

## A public space project on grammar, poetics and management

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### Abstract

This article is a result of my PhD research activities. The main goal of the research was to understand the key factors of success and failure in public space design and management. Accordingly, the first part of the article investigates what a public space is and what makes it successful. The term "success" is ambiguous since it refers to multiple different views on public space. A less uncertain area is that of the design quality of public spaces: many authors have treated this subject more or less explicitly, including aspects such as accessibility, the perception of space and its use. The second part of the article presents the methodology used for the study of public spaces, explaining why Zaragoza has been chosen as a case study and describes the stages of research. The third part of the article presents the case of the public spaces of the city of Zaragoza, Spain. This case study is used in order to find correspondences and discrepancies with the conclusions previously made in the literature and eventually to identify other qualities of public space design. The analysis aims to identify which factors are essentially insignificant for the success of the project (such as the available budget or the design process), and which elements, by contrast, strongly affect the attendance and the appreciation of public spaces by the population. In particular, three elements were singled out that have the potential to become the drivers of the project: "grammar" (distributive features of spaces and buildings, microclimate, etc.), poetics (identity, recognisability of the space, etc.) and management (functions performed within the area and at its borders). The fourth part of the article examines these three elements (grammar, poetics, management) and the way they may be present within different projects. In some cases, the project succeeds in creating an optimal balance between all three elements, in other cases one element prevails over the other two; sometimes there is only one element, but it is so powerful that it compensates for the others (e.g. the entertainment activities on-site can animate even an ordinary space exposed to the elements). In conclusion, some reflections are offered regarding grammar, poetry and management, and their interrelationship.

**Keywords:** public space; design quality; grammar elements; poetics; management.

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### **What is a successful public space?**

Recent years have witnessed a renewed debate on public space; public space themes like scale, functional use and usability are now subject to multiple reflections. The present thesis derives from the critical observation of many public space projects which the Italian authorities have been carrying out in recent years: projects, among them very expensive ones, that mainly deal with the repaving of streets and squares and improving street furniture. As a result of such interventions, the city is provided with a better "business card", but if the spaces were not lived in before the intervention, they usually continue to be unused.

Here, the main goal of the research was to understand the key factors of success and failure in public space design and management. Hence the first step was to investigate what public space is and what makes it successful. Many definitions of public space can be found in Literature and at times they contradict one another (Listerborn, 2005; Németh, 2009; Cicalò, 2009; Boniburini, 2010). The resulting ambiguities have an impact on criticism on public spaces and so some authors argue their decline and other authors their revival (Carmona, 2010a and 2010b).

The resulting ambiguities also have an impact on the objectives of the projects: there is a marked difference - in political terms as well - between a popular public space and a public space frequented by all. The presence, the gathering, the debate and the clash are four ways to enliven a public space, but they have very different impacts and require different strategies and actions. When a government embarks on a public space project, it becomes necessary to share the main vocabulary and meanings with designers and citizens.

### **From successful spaces to design's quality of public spaces**

Many authors approach the issue of success or failure of public spaces by identifying parameters for the interpretation of their design quality.

For example, since Jane Jacobs, the Berkeley school has acknowledged that the distributive features of space are of fundamental importance. According to Jane Jacobs (1961), a public space must be safe and vital, and for this to happen there must be a clear demarcation between public and private space and the street must be continuously watched (by residents, business owners and passers-by)<sup>1</sup>. Oscar Newman (1972; 1976) and Clare Cooper Marcus (1990) place great emphasis on the safety of public space, starting with studies on crime prevention through environmental design. Allan B. Jacobs (1993) and Peter Bosselmann (1989) consider thermal comfort (sunshine, wind, etc.) to be a key element and study its possible variables.

According to Jan Gehl (1987; 1996), a good public space must be "saturated" with people and activities (building density is necessary but not sufficient); the system of public spaces should be potentially open for any kind of use (and not just specifically address a single function or a single category of users); it should be social-life friendly and there must be visual permeability.

For Matthew Carmona (2012a), the key to designing successful public spaces is to consider diversity: different types of audiences, use and contexts within the same city. Many considerations converge on the issue of integration between these components, thereby avoiding functional specialisation.

## **A methodology for the analysis of public spaces**

The actual research refers to research-on design(ing) (Lenzholzer, Duchhart, Koh, 2013) and borrows from the “case study research analysis” developed by Mark Francis on behalf of the LAF – the Landscape Architecture Foundation (Francis 1999; 2003). The “Post-Occupancy Evaluation”<sup>2</sup> has proved to be highly important to the case study’s analysis, and has also been implemented for public spaces (see Newman, 1972). In all those methodologies the ability to observe is essential. The research refers to the first degree direct examination, developed by the Berkeley School and Jan Gehl (A.B. Jacobs, 1985, 1993; Porta, 2002; Gehl, Svarre, 2013).

In order to verify the results coming from Literature it was necessary to go in-depth into the real public spaces of a city. In order to compare both living and abandoned spaces in the same city, an “ideal” context is needed. Therefore, it was necessary to look for a city that could respond to specific criteria: dense, solid and with a mix of uses; citizens accustomed to occupying public spaces and spending time outside; public spaces named by Literature as “best practice”; a well-stocked and diversified network of public spaces, different spaces being used in different ways and in addition, recently designed public spaces, which can be testaments to an ability to respond to current political, social and economic trends (economic crisis, increasing unemployment etc). The case study should not have been investigated solely and wholly according to the Literature but instead have been researched in a more original way. Moreover, due to the fact that the research is based on Anglo-Saxon Literature, we wanted to see what else is under development, in different contexts. These criteria have led us to Zaragoza as the prime choice.

The study of Zaragoza has been developed in different steps. The first analysis<sup>3</sup> was aimed at a reconnaissance of Zaragoza’s squares and urban streets. The analysis aims to identify which factors are essentially insignificant for the success of the project (such as the available budget or the design process), and which elements, by contrast, strongly affect the attendance and the appreciation of public spaces by the population. Through an initial comparison between reading activities and the results of surveys and interviews, certain design's features were identified that can positively or negatively affect the use of a public space. These features refer to three main components: “grammar” (distributive features of spaces and buildings, microclimate, etc.), poetics (identity, recognisability of the space, etc.) and management (functions performed within the area and on its borders, etc.).

The second phase of the study was aimed at answering several questions that emerged in the first phase of the analysis. In the design of public space, what is it that matters most: the technical and functional aspects, the poetics or the management of the place?

Considering the great importance of poetics for the success of a public space, does it still make sense to develop guidelines?

Can a space without poetics be a successful place, even if it is well-designed from a technical and functional perspective? Can a space with technical and functional problems be a successful place, even if endowed with great poetic force?

Does the design end with the construction of the space or is the project continuously modified over the course of time?

To this aim, 10 very different projects were selected and for each project, a 12-hour on-site survey was conducted, producing a time-lapse movie and interviews.

The last phase of the analysis provided data verification, specific studies and analysis of the interviews and movies. The topics that emerged from the analysis of Zaragoza's public spaces were then compared with other European case studies through Literature, in order to verify that they were not local phenomena; for example the cities of London

(Nucci, 2012; Punter, 2011; Carmona, 2012b), Zurich (Gehl, 2004) and Copenhagen (Gehl and Gemzoe, 2000), and some examples of temporary cities (Bishop and Williams, 2012) were all studied.

### **Case study: the Municipality of Zaragoza**

Zaragoza offers an interesting range of public spaces. Its complex and heterogeneous mosaic of different spaces is characterised by a range of elements: the presence of public spaces remodelled in the '80s and '90s according to the "Barcelona's style"; open spaces inherited from the Expo and planned as part of its Plan de Acompañamiento; a remodelling of the open spaces along the route of the tramway and by the spaces of the Estonesunsolar program. These spaces join the traditional public spaces such as the squares of the historical city and the open spaces of residential complexes.



*Figure 1. Plaza José Sinues y Urbiola is one of the squares remodelled in the '80s. These squares are characterised by smooth granite flooring, urban furniture made with corten steel and little vegetation.  
Source: Daniela Corsini, 2013/09/17.*



*Figure 2. The open space inside the Recinto Expo and along the Ebro is now a new public space for the city, equipped with playgrounds, sport facilities and relaxation areas.  
Source: Daniela Corsini, 2013/10/11.*



Figure 3. Paseo Fernando el Catolico renewed by the Tramway's project. This rambla, richly endowed with urban furniture, is now one of Zaragoza's most popular public spaces.  
Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/05/09.



Figure 4. Estonoesunsolar II - Calle Coso. The initial goals of the programme Estonoesunsolar were to elaborate on an employment plan for 50 workers who had been unemployed for a long time, and to clear the unbuilt plots in the Casco Historico of Zaragoza. In 2009, with a small budget and within a timeframe of a few months, the programme transformed fourteen spaces in the historical city, both public and private, into urban gardens, sports areas, squares, playgrounds etc. Building on the success of the programme, in 2010 another fourteen spaces were redesigned, this time public properties located throughout the city. In recent years, other plots have been added, with all projects having in common the ability to transform the space with limited resources (few materials, scarce financing, a small timeframe), making them usable and lived-in.  
Source: Daniela Corsini, 2013/10/06

In addition to the planned spaces, the city has a capillary structure of small spaces and small practices which, with their complexity and heterogeneity, form the public life of the city. There are many squares of an informal character, often with greenery, children's playgrounds and benches where the locals sit down to read their newspapers; sometimes there are small paved areas, which work especially well when adjacent to bars, restaurants and institutions such as community centres and schools.

Overall, the city shows that the success of public spaces should not be sought only in the single space, but in the system of public spaces as a whole, which must include the highly visited spaces (the places with nightlife) the spaces for relaxation, and the meeting places for discussion, socialising etc., confirming the concept of diversity as a key to success, illustrated by Carmona (Carmona, Matos Wunderlich, 2012).

The city's main public spaces (of which there are approximately 120) have been studied through a multi-criteria analysis of the following factors: the year of their design, to understand if there have been any changes made to the design of these spaces, or indeed changes in the relationship between space and customer; localisation, with a particular interest in the established areas and new neighbourhoods, to understand the elements they do and do not share; the design process, in order to understand how and in which cases participation has had a positive impact on the success of the project and where, on the contrary, there was little or no success; any changes incurred by the project over time, to try to understand the differences between constantly evolving spaces and projects "completed" at the time of construction; the economic factor, in order to compare the efficiency of both the low-cost projects and the very expensive projects. Though these factors proved to be substantially indifferent to the success of the project.

### **Grammar, poetics and management**

From the continuous comparison between Literature and case-study numerous elements have emerged that are capable of facilitating or hindering the attendance of a public space. The shape of public space can encourage activities and stopping. The project must meet the technical and functional aspects such as accessibility, thermal comfort, visual comfort, sensory stimulation, road and personal safety, right size, visual permeability, street furniture suitability (the relationship between form and function) and the presence of water and vegetation.



*Figure 5. The Balcon de San Lazaro is situated in a beautiful location on the river and has magnificent views of the Cathedral, but it is an uncomfortable place.*

*Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/10/14.*

However, these results do not offer clear answers to the project's line of enquiry and do not propose mathematical formulas or certainties, they are instead complex and

articulated issues that need to be included in considerations surrounding public space and understood as being in relationship with the context in which you are working. For example, the overall size of a space, and the measure of its furnishings and its spaces should correspond to the number of expected users and the type of activity that will take place. Very often there are signs of an inability to make viable proposals based on the aspect of architectural spectacularity. The aspects related to the shape of public space have been defined as "grammar", and as such can be transmitted and learned. If well done, this grammar is only noted by the expert; In any case it must exist. The analysis of public spaces of Zaragoza shows that, in different contexts, numerous technical and functional aspects can assume different weights: in the mentioned case study, the protection from sun and wind proves to be a necessary condition for the attendance of a space. However, despite being a sunny and windy city, the idea of protecting people from the sun and wind in Zaragoza's public spaces has been deemed trivial and many plans have neglected this important aspect. There are projects, like that of Balcon de San Lazaro in which people have to adapt to the shape of the space, chasing the shade cast by the few trees that are present. It's easy to understand why this public space is poorly attended.



*Figure 6. Jardin en Altura and Plazas Delicias, beloved public spaces of Delicias, one of the most populated and multiethnic districts in Zaragoza. Jardin en Altura is a space developed vertically to evoke associations with a tree one could climb. The Jardin expands the space, while making the square very recognisable and affording shade to it. The place is very popular among the people of the Delicias district, especially in the afternoons and evenings. The neighbourhood association "Manuel Viola", located in the basement of the Jardin, performs many activities in the square and its surroundings. The project integrates grammar, poetics and management.*

*Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/05/06.*

Literature and case study combined show that the technical and functional elements (grammar) alone are not enough: do not forget the site's character and its ability to evoke a *genius loci* (sense of place), its image and anything else that helps to convey a deeper meaning; cultural heritage, urban art and - potentially - all manner of shapes and design elements. While some functions, such as the technical or the social, can be spelled out relatively easily, this is not usually the case when it comes to poetics: generating a meaning is not something that can be rationally expressed and planned. The meaning emerges from the dialogue between the users and the site. What the designer has to do is prepare the ground, acknowledging that the meaning will emerge, and probably the best

way to achieve this is to make sure that the design is closely connected to its context (Stiles, 2010, p. 46).

The case of Zaragoza offers food for thought on this issue. In the case of Jardin en Altura the poetics of the design enable the residents to feel the uniqueness of the place, thus triggering the Jardin to go from an attended space to a space taken over by the population.

Plaza Santo Domingo shows that a space can be experienced even if it lacks poetics (no visual theme, catalog furniture, a functional and practical place but one lacking in charm and meanings), but the case of the Jardin en Altura confirms that a space that features poetics, which processes and "translates" the place, is not only popular, but it is adopted by citizens who take care of it and participate in its maintenance. If the meaning is deep rooted, it survives and lives on for different users and different uses of space, even over time.



*Figure 7. Plaza Santo Domingo is a space that is highly frequented by the population thanks to the functions that can be performed inside the square (the children's playground, meeting areas, etc.).*

*Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/05/11.*

Comparative analysis of the Literature and case study found a third essential element, that of management, which includes the functions, tasks and purpose - planned or unplanned - in public space and in its immediate surroundings, the relationship between order and disorder, maintenance and animation. The essence of social life is created by the activities and functions that take place in a space or at its edges. The multiplicity of uses includes both those provided and those that emerge from the dialogue between users and the site (Stiles, 2020). Particularly significant is triangulation (Whyte, 1988, p. 94), the elements and the activities which have the ability to induce people to overcome the threshold of personal privacy: two examples are the sports facilities and playgrounds for children. The management of public space seeks to ensure that public space is able to fulfil all of its legitimate roles over time. This includes the management of: the uses and conflicts between uses; scheduled maintenance; new investment in public space; finding the resources and the coordination of interventions on public space. Particularly attractive functions on the edges or initiatives specifically designed for that space can also lead an ordinary and sunny place to become a highly experienced and appreciated place, like Estonoesunsolar Octavio Paz.



Figure 8. Estonoesunsolar Octavio Paz was built with a very tight budget and so it was unable to respond appropriately to all technical and functional problems. Despite that, the animation provided every afternoon by the free time centre makes it very popular and it is widely appreciated, especially by children.

Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/05/10.

## Conclusions

The best projects are those that integrate the three components (grammar, poetics and management) considering technical, functional and perceptual aspects as well as the life of the site. Integration is a key issue, also according to the European Landscape Convention (ref. 5.d). The case study shows how spaces can be frequented areas even if there is a lack of one of these components, but the absence will not be painless: an area without poetics can be attended, like Plaza Santo Domingo, but it lacks the sense of belonging, pride and attachment that citizens might otherwise feel, affecting people's attitude towards it. If the project is lacking in technical and functional aspects, especially if it is uncomfortable, it should have really attractive functions in order to work as a space, as in the case of child entertainment in Calle Octavio Paz.

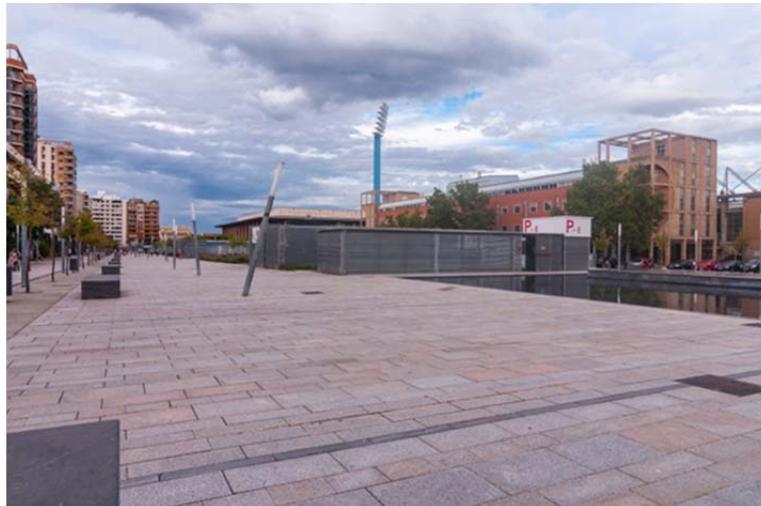


Figure 9. Plaza Portillo is a quiet and secure place, much loved by the elderly population who go there despite the fact that it is not the closest public space to people's homes.

*Source: Daniela Corsini, 2014/05/13.*

Finally, these functions greatly encourage interaction between people, but a space with few functions that does offer the opportunity for people to meet - if comfortable - can also be very popular. A good example of this is the case of Plaza Portillo: some comfortable and shaded seating, in a peaceful and secure environment, create the perfect setting for the elderly population to meet.

The public spaces that are less successful in Zaragoza are the ones that have viewed the square as "something that can come later", for example, after the construction of an underground parking space (e.g. Plaza Eduardo Ibarra or station square in Delicias). In these projects, public space is a subordinate element, compared to more important issues such as infrastructures. The underground parking space dictates the size, arrangement, and the presence of trees and consequently its exposure to the sun, leaving behind the design of the square elements that are then difficult to resolve and subject to major limitations.



*Figure 10. Citizens complain about Plaza Eduardo Ibarra, in particular about the lack of shade and its uncomfortable benches.*

The complexity of grammar elements, the great importance of poetics and management and the importance of the environment, make drafting effective guidelines difficult, but their study is a way in which professionals can become more aware, through continuous training, of the issues presented in the project and what constitutes good practice. The case studies are very useful both in evaluating the outcomes of a project and as references. While some items are related to the specific context, other principles are generalisable and can fit comfortably within similar projects.

The case study confirms that a project often shoulders a great responsibility in connection with the failure of a space, sometimes the lack of response from the local community is caused by a deficiency of investigations, by an over-project or by a lack of stimuli and functions.

Designing public space in the contemporary city is a complex empirical affair, and strongly relies on the evaluation of the results. It is normal for landscapes and cities to evolve as a result of these experiments, therefore, the lack of acceptance and vitality of a designed space should help us to realise that it was, from a certain perspective, a mistake: if the population did not respond there is a reason for that. At some stages, a project cannot be

expected to ensure a certainty - of an almost deterministic kind- of operation. The process continues even once the project has been realised, and the phase of monitoring and possible intervention to correct the path taken is a fundamental part of the process.

## Notes

- (1) "There must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind". Jane Jacobs (1961).
- (2) "The process of evaluating buildings in a systematic and rigorous manner after they have been built and occupied for some time" (Preiser et al, 1988).
- (3) It took two months to conduct a survey of the nearly 120 public spaces identified.

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