theory of space-time, Physicists have been in jeopardy explaining time as a static and permanent entity. The shortest time ever observed (Folger, 2007), in the physical sense, by using ultraviolet laser pulse to track the quantum leaps of electrons within the atoms, is 100 attoseconds, or 100 quintillionth (10^{20}) of a second. How small the physically measured time, the smallest length of 'experienced time' is largely dependent on the individual's senses and his or her surroundings. For example, the aroma when you experience entering a cafe is due to the complex chemical process occurring inside your sensory organ, the nose. The taste of the coffee is dependent on the stimulation of taste buds on your tongue. However, the time you spend inside the cafe is revealed by none of the sensory organs directly. Is the taste of time revealed by a clock?!

Time 'as experienced' involves the following characteristics, (1) a one way direction that is, in principle irreversible, (2) categorical differences between past, present and future, and (3) constant becoming. (Griffin, 1986) The direction of time is still argued upon in theoretical physics, however, on the daily experience of time, it could be understood as either forwardly directed – when the future occurrence is uncertain, or backwardly directed (as a countdown)—when the future occurrence is certain. For example, if you go to a cafe and order a coffee and sit outside in a terrace leisurely reading a newspaper, as you don't have any commitment after the coffee break, you would experience time in a forward direction. On the other hand if you, for instance, have to get back to office soon after the coffee break, you would be experiencing time in a backward direction, counting down the moments getting ready for the next occurrence. The apparent movement of time, either forward or backwards, gives birth to past, present and future. Past—or history as experienced in architecture—is a continuation of the present. Peter Eisenman (1986) however, explains that history is not continuous; that it is made up of presences and absences. Constant becoming of time, or the continuity as explained by Eisenman (1986), in architecture, is defined by categories of processes and objects. The objects, both animate and inanimate, demonstrate the apparent momentarily change in our surroundings; and the processes which are governed by both human behaviour and by Nature, illustrate a constant becoming of time.

Psychological time consists of three major aspects: (1) succession, (2) duration, and (3) temporal perspective. (Block, 1990) Succession is the sequential occurrence of events. Duration refers to the length of the event which an individual may encoded and remember. Temporal perspective is an individual's experience and conceptions concerning past, present, and future. Where there is a human mind, there are always events; even if the surrounding seems completely still, subtle changes occur within and outside the human mind. Biologically, heart beats all the time, also breathing is continuous; inside the mind the thought process happens continuously, without break, even before one thought moment is completely subdued another occurs. This eurhythmy keeps a sequential occurrence of events. The lengths of these events are a measure of the individual; without a universal measurement for

measuring the length of these events, they are dependent on the individual's memory. These events are temporary; they are an occurrence in the mind. The moments neither exists in the future nor the past, they are an occurrence of the moment itself. They are isolated entities of temporalities.

Human behavioural rhythms, divided as 1) indigenous 2) endogenous 3) external and also 1) socio-cultural and 2) of public space (Lefebvre, Elden & Moore, 2000 & De Wandeler, 2010) explain the diverse lengths of the events as perceived by the individual. For example, the event of having coffee/ tea on a outside terrace in a public place – determined by a set of coordinates in the space – by an individual maybe dependent on all or some of the behavioural rhythms. When considering two or more individuals in adjoining (almost over lapping) places, the events could be perceived entirely differently owing to the differences in the individual behavioural patterns. The time, in this sense, as a sequence of moments, is entirely dependent on the individual.

Futility of the object

The architectural object of both classicism and modernism contains the idea of original perfection. That is, the significance of any specific object is, in part, understood by some references to simple type forms. (Eisenman, 1986) The specific object does not so much represent type form as it is significant of this relationship; it is in fact a collection of smaller objects which inherit their own importance in reciting the story of the whole.

The purpose of the object, with modifications to itself, continuously undergoes alterations as its surroundings are in a constant evolution. Changes in cultural, social, economic, environmental etc., conditions in a specific place, influence the objects in the vicinity to alter accordingly; failing to do so result in abandonment as a failure in the test of time. The origin of the object, therefore, should contain flexibility to make this transformation possible. Peter Eisenman (1984) explains, '... since the origin was thought to contain the seeds of the object's purpose and thus the destination, this belief in the existence of an ideal origin led directly to a belief in the existence of an ideal end'. The 'ideal end' as described by Eisenman (1984) is the new beginning, where the journey continues from one moment to the other; the object itself, although, is dead before it even existed.

As the objects get defragmented into their fundamental existence, to a state of mere mass and energy, they become a recipe of similarities. The atoms in Grand Place, Brussels are of the same kind as the atoms in Independence Square, Colombo. The materiality of the objects however, gives a sense of permanence; they seem to last forever. Einstein's equation (Einstein, 1914) on energy and mass, later studied in depth in quantum mechanics, contradicts this state of imposed permanence to matter; by reducing matter to energy. Every matter is a constant fluctuation between mass and energy.

The loss of matter, thus the object, should not be confused with the loss of 'everything'; on the contrary, understanding the object as a temporal experience encourages us to become sensitive to the messages of matter, as well as to scenes of erosion and decay. Pallasma (2000) explains 'erosion and ruins have been favoured subject matters of contemporary art from Arte Povera and Gordon Matta-Clark to Anselm Kiefer and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky... Richard Serra's and Eduardo Chillida's uniquely authoritative masses of forged iron awaken bodily experiences of weight and gravity.' Michelangelo Pistoletto's contemporary art work 'Venus of the Rags' emphasise the message of the matter; the object, Venus—the goddess of love and

beauty—positioned with the back to the viewer facing a stack of discarded cloths, proudly loses its value as an object to the value of its message.

Brussels and Colombo – a tale of two cities

The drama unfolds in two cities, far apart from each other, not only in distance but also of numerous parameters such as culture, economy, climate, environment etc. Though the differences are plenty, the two cities—stripped off to their basic form of the object, where time is determined as a sequence of moments (events)—are compatible in a fruitful discourse. The notions “Brussels” and “Colombo” are only reference points in a three dimensional spatial system; where an exact point (place) is an event taking place in this spatial coordinate system in a given moment. The following urban drama (thought experiment), though place dependent, is completely independent from the spatial coordinates; thus could be happening either in Brussels or Colombo. Depending on the context of the observer—reader in this instance—the drama could be—and encouraged to be—interpreted in various angles.

Looking from a cafe window, towards the street in front, an individual sees a partial reflection of himself; before seeing a homeless person squatted in the opposite corner begging for money from the well-dressed lady. He retrospects how lucky he is, to sit inside a cafe and sip a cup of coffee in leisure. On his way out, he gives the beggar few coins; and smiles. The visual connection with the outside, even from the comfort of a controlled environment, makes the experience of a moment rather enjoyable.

Art, either illegal street art or legal forms of urban interventions like sculpture, plays a significant role as a form of indirect communication in the city. Temporary exhibitions housed not only inside galleries, but also by the side of the streets, or in the open public spaces in the form of sculpture, all engage in a conversation with the walkers. Street-art is perhaps a form of expressing anxiety and tension of the urban dweller; although it is a useful medium of expressing emotions, individually or collectively, of a particular neighbourhood.

Garbage bins are not only the collectors of waste, but also the collectors of moments. They gobble down most of the unwanted, deleting its existence and presenting with a perfect end. What better way than to hide your misdoings in a garbage container. It is a constant reminder of the change; the once useful is useless the next minute, and ends up in a pile of rubbish. A bench in a public park may introduce a wide variety of events, both on and around it. The dimensions and the organization of the bench might prevent activities like sleeping, though the possibility of performing a variety of activities lifts its status from a mere non-existing ‘object’ to a spiritual and intimate level.

The sound of the cars, taxis, busses and trains add to the drama of the city. The acute high frequency sirens of police, ambulance or fire brigade vehicles and the continuous honking of vehicles are both a sign of hectic city life. The sirens though are more annoying of the two varieties, because they can disturb your peace of mind by a sudden onslaught of noise. They seem to echo more, multiplying inside the urban courtyard, rather than on the open pavement.

The smell of freshly fried delicacies, by the side of the road, in a small kiosk makes you crave for an unhealthy snack. You know if you eat it you will have to run an extra round in the urban park or your usual jogging track; but still, you will have it, whatever the later consequences.

Walking down an alleyway alone in the dark night, dim-lit by the halogen street lamps, you hear the echo of your own footsteps. You might be intrigued to counting the footsteps, to get away from the loneliness, to keep company with your thoughts. In contrast, walking on a

pavement brightly lit, you might still feel lonely; alas, without the eco of your foot steps for comfort.

Tourists, walk the city in a slow pace, admiring their surroundings, capturing as much memories as possible, capturing moments with a camera, hoping to share them with friends and family. The daily commuters to city, on the other hand, are in a constant rush in getting into the city and getting out, seldom paying any attention to their surroundings while walking, always trying to take the shortest route from point A to B. The red man, in the colour lights, is a bore; the green man is much anticipated.

Boys and girls, walk hand in hand, on a journey they have no clue about. Chewing on gum or munching a sandwich, talking nonstop, with no care in the world about what is happening around them, completely oblivious to their surroundings; they wander on the streets of the city. At a red light the chatting gets louder, catching up. A car speeding over the city limit runs the red light, without giving two thoughts about one of the girls crossing at the zebra (pedestrian crossing), squeals to a halt. The screeching noise made by the tires on gravel wakes up a baby sleeping in the fourth floor of a newly constructed apartment building.

The piercing noise of a car engine, startles an old man trying to cross the road at the traffic light, but sees that it is still quite far away; only it is the sound of a tuned car, the dream ride of the urban youngsters. The automobile has taken over the city. Means of transportation might vary, of the daily commuters to the city, depending on the economies of the individual; however, they all congest the cities in rush hour, making traffic at peak hours impossible to penetrate. Difficulty finding a parking spot in the congested city centres is a current issue of the motorist. Driving around in circles till someone pulls out is common; adding on to the already congested traffic.

Lovers embraced in a kiss, looking only at each other's eyes, makes the moment freeze; memorable in their minds for eternity. An elderly woman seated in a bench by the side of the park, in the shade, seeing this kiss, embraces in the past, remembering the last kiss of her husband, before he said goodbye forever. The time, as she knew it, had stopped since then.

The tweeting sound of a bird might snap you back to reality from a dream world, reminding that humans are—yet—not alone in this world. Sunlight penetrating the tree canopies makes shadows on each and every surface they encounter. The constant change, as a result of movement of these surfaces, makes the shadows dance around. The sun setting down through the high and mighty skyscrapers creates a beautiful sight of urban sunset. Wind is a gift, making the urban heat islands bearable. The strong currents though might lift you in to the sky. Air born, you observe what a corporate chairman sees from his penthouse office in the fifteenth floor of an office tower. Looking down from above, like the god himself, you feel the power to control the whole city; though little you know that you could fall down to your death any moment.

Glazed shop windows create an illusion of permanence in the materialistic world. They attract passersby inside by announcing their presence. Reflection from a shop window, though tells a different story; of an in-between world, where the desires are often overcome by the actual need.

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