

A SPACE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION: THE URBAN SQUARE

Centripetal and centrifugal at the same time, starting point and crossroads which combines, even from ancient times, functional values with aesthetic values or, in the words of the theorist and Renaissance artist Leon Battista Alberti, "comoditas" and "voluptas", the city square could become both an object of architectural reflection (Pierre Lavedan) and of an anthropological-sociological one (Georges Balandier).

To me, it seems to be two functions which deserve being discussed as existing along the borders of several disciplines: the square as the scenography for staging politics and the square as a place of festive therapies. It is a fact, that different ideologies, from the classical antiquity and from the Renaissance, have spoken – again in various ways – about several possible "specialisations" of some urban functions, certain coincidences between some symbolical topographies and some social-political ones, starting even from some Aristotelian comments.

The development of some central spaces of "agora", "forum", "praetorium" type towards the Renaissance squares will reach their climax in architectural projects of utopias, political and urban as well, and the so called Sforzinda of Filarete in Quattrocento, or the ideal town imagined by Palladio in Cinquecento, where the great/big square had to be separated/delimited from the precincts of the prince or of the republic, from the building of the treasury or the prison (four centuries later by a slight change in civic priorities, the reality of Brasilia, the federal capital, designed by Niemeyer in a desert, was endowed with a vast square bordered by the government building, the Parliament and the Courts).

As we can easily notice, sometimes, the public character of the square could border, especially in the technocratic type of monarchies, some other spaces, this time, being closed, "forbidden", secret, occult places, owned by the spiritual and political power, either belonging to the Vatican, or the imperial palace in Beijing or the Kremlin, where there appeared, in strict overwhelming

symetries or with intended irregularities, San Pietro Basilica Square, Tiananin Square or "the Beautiful" Square (because this is the meaning of the epithet "Red", in a specific Russian speech polisemy, regarding the famous Moscow space).

Some other times, the open space – with a square or circular shape – of such a public square may become the ample scenography for a regal statue, placed in its centre, as it is the case of the future Place de la Concorde in Paris, dedicated to Ludovic XV; it may be the space for popular performances taken place under some monarchic symbols which offered in a munificent way "bread and circus", or the place for some events organised by the plebs, as it was the case of the tauromachies in the Iberian world, which gave birth to the urban design specific to Andalusia and Aragon – but, also, to be found in the Latin America and the Philipines – their squares being octagonal closed spaces, therefore, places for some performances, games and celebrations, and when, in modern times – under "monarchs of the Enlightenment and all kinds of absolutisms – overwhelming totalitarian systems appeared, squares became urban spaces well controlled, taking part, from the Revolution of Robespierre to that of Lenin, in authentic political dramas, being the more personalised as the leader was more important (let's remember the outstanding role played by Piazza Venezia in Mussolini Rome).

On the contrary, the slow road towards democracy made these open spaces places for a public therapy, for a festive liberation, for a symbolic and ritual expulsion of what was bad in the City, giving birth to a street oral culture of a folklore type, from the Gothic "mysteries" to the baroque carnival, to the present day American "Open Theatre" or to the Romanian lively slogans, sometimes stupid, like "he was with the Russians for five years cannot think like Bush" or "We do not leave this place, we do not go home", shouted by people who, after a couple of hours, went peacefully to their homes.

In the already mentioned terms of political dramaturgy, we have to say that in pluralistic societies, which are familiar with the rule of the competitive game between the Power and the Opposition, the street, the square often become places of a challenging dramatisation – be it on the level of an infantile slogan, but with a great genuine liberation force – in a real “demonstration democracy”; the latter makes use of such symbolic spaces for its periodical events, as we can mention, closer to us, the University Square in Bucharest – a place of heroic resistance on 21st december 1989, a place of impressive manifestation, again carnival like, a place of national and international communication of a political opposition “in statu nascendi” in the spring of 1990 – conquered and reconquered, almost ritualistic and challenging – then, again, used by the opposition, less numerous, but tenacious in January-February 2012; or Piata Unirii in Iasi which could have become a place for an anti-totalitarian action, which was soon betrayed on 14th December 1989, becoming later on a place for popular dances, huggings alternating with hootings, going on until the present time.

Farther away, but with the same typology, we can mention the public places in Paris characteristic to the left French mythology of the last decades as the squares Bastille, Republique, Nation.

There and here, the scenography, the therapy and the dramaturgy of the square belong in an equal measure to the political folklore which can become, at the same time, demolishing and ridiculous.

Shoulder to shoulder, people all over the world, those who in old times showed in the Romanian space their solidarity on rural fields or on the outskirts of towns – on the Islaz Common in Teleorman and on the Liberty Plain in Blaj in 1848, on “Horea’s field” in Alba Iulia in 1918 –, now, in the open places of the urban squares, they speak out their revolt, their hatred, fear, hope, communicating. They communicate by means of slogans, riddles, speeches on statue pedestals or on the near by balconies.

Taken over by the radio and television, this communication has got national dimensions, has been manipulating, in the right sense of the word. In fact, it has created a mentality, which, sometimes, could rewrite history. My conclusion is that this type of communication takes the risks of being deceptive, to vehiculate appearances, to create false leaders which masses of people and aslo the elites could follow for a while. This is rarely to the benefit of the real history, it is more often detrimental to it.

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