

# Chapter 10

## Learning from Djemaa el-Fna

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Learning from the existing landscape is a way  
of being revolutionary for an architect.  
Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris  
and begin again, as in Le Corbusier's suggested in 1920s,  
but another, more tolerant way;  
That is, the question how we look at things  
(Venturi et al. 1972).

**Abstract** The essay explains the role of the urban landscape of fragmented modern cities, and proposes to remove superfluous and unnecessary features built into urban stratifications in order to better remark the original essence of the space. Thus, landscape will still propose the value system of a specific society without any kind of fake or imitation, and public space should overcome its own crisis of identity born with our car civilization and the reduction of spatial distances.

**Keywords** Landscape · Public spaces · Urban relationship · Community

It is very difficult to talk about landscape and especially about that part which, for a strange reduction and simplification, is called urban landscape. Although it is easy to define the term landscape in forms and types (rural, coastal, urban, etc.), it is much more difficult to attribute to urban landscape its clear and precise specificity.

It is possible to say that urban landscape is the universe that gets together the complex relationships between our city and the society that uses it. It is rather curious to define the open space of cities as *zero volume architecture*.<sup>1</sup> In this sense it would mean that a city is the result of a complex structure made up by a set of architectures with and without volume.

Without mentioning a multitude of definitions and out of every rhetorical criticism, I will try to illustrate how nowadays urban *space-landscape* is leading to redesign a contemporary image of the city, especially at the present state of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup>“The architecture ZCA [zero cubic architectures] while not technically an interior space, however, come through a negotiation between the environment and landscape, to set up outdoor space, a field of quality and handling characteristics with its [...]”. In: Aymonino A., Mosco V. P. (2006) Spazi pubblici contemporanei. Architetture a volume zero, Skira Editore, Milan.

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Urban spaces consist of a catalogue of many complex forms that refer to narratives, stories, sometimes even clichés, and they are excellent places where material and immaterial layers have slowly accumulated and settled. A changing palimpsest, that is enriched constantly by urban patterns and that gradually tends to modify, remove or abandon rituals and social functions, is no longer compatible with the rise of new cultural stereotypes.

The urban landscape design in recent years is set in continuous overlapping and layering of signs and forms, which aim to overcome the lack of identity of places, as stronger and closer to situations of marginality, with a semantic too often redundant. In fact, public space exists if there are people who use it, and thus bear witness of quality and comfort values.

In 1972 Robert Venturi published a book on the city of Las Vegas, which became a reference tool for a whole generation of architects. In contrast with modern architectural theories, founded on a rigorous structuralism and a blind functionalism praising the spatial qualities of architecture against the rhetoric of symbol and decoration, Venturi proposes a reviewing of Las Vegas, trying to show how urban image quality and its impact were the medium between cities and society to assist urban behaviors. New urban paradigms were developing, in the disorder of sprawl city, declaring the new image for the future modern city. Nowadays, visiting Las Vegas is a spectacular and dazzling visual experience, perhaps less interesting than Venturi imagined. Architectures, colorful lighting, events lead people into adventure searching of his place of entertainment, in the glitter of signs.

This does not change the cultural significance of Venturi's research, which elicited a critical reflection on the *Forma Urbis*, and on the dynamic relationship between architecture and outdoor space.

Venturi proposes a complex of new urban paradigms that, reversing the relationship between three-dimensional space and two-dimensional image of the city, may be useful to read contemporary reality of new cities. Las Vegas became the semantic city par excellence, where image is necessary for communication and interpretation of urban space dynamics. In detail, we can say that Venturi proposes a light but complex system of urban signs as a tool showing a variety of urban functions: events, places and spaces (Fig. 10.1).

This interpretive model of the city anticipates all reflections on modern public space, it emphasizes the psychological and physical distance of human beings inside urban spaces and it shows a way to connect men with urban landscape.

Trying to understand the nature of urban landscape is not an easy performance. We know that a landscape, in common sense, is a complex system of phenomena defined by nature and by material actions that people make in a continuous transformation process. The urban landscape however is a place of socio-spatial relationships of people. Therefore it is logical to say that the urban landscape-space exists as a place of human actions. We recognize and testify to a quality value of open space of our cities in relation to the people who live in it: in brief, the square is the people who live in it.

**Fig. 10.1** Las Vegas urban sign



Learning from Djemaa el-Fna, the city square inside the Medina of Marrakech, means setting the coordinates to reflect on the spatial organization of the place and on the way of its use to find a possible urban quality.

This “cultural space” was included in 2001 in the UNESCO list of sites referred to as “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”.

This medieval square is resistant to attacks and transformations of the medina, but it’s hard to find in literary sources, clear descriptions of the history of the place. The first interesting description of the place is dated on 1922, when the Sultan Moulay Youssef included it in the list of monuments and environments to be protected. In fact, for the first time, an interest in the place is being manifested, primarily symbolic and cultural, even if directed at control of the growing Medina and the public buildings proliferation. After the Treaty of Fez and the French protectorate, some buildings with a public function have been realized and they have changed the shape and use of space (Fig. 10.2).

This square records every year millions of visitors from around the world, who come to visit the exciting entertainment show offered by a multitude of actors (acrobats, snake charmers, vendors, doctors...). The current image of the place is the result of a historical process, not always conscious, that has made the square the symbol of the city and Morocco in general.

Watching and analyzing the current spatial conformation of Djemaa el-Fna, we cannot say that it’s really a square, but an open space without a clear border, where the vacuum power accommodates a multitude of actions in infinite spatial configurations.

The buildings surrounding the site were characterized by a lack of scenery and by the exclusive use of simple materials drawn from the local building tradition.

The square of Marrakech shows, in significant ways, all complexity of urban places and also the internal conflicts of the modern city. The urban landscape generated is of rare beauty, but it is not immune from the conflicts of the social

**Fig. 10.2** Marrakech, Djeema el-Fna square. A simple space for endless and complex social uses (Source Alessandro Villari)



structure. Often sites like these are witnesses of unresolved conflicts that sometimes it is difficult to perceive and sometimes clearly stand out.

We must walk around and penetrate the streets of the city of Hebron in Palestine to understand how the social and ethnic conflicts permanently alter the idea of public space, inverting the reaction dialectic between space and society. In Hebron the public space has abandoned the role of indicator of urban and social transformations. It is no longer a place of diversity and relationships but a place of political power (Fig. 10.3).

In contention cities, empty spaces are witnesses of unresolved conflicts. Outdoor space takes on the role of collective vacuum, where usual activities of public space are reduced just to crossing.

There are many places, especially in the South that is not geographical but cultural, as well as being similar to each other, that have many similarities and correspondences with Djeema el-Fna square. In some ways, all souks and North Africans medinas tell of everyday life and of the complex relationships between cities and people. Also in Italy you can find sites that possess all the chromosomes of an urban metabolism, very often of Arab tradition, where sounds, smells and people gives us an n-dimensional space for a sensory experience.

One of these is the fish market square in Catania, one of the landmarks of an ancient culture and a social model. In fact it occupies a void space between the eighteenth century building near the sea and the old city walls. Its transformation into an open-air fish market is not really clear, but its history is deeply established in the memory of the city and its inhabitants. It's a site without form that isn't marked by any obvious morphological structure and it is located in the centre of the city. It's a timeless place, immune to social change and urban transformation. It's the

**Fig. 10.3** Palestine, Hebron. The public space becomes eloquent witness of intractable social conflicts (Source Alessandro Villari)



place of repeated gestures, without remarkable changes, without stress for crises of modernity during everyday life. The charm of the place is enhanced by the presence, now barely recognizable, of the Amenano river which, although submerged by the last historical lava flow of 1669, is still visible due to the extraordinary trick of a fountain that is the mark of the river and the transition place from the fish market to Piazza Duomo. Moreover, it simulates the entrance to this symbolic place with all its colorful, charismatic and disordered humanity. Here, as in Marrakech, we have an informal public space, without a specific design or architectural connotation, but just a place of intense cultural and social reciprocity.

If the sites also have symbolic value, as stated by Debarbieux (1995), then we can declare that Djemaa el-Fna and the Catania fish market are “lieux de condensation sociale et territorial”, because they express the value system of a society. In this sense, the square more than a space is a container of actions that, from time to time, reconfigure the spatial arrangement of the place by starting a dynamic process of continuous modification of urban relationships.

When space is in direct relationship with the community and in general with the city, it reveals a myriad of spatial combinations, not depending on the shape of the place, but interacting with a continuous combination of events related to each other. In this sense “the square” is no longer a spatial organization of static elements, an involuntary organization of actions that create and produce areas. Something similar happens in the theatre, where actors, as a function of their roles, play and move giving to the scene an image, not static but variable in time, always evolving. Djemaa el-Fna Square is the city’s theatre, the mirror of a common identity and so urban landscape par excellence.

By the persistence of places not affected by the processes of modernization, where there occurs continuously a sequence of collective rituals, issues emerge concerning the way we use them (Fig. 10.4).

How are the relationship between people and urban landscape changed?

Regarding collective and spatial interactions, the Danish architect Jan Gehl in 1972 published the results on a systematic study of relationships between people and public spaces. His book *Life Between buildings* is a reference point about public

**Fig. 10.4** Catania, Fish market. It is the identity place of the whole community: the central space of collective rituals (Source Mauro Moschitti)



space qualities and about the ability to modify and decline the complex interchange between people and the modern city. Gehl proposes a new vision of public space, related to categories of actions performed in open spaces, in strong opposition with the opinion of the fundamentalist city planners. Gehl divides the human activities in the public space into three basic categories (Necessary activities, Optional activities and Social activities) assigning each one a weight and a method of use of public space, quantifying the number of activities and frequency of their interactions.

With a totally scientific approach, he shows that “The more time people spend outdoors, the more frequently they meet and the more they talk”. He tends to show that open-air activities and their interactions are influenced by some conditions, and that the quality of the physical urban environment is one of the determining factors together with the environmental and climatic factors. In few words, the best quality of public space leads to a greater quantity and quality of relationships between people. Gehl offers a model of a “Carless city”, able of returning to the community adequate cycle and pedestrian spaces. It is no wonder that nowadays Copenhagen is the capital of sustainable traffic with the most extensive net of cycle routes in the world, used by 40 % of the population.

Forty years after the publication of Gehl’s book, we must reflect on the relevance of his studies in relation to new behavior models expressed by society and to the complex crisis in public spaces.

The collective dream of a car for every family is gone and “car civilization”, claimed by Ford, has been replaced by new questions of conscious balance of urban behaviors and of environmental sustainability. As you know, with the rise of personal transport and the reduction of spatial distance, cities have been able to expand their territory beyond the limits of the compact city. This process of extensive expansion has contributed to the gradual erosion of public life, to the fragmentation

of public space in more specialized areas, to the gradual abandonment of urban space and to the disappearance of the functional *mixité* typical of pre-modern cities. The consequence of this dislocation has served to create and disseminate, in the suburbs, new areas of centrality as a substitute for public ones, including the Shopping Mall.

The situation of degradation of the city isn't less important, and people look for a comfortable refuge in their home. A degradation, sign of a lack of civic consciousness and of a disconnection between individuals and public space, that is manifested in the most suburban areas of the city.

Electronic modernization drives us towards a relocation of activities that took place first in urban space, increasing the degeneration and the crisis of public space. The cyberspace has become a social place par excellence, where all the public life of people takes place. Houses have assumed the role of shared and immaterial public space, where there are many of the actions typical of outer space.

In response to this crisis, we must remember that the design of public space has been a status symbol of European society. The strategic plan for specific projects of reconstruction of public space planned and realized in Barcelona has had a dual objective: the first has been to think of the city image in planning the collective space as important elements in urban development policies; the second has been to start a strategy of agreement extended to all social groups, to reduce geographical and cultural differences that had arisen between downtowns and suburbs. In the wake of the Spanish model, many European cities (Lyon, London, Copenhagen) have developed plans to re-qualify public spaces as a topic aspect for a consistent policy of urban renewal.

Currently, urban landscape is more a transitory space, material and immaterial, where human activities mingle in a disorder that cannot be evaluated by categories of default actions. There is no longer a place for work and a place for leisure, but it confirms the logic that tends to mix up our experiences in a continuous process of contamination of events, that are layered on residues of urban collective rituals still standing. In this sense, the urban landscape acquires more and more, the size of the place of the continuous variability of scenarios and of testing of most appropriate processes of negotiation between man and city.

What is the quality of the urban landscape for future cities?

We are heirs to a long tradition, mainly Anglo-Saxon origin, in which the design of public space has always belonged to the sphere of urban design confirmed by a multitude of projects. A result of the project was based on the mechanical assembly of furnishing equipment and plants that gave responses more to requests for quantity of services rather than starting a reflection on the quality of the city. The awful urban furniture has invaded our cities. The poor quality of many realizations has certainly not improved the places, but it caused the confusing overlap of objects and shapes in complete disharmony. This trend is pervasive, not yet completed, and it has to deal with a society that has set its coordinates of development on the political integration man/nature, no longer be postponed.

We are witnessing, more and more often, in designing projects with a strong representation and social impact that is a symptom of analytical difficulties. These projects try to create urban scenes as exaltation of the collective imagination, good to see immune to socio-cultural changing, or they have tried to repair obsolete or outdated rules of life. In this sense, the pedestrian *tout court* in many parts of the city and the exclusion of cars from the most sensitive environments haven't always been the resolution of the widespread phenomenon of urban chaos, and they haven't contributed, in a structural way, to reformulate new ways of use of public space. Without disappointment the consistency of contemporary projects is often associated with the desire to give the community more specialized, attractive and spectacular areas in contrast to the historical roots of public space.

For some years the *paesaggio* or *landscape* or *paysage*, has become the password to start cultural projects of reform of the city. The urban landscape has shared and supported, with architectural projects, the growth of a new urban model according to the wishes, imaginations and expectations of a community studied by the media. It's necessary to filter any adjustment according to a cultural figure that starts from landscape as supporter of the urban quality able to manage with the complex and ever-changing metamorphosis. The new theories of landscape urbanism, based on architecture criticism and on modern tradition planning, claim that only through the proper tools of landscape is possible to rearrange the city and improve the urban life. Although this theory is widely acceptable, we are faced with the nth cultural manifesto of principles that are not always fully implemented in contemporary projects.

Aware that the landscape is a system of phenomena, then we have to imagine that the urban landscape design should find symmetries with natural phenomena and return to the city the natural metabolism that has been forgotten for too long. The city is the ensemble of collective phenomena, made up of codes and languages that have to be interpreted, guided or sometimes rewritten. Cities are increasingly overweight and wealthy, it is urgent to find a solution that would provide a new path in the public space design and that would be able of ensuring environmental and formal quality in relation to new patterns of use.

We must establish a dynamic balance between urban tissues and environmental system, which establishes comfort rules for public space, that does not depend form morphology and from size of the available space, but from the structural quality of the project getting over the limits of the design of the soil.

There is a clear need for a cultural model, in analogy with the natural processes, taking possession of tools to overcome and control the aggression of the territory and the continuous use of land, restoring a physiology of the city able to protect the environmental balance. The car paradox is symptomatic to understand how the community should bear the heavy burden of social emancipation and modernization at low cost. To make transport more comfortable we asphalted all the streets of our cities and, once sealed the soil, higher was the production of cars. The result of this intervention was to have interrupted the natural cycle of water and through the artifice of a complex system of pipes to drain the water, not through the soil, to the sea. Establishing water cycle, expanding the permeable areas of the consolidated



city, could be one of the first tasks for environmental restoration and reconstruction of an urban microclimate.

What is surprising is the total absence of organic and systematic projects of public space as we witness the proliferation, according to the rules of a policy not careful to quality but more interested in consensus, of a production of project without a general strategy and of a continued fragmentation of urban space.

The public space is the cultural dimension of the city, where the society has always settled expectations, aspirations and dreams. A place of conflict and convergence, that has for centuries played a decisive role in the structuring of the urban tissues and in the dynamics of growth of the modern city. We can say that the design of the urban landscape is the key to the new strategies of urban regeneration worldwide space.

Learning from Djeema el-Fna or from Catania fish market means to understand the success of some urban landscapes. It means to question the values and qualities of a “landscape without a plan” that exists in relation to its cultural and spatial stratification. It also means to trace the reasons for this social success and to reproduce them in the new urban landscapes. I think that sometimes, more than assembly elements in amazing shapes and figures, we just need to remove the superfluous. Eliminate unnecessary time stratification to return to the essence of space. From the knowledge, editing and rewriting of the codes of public space depends on the opportunity to modify the urban contexts. The project must start in the city, not as a solution of decorum, but it must anticipate and intercept the desires of a society, to interpret the changes, reconfiguring what is there. “The architects chose to change the environment rather than improve what’s there” (Gehl 1971).

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