Metaurban Tourist Places and City Development

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Abstract

One typical manifestation of tourist urbanism is the creation of prettified images of *places* in order to competitively use their *urbanity* - that unique quality forwarded by cities to their citizens in terms of communication and sociability - as a tool to attract tourists. Known as placemaking, the practice is accompanied by a placemarketing that aims at the creation of branded places. This action reshapes cities, carving out places to work as urban entertainment fragments of development. The paper discusses the use of tourist metaurbanism global strategies - such as the retrourbanism of abandoned historic areas; or the production of glamourized cloned places - and their implication upon local cultural and economic agendas. Outcomes from a research project in Porto Alegre, south Brazil, point out to cases in which both tourists and the city population are successfully appropriating newly invented places of cultural consumption - a multifunctional airport and a revamped old icon.

1   Places

"Place is a well accepted theoretical construct of the area of spatial studies. The various disciplines involved in the area are used to approach the concept according to each individual rationale" (CASTELLO 2005a p.350). On urban-architectural grounds, place is a *construct* that implies the existence of a created environmental form - a form imbued with a symbolic significance to its users.

1.1   Rethinking the concept

In the actual shift of paradigms from modernism to postmodernism the concept receives numerous contributions, appending a broadened trans-disciplinary perspective to its understanding. In the move from internationalism to globalism, the forms of cities also experience drastic changes, evincing the decisive influence market forces exert upon them. Changes occurring within the very conceptualization of place also provide unforeseen fundaments for rethinking the concept. Thus, the inclusion of an *economic* value to measuring the quality of a place is not an inadmissible consideration any longer, especially within today's societal changing mores. This comes as an addition to the consecrated *existential* values, widely recognized among authors of the area (e.g.: ADAMS et al. 2001; CASEY 1998; NESBITT 1996; NORBERG-SCHULZ 1996; RELPH 1976, 1996; TUAN 1998), as place's traditional valuator. Therefore, a *place*, normally understood as a *social construction*, can also be thought of as an *economic construction* (FAINSTEIN 2001; FLORIDA 2004); mainly when tourist urbanism is involved (JUDD & FAINSTEIN 1999).

1.2   Placemaking / Placemarketing

The praxis of constructing places is known as *placemaking* and comes usually associated to a vigorous *placemarketing*. Both, placemaking and placemarketing act together in an effort to ascribe to the new places a *branded* image, so as to act as a strategic tool for achieving marketing management objectives. The practice of "making places" aims at creating (or *re*-creating) lively "social" areas within the cities - as well as bringing them into businesses. More than merely designing a functional area dedicated to

boost sociable encounters, to make a place now also entails strategies to marketing that place. And the quickest and safest way to market a place is through the construction of an *image*. An appealing image, so that places can become more rapidly included within people's *imaginary* repertoire. Probably herein lays the most drastic variation to reach the concept of place: thanks to that goal of transforming fantasy into materialized constructions, places became highly tied to the construction of *images*. There are numerous examples of such practices currently *taking place* in cities all over the globe. Examples range from larger scale projects, such as Port Vell (Barcelone) or Puerto Madero (Buenos Aires); to smaller ones, such as the Globe Theatre (London) or Xin Tian Di (Shanghai).

2   Urbanity

Urbanity is understood as that unique quality forwarded by cities to their citizens in terms of communication and sociability. Urbanity is normally connected to the concept of *public* space. However, today, even such classic urban concepts experience a rethinking. The interface between *public* and *private* spaces is increasingly blurred, and, as the literature observes, "public space" now encompasses a *polysemantic* meaning (e.g., ASCHER 2004; CARR et al. 1995; HANNIGAN 1998; KAYDEN et al. 2000; WHYTE 1990). A growing public-private spaces interpenetration leads some authors to recommend that urban designers should focus "(…) on the broader concept of 'public life' (i.e. the sociocultural public realm of people and activities), rather than the narrower one of physical 'public spaces'", since public life now is "flourishing in private places, not just in corporate theme parks, but also in small businesses such as coffee shops, bookstores and other such third places" (BANERJEE 2001 in CARMONA et al. 2003 p.114).

2.1   Urbanity places and Cloning places

In our research work, the new invented places of today are called "cloning places", given their efforts to *replicate* the spatial patterns through which the phenomenon of urbanity is perceived. The design of "cloning places" draws heavily from the environmental *stimuli* believed to be responsible for attributing *urbanity* to the *urbanity places*. Hence, the use of the expression "cloning", here employed with an unusual positive tone.

In the process of making places, design imitates an idealized prototypical scheme which had, previously, proved to bring out the inherent quality of urbanity. Thus, the new place is understood as a *cloned* offspring of the primary urbanity place. As such, it is supposed to produce a *perception of urbanity* - or, perhaps, the perception of a *proxy of urbanity* –, unmistakably, that same urbanity sensed in an urbanity place. Moreover, the expression is used to intentionally evoke the strong *human* content of Architecture and Urbanism, suggesting that, whereas bio-genetical cloning may create life, urban-architectural cloning may create places - where life can be lived and shared.

It is worth remembering that the shifting between sites formerly perceived as paramount symbols of urbanity, and their cloned offsprings, may bring about changes on people's perception of urbanity. In fact, "(…) certain aspects of urbanity that until recently were the exclusive privilege of the old core cities (…) [are] made possible by the site-unspecific reproduction of 'urban' outdoor space inside air-conditioned indoor megaspaces" (RUBY 2002, p.24). The new places are often criticized as *escapist*, but, in the understanding of consecrated scholars, as cunningly teaches TUAN (1998), escapism should be seen as nothing more than a spontaneous manifestation of a humane act. Among his examples to enlighten his point, Tuan alerts that it was necessary to cross one whole century so that the Tour Eiffel passed to be perceived by the Frenchmen as it is nowadays, legitimated as a real place of urbanity (TUAN 1980).

3   Tourist Urbanism

Making places for attracting and entertaining visitors is not a novel praxis in urban planning. What is interesting to remark, though, is that the *state-of-the-art* in place theory now offers a suitable path for a promising bridging between tourist urbanism practices and environmental planning.

The making of new places is linked to urban policies, either public or private, where *places* are destined to accomplish specific planning goals. To expand and incorporate this strategy into tourism planning is a likely consequence. Additionally, since cloning places are apparently carved out of the city's own fabric, one can expect that this "progeny" will work as a natural sustainer of local

environmental qualities, apt to be used as a tool to counteract the eventual invasion of the globalized sameness, often criticized in new tourist places.

3.1   MetaUrbanism

The creation of tourist places destined to function as urban places for the entire population of a city is a cherished objective in tourist urbanism. Among the urban-architectural procedures involved, two stand out: the creation of iconic-edifices (JENCKS 2005; SUDJIC 2005); and the development of cities as theme-parks (SASSEN & ROOST 1999; FAINSTEIN & GLADSTONE 1999). They both rely on the creation of elements of the popular imaginary, represented by *images* that emerge either from the newly built locations or from those coming from the revamping of vernacular historic locations. The invented forms try to evade from the sameness of everyday reality, leading to environments eventually perceived as "non-real". In the process they may reach, sometimes, even *meta*-real characteristics. Therefore, this sort of placemaking comes closer to a "*meta*"-urbanism rather than to the more ordinary one. In our research works, the professional actions related to the construction of such environments are called *meta-urbanism* (CASTELLO 2005b). This is so because "In general, the urban-architectural design of theme places becomes responsible for bestowing images of fantasy into the domain of real places. As an outcome, reality may become altered (...). And (...) practices more akin to a meta-reality might be expected (...)" (CASTELLO 2000, p.2) – practices that lie *beyond* the day-by-day reality. Analogously, the prefix *meta* before the word *urbanism* implies 'that which is beyond urbanism' - that is to say, beyond the usual domains of what urbanism is usually familiar to deal with.

4   Urban_Trans_Formation in Porto Alegre

Two research works in Porto Alegre, focusing on the interaction between people and their environment, gathered through environmental perception techniques, allowed identifying significant environmental elements. Crucial to the concerns of this paper are the findings relative to two elements: the old Gasometer plant; and the new Airport complex.

4.1   The reuse of the Gasometer as a *place*

Research on the central area took place in 1986 and 1995. In 1986, the Gasometer plant was just an old building in ruins, surrounded by an emptied area by the river. Despite that, its image was quite resilient in people's memory, probably by its strategically visual location at the very interface of the natural and built environments, on the farthest point of the central peninsula (FIG.1). In 1995, the construction had been rehabilitated by minimalist strategies, destined basically to keep the edifice up. Brought back to working again, the ancient icon soon began to reach unexpected peaks in people-environment interactions.

The edifice and its natural surroundings are impregnated by an image of permanence deeply immersed in the population's cultural memory. Thanks to its new functioning, the novel place rapidly gave *place* to new *behavioural settings* (BARKER 1978; BONNES & SECCHIAROLI 1995) for the leisure times of both, visitors and the community; to a venue to see and to be seen, to play, to sing, and ultimately, to enjoy the urbanity it has to offer. It also became a cultural brand for marketing the city (FIG.1). This was all achieved by "cloning" and highlighting the memory images the site had always possessed. Today it is *the* place to take visitors, either for showing them the charismatic presence of the river, obliterated by urbanization in the image of the city; or for sharing the enlightening bliss of its historic meaning.

Figure 1: Repurposing iconic landmarks and bringing them into our time. The old Gasometer.

4.2   The multifunctional Airport Complex as a *place*

Located on a very convenient city's overspill, the new Airport is easily accessible and combines a diversity of functions, offering an example of the new global tendency of gathering under a single roof, a multifunctional "hybrid" compound. It is a typical representative of the multipurpose buildings found in today's postmodern urbanism (ELLIN 1999), believed to clone the characteristics of a place as a means to induce the happening of grand "events", for citizens and tourists alike (KOOLHAAS 2004; VIRILIO 2000).

Research on the airport took place in 2002, and among other objectives, investigated whether people and tourists perceived the airport as an urban place. Both the quantitative and qualitative results revealed that all the functions offered by the complex had been fully 'appropriated' by the population in their daily practices. As shown in the Charts, an expressive number of interviewees stated that "Yes, they would bring some friend to take a walk in the airport"; and "Yes, they would indicate activities such as 'leisure' and 'other reason'", when asked about the reasons originally motivating their visit to the airport. The illustrations, in addition, show people at ease, reading, gathering in the food parlour, shopping, going to the Cineplex, or simply relaxing in the armchairs (FIG. 2).

Not only travellers are attracted to the Airport. Activities typical of those that ordinarily take place in a *place* are now occurring there: the complex is already responsible for attracting people from the nearby metropolis and its adjacent outskirts, indicating that the population at large perceives the complex as a legitimate *urbanity place*.
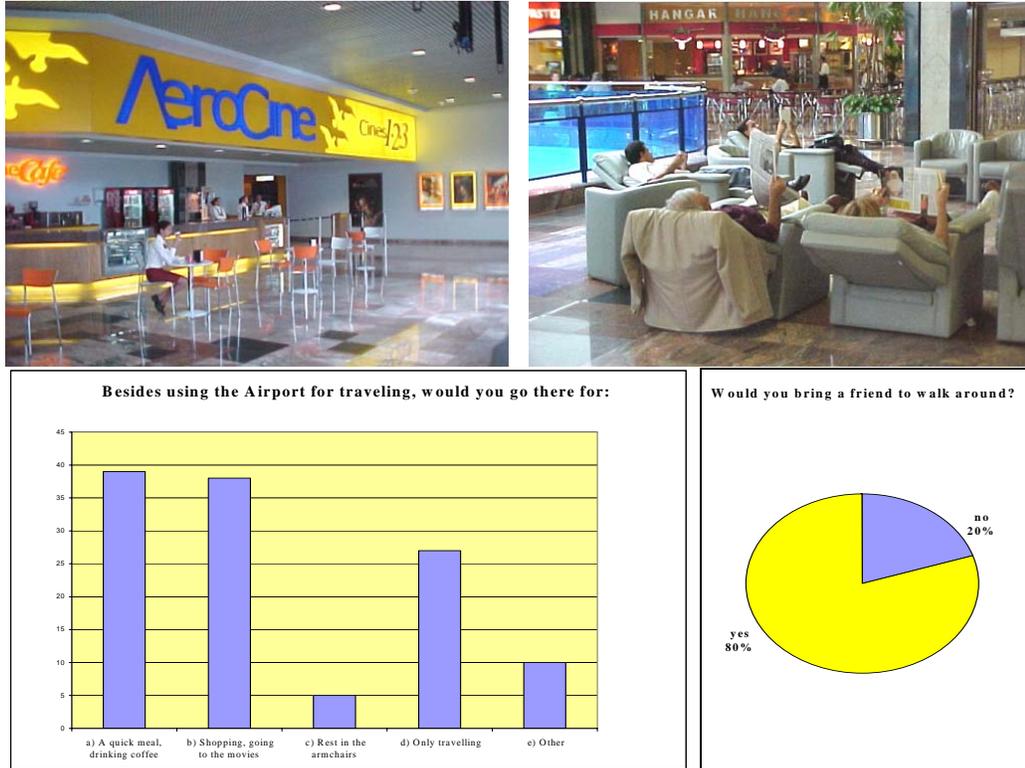
Figure 2: Global presence in the infrastructure of everyday life. The new Airport as an urban place.

4.3 Conclusion

Given the growth of meta-urban places such as the ones selected above; their use in tourism; and the actual place concept rethinking; can an urban transformation be anticipated?

Yes, in all likelihood. There is a significant *mutation* to be expected, a mutation that permeates all dimensions of the urban realm - social, economic and cultural. Yet, as well accepted theoretically, a *mutation* is a proviso for *evolution*. The concept of place, positioned as it is at the very interface of physical, social, and behavioural disciplines, may contribute beneficially to facilitate this evolution. Also, it affords to bridge *global* and *local* tourist planning strategies, pointing the guidelines for the consequent urban_trans_formation. Plainly put, this is the message of this paper. Though tempting as it is to further pursue the point, its elaboration would necessarily demand additional specific research.

The cases discussed here are symptomatic, especially of the possibilities opened up by the use of the place approach for explaining the interconnection needed among diverse disciplines in tourist planning. The Gasometer case depicts an acceptable way of using a *cultural* asset as a tourist commodity; a viable way to increment the circuit of *social* places; and a feasible method to stimulate *environmental sustainability*, either *economic* (the valuation of derelict land); *behavioural* (the renewed perception of an urban icon); *physical* (the reuse of an abandoned landmark); or *political* (an oxygenation to people's own self-esteem, and under visitors' eyes). The Airport case can, additionally, render the city's aptitude to transmute a typical representative of the global scale of mutational places into the city's local repertoire of places. By its periphery location, it is illustrative of what some authors call "transurbanism" (MULDER 2002), since it clones the features of a city hub, and, as the city gets internally deurbanized, the new cloned places progressively urbanize the landscape (RUBY 2002). This, ultimately, confirms that the city is able not only to assimilate the global *mutation* process but, more importantly, can, at the same time, direct the environmental *evolution* towards a manageable *sustainable* path.

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