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'City as a work of art' – Influence of public art in the city

Introduction: Public art and the city

There is no doubt that the current process of globalization and increasing competitiveness of cities greatly influence the relation between public art and urban development. Public art is in this relation often regarded or exploited as a tool that could help increase the distinctiveness, uniqueness and attractiveness of cities and consequently provide work for the local economic base (see for example Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Howkins 2001; Bianchini, 1999). Regardless of this consumption related concept, where public art is put in function of city beautification that supports marketing strategies designed to attract mobile international capital and specialised personnel, it is important to stress that this type of relation between art and cities is not a new invention. History is full of examples where city authorities intentionality supported art in order to gain competitive advantages, measured either in the form of reputation, prestige or simply by enhancing the attractiveness over similar cities. Maybe the best known examples of such enhancing of physical i.e. “cultural capital in materialised form” (Bourdieu, 1986) are the cities of the so-called “grand tour”, a traditional trip of historical European cities in 18th century undertaken by mainly upper-class European young people, which is well represented in novels like “A room with a view” (Forster, 1908/2014). This cities were due to their historical spatial form, most commonly part of visual records i.e. landscape paintings in the 18th century which included waterside panoramas of numerous monuments (e.g. Florence, Venice, Paris, London).

In comparison to other historical periods, where art was largely the domain of elite and monuments or architectural pieces have been present in public spaces to emphasise the centrality of important sacral and secular places, the notion of public art was much expanded

after the Second World War. By the term public art we refer to works of art in any form that have been designed and performed with the specific intention of being sited or staged in physical public domain, usually external and accessible to all (Jones, 1992; Goldstein, 2005; Knight, 2008; Finkelppearl, 2000; Januchta-Szostak, 2010). In the post-war period public art became much more connected to the concept of revitalisation of urban space. Public art became a mediator between various city users¹ (citizens, residents, visitors, tourists) and artists that tried to express important social issues and add to the quality of experience in a specific place. In this perspective, public art much more tried to communicate through various spatial forms like exposition places. Such was the case of Pompidou Centre² in Paris (see Miles, 1997; Kwon 2002; Rendell, 2006; Lacy, 1995), which embodied both permanent and temporary artworks, performances, happenings, installations and street theatres. This process, where art tried to communicate through ‘spatialisation’ became evident in the so-called phenomenon of “street art” which arose from: “a need of free artistic expression on the public forum” and represents an attempt to have the artist’s “work communicate with common people about socially relevant themes without being imprisoned by aesthetic values” (Januchta-Szostak, 2010: 80-81). Although not everywhere socially accepted, street art importantly influenced the debate how public art should be perceived and what is its role in the city. New art interpretations, which were sometimes quite remote from the Kantian idea of universally recognised beauty, have ‘let the genie out of the bottle’ and reopened the debate about what art means for the city.

The influence of public art on city users

The transformation of public art in the post-war period reopened important questions about how it influences the contemporary city and whether public art has or should have a specific role in the city. How should public art intersect with city spaces and new art trends which include performance art, conceptual art, installation art, land art, process art, community-based art, site-specific art and many new elements (urban furniture, lighting, multimedia, graffiti and even commercial art) is a complex question. New art trends and art innovations constantly try to claim the status of public art that is supposed to convey existential meaning

¹ Martinotti (1996) in this regard notes that unlike in industrial city, today's post-industrial cities due to changed mobility, flows of people, information and resuources, it is no longer possible to speak only of the permanent city residents but also other groups of city users.

² Constructed from 1971 to 1977 and designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers.

and symbols which individuals are able to percept and understand through an act of identification (Norberg-Schultz, 1974). How individuals i.e. the audience understands public art is in this sense of crucial importance. Artefacts of famous artists can be found anywhere in the world but not all of them are able to establish communication with the local environment and produce social, cultural, historical and spatial coherence. How individuals percept the artwork or better say how strongly do various audiences integrate with public art can be described as a difference between the “visual landmark” and the “collective anchor-point” (Januchta-Szostak, 2010: 82). Whilst the first may amuse, stimulate superfluous interest and provide temporary engagement of a person, the second one produces mental acceptance and provides social identification with the artwork. Collective anchor-points construct deep integration with individuals and become part of their “mental map” of the city (Lynch, 1960). Due to their widely accepted character such public art often becomes a city symbol and cross-cuts through various audiences that range from residents to ordinary tourists and other city users.

Various types of permanent and temporary artworks can become collective anchor-points. Contrary to the old-fashioned perception that only permanent artworks can represent real public art, it is nowadays generally accepted that temporary and transient exhibitions, events and happenings can be by individuals regarded as a permanent reference and a stable collective anchor-point. In this sense also short-time, but repeatable and intensive events, can provide social integration and similarly to physical artefacts localize it in specific city spaces. Januchta-Szostak (2010: 83) enlist three means by which public art can achieve social integration: 1) collective participation in commemoration events; 2) spatial arrangement of interactive artworks, which encourages interpersonal relations; 3) social engagement and collaboration on cultural projects. By this explanation public art can be found in any form, any place and in any occasion where this connection between art and the act of identification that consequently gives meaning to the individual existence, occurs³.

Public art thus includes the dimension of ‘temporality’ i.e. how long is its duration in the city and ‘empathy’ or how much and what kind of (social) integration is achieved between public art and various city users. From here we come to the inevitable question - should the public

³ The project Global City - Local City (2012-2014) in this sense represents a classical example of a dispersed portfolio of activities and multilateral approaches to social integration that can be found in today’s public art in cities.

art by definition be 'site specific' and involve community engagement or can public art address different audiences without links to the local community? The truth is somewhere in the middle as all cities in the world are experiencing some level of cultural globalization, which is constantly inserting new cultural elements into the city space. Due to this, also the relation towards what should be taken as exemplary public art in a specific city is put under question. For example "global cities" (see Sassen, 1994, 2001; Taylor, 2004), due to their extreme scale and density of networks, need and comprise all possible types of public art. Their scale and global character spontaneously produce cultural offer suited for extremely diversified audiences, which includes both local population and global visitors (Martinotti, 1996). Nevertheless, not all cities have the possibility to spontaneously produce such amount of 'audience diversified' public art and also global cities cannot balance the offer of public art in specific places, which often results in intense social inequalities and "gentrification processes" (Smith 1996; Hamnett 1984; Downs 1981) that constantly change the cultural landscapes of the world metropolises⁴. Due to their scale and critical mass, world cities have the 'luxury' i.e. possibility to quickly adapt to such situations as audiences and artists are due to processes of commodification of space constantly in search for new or more appropriate locations⁵. Smaller cities have in this relation less flexibility and can be more affected by the process of urban regeneration and renovation that can strongly influence or diminish their diversity of public art.

When analysing the role of public art in a city it is important to stress that different audiences or city users have different needs and different views towards how should public art be inserted in the urban space. The segmentation of audiences is site specific and each city therefore needs to produce different types of custom made public arts. Nevertheless, the segmentation and supposed needs of diversified audiences are often a favourable excuse for "urban managers" (Pahl, 1977) to implement specific cultural policies that are more linked to the economic and marketing strategies than elevating the quality of life in the city. The use of cultural policy and public art for urban economic development gives rise to many dilemmas

⁴ There exist a lot of examples (e.g. New York, Berlin etc.) where various financially vulnerable groups that importantly added to the character and quality of life in the area are due to their inability of paying rent gradually evicted from the area during the process of revitalisation and regeneration (see for example Zukin, 1991; Featherstone, 1991; Jacobs, 1994; Harvey, 1989 etc.).

⁵ Artists often have the role of bridging gentrifier that temporarily occupies or 'reserves' the area until the political authorities or economic interest groups define the function of the area. In this sense, artists become part of the strategy of 'interim development', i.e. warmly welcomed temporary guests (non-statuary tenants), which are gradually pushed out of the neighbourhood as developers try to realise the potential for economic exploitation of the area.

such as the question of inequality in the level of cultural provision in the city centre and outside (peripheral) neighbourhoods, differences in consumption-oriented strategies and support for local cultural production and innovation, investment in buildings or expenditure on events and activities and many more. Several authors (e.g. Bianchini, 1999; Mercer, 1991, 1996; Evans, 2008) stress that cultural policies are too often by authorities seen as a valuable tool to diversify the local economic base where city centres are used as “showcases for the local economy in the emerging inter-urban and inter-regional competition games” (Bianchini, 1999: 39). The focus of cultural policies and public art on city centres or other limited districts produces unequal spatial development at the local level and tries to apply “planning of culture” instead of a more holistic “cultural approach to urban planning and policy” (ibid.) that should try to ensure a good platform and opportunities for the development of diverse, heterogeneous artistic practices.

Enabling an accessible platform for various forms of public art is becoming a necessity due to the changes which made art much more connected to social and local contexts. Not only has public art become more site-specific but also the mainly aesthetic definitions of art have expanded to include a very broad array of various cultural resources from which art draws inspiration. Such cultural resources include social networks, tangible and intangible heritage, local communities and their skills, manufacturing, services and other elements of both ‘soft’ (non-physical) and ‘hard’ (physical) infrastructure that exists on site. This shift or expansion of public art from mainly being expressive in aesthetic terms i.e. as a visual landmark, to being expressive in social and local context as a collective anchor-point, changed the way art is perceived. The change of format and ways how public art communicates or is inserted in the city, changed also the expectations of audiences, which see public art as a medium that can help develop senses of spatial identity, contribute to community needs and promote social change.

In contrast to previous periods, when public art inserted socio critical messages in the aesthetic format, it is now being justified also on the basis of its social engagement and wider ‘pro-active role’ in the local community, city and region. It is important to emphasise again that the pro-active role of art in urban space is greatly discussed in the last period. The line between public art and its usage for the purpose of gentrification or preserving/enhancing the quality of life for local communities, is very thin. Simultaneously with the wishes to use public art for supposed contribution to what might be broadly termed ‘urban regeneration’,

can run parallel process of commodification of space that include land speculation, declining of traditional jobs and destroying of the traditional urban structure and cultural identity of cities (Smith 2002; Perrons 2004).

Hall and Robertson (2001: 5) argue that contributions of public art to the city, if implemented in correct way, could be of great value in “economic, social, environmental and psychological” terms. However, the authors continue that these wishes have been subject to very little serious evaluation. When evaluating the impact of public art on the city they first recognize a broad distinction between “flagship, or prestige, regeneration projects” and “communal regeneration projects” (2001: 7), which are much more tied to the needs of local communities. Secondly, they evaluate several communal regeneration public art projects⁶ that are focused on the social rather than economic bases and follow the broader advocacy of the cultural, non-purely property-led or economic approach to urban regeneration. On the basis of claims of project planners and supporters they analyse seven areas of social concern which, as advocates have argued, might be addressed by public art. These seven areas to be addressed by public art include: 1) developing a sense of community; 2) developing a sense of place; 3) developing civic identity; 4) addressing community needs; 5) tackling social exclusion; 6) implementing educational value and 7) promoting social change. Regardless of limitations, which do not allow to consider in detail all claims of public arts advocates for specific projects, they identify several problematic issues inside the field of public art. In this sense, the field of public art could be exposed to four very broad critiques that address the questions that are usually ‘not being asked’ or even considered ‘blasphemous’ within the local art community. First, their analysis shows lack of satisfactory evaluation and rigorous critical apparatus of implemented public art projects. Secondly, the advocacy for public art projects was often based on essentialism and claims that there exists a set of attributes which are necessary to the identity and functionality of the project. Thirdly, the public art practice also lacks critical intervention and does not support much interference inside its field. Fourthly, the authors notice many fundamental flaws of the technocratic advocacy of public art, which does not have an adequate critical paradigm to satisfactory evaluate the claims of public art advocates.

⁶ On this point it is important to mention that Hall and Robertson (2001) evaluate mainly public art projects that were funded or subsidized by various parties (city municipality, city councils, EU funds, national state, companies, other subsidizing schemes etc.), while other public art initiatives which are not connected to official subsidizing were not analysed (e.g. subcultural public art).

The analysis showed that the field of public art functions on unclear basis when it comes to evaluation of its contributions to city or urban quality of life. The supposed contribution of public art to the alleviation of a range of urban problems is often 'taken for granted' and very little satisfactory evaluation of its impacts has taken place (see Philips, 1988; Selwood, 1995; Hall, Robertson, 2001). Additional problem represents the inability of public art field to produce any evaluation mechanism that would confront different views on the implementation of projects in local contexts. Philips (1988) argues that on one side public art field is quite reluctant in establishing such mechanism, which would expose the errors and shortcomings of various projects. On the other side there also exist a relative scarcity of funding, particularly in the community arts sector. As such, it is normal that funding is to be directed towards implementation rather than evaluation of public art. Nevertheless, without proper evaluation, the field of public art is inherently perceived as a good thing inside the city, which also has collateral effect best represented by its use for gentrification and producing of social inequalities in space. Essentialism and automatic accepting of all elements of public art, without making proper questions, opens possibilities for urban managers to commodify city space without resistance from the majority. As several authors write (Hall, 1995; Miles, 1998; Sargent, 1996), essentialism posits public art as an obligatory component of the cultural stock of cities that contributes to the enhancement of city-centre environments and the externally projected images of cities, while being imagined as a panacea for a range of social problems.

Conclusion: Developing the self-reflexivity of public art sphere

There is no doubt that evaluating the impact of public art on the city is no easy task. How to install social scientific criteria into the field that is based on the borders between praxis, emotions, theory and interconnects them into a unique assemble. In this sense, there exist thinkers which are questioning the mere notion of evaluating public art at all (Lacy, 1995). Nevertheless, leaving the field of public art to spontaneous development also opens doors to its exploitation and make it vulnerable to economic pressures. At the moment the discussion about impacts of public art on the city is dominated by two critical approaches, which to a big degree evade the post-implementation analyse of actual social, cultural and economic impact of public art on quality of life. The first approach, which may be described as "productionist" (Hall, Roberts, 2001: 19) is typical of much writing stemming from advocates, artists and arts administrators. It reflects their roles and their concerns with quality in the production of

artworks. From this perspective, the quality of produced public art is evaluated according to its successful reception, interpretation or consumption of works. The second “semiotic” (ibid.) approach on the other hand critically evaluates public art within the ideological realm of the post-modern city embedded in a consumerist society. This approach offers a sophisticated theoretical elaboration about the meaning of art but is on the other hand unable to adequately elaborate the public’s experiences of public art and consequently its role in urban space.

Neither of both approaches adequately evaluate the impact of public art on public and how the art experience on the long-term integrates into public’s everyday life. Due to this inability to evaluate actual impacts, public art has according to some critics lost its ability to problematize social inequalities. Phillips (1998: 100) argues that the machinery of public art production is so immersed in the complex selection procedures, briefing demands, multi-stage competitions, health, safety and insurance constraints, practical community needs, selection committees and other demands from city, regional, national, corporate bureaucracy that it has developed fear of possible hostile public and media reaction to any attempts that try to provoke the fragile relationships between diverse stakeholders in urban space. The result of this dependence of public art upon various parties is the so-called “minimum risk art” (ibid.), designed to evade controversy, being largely bland and offering neither critical disruption nor artistic risk or challenge. Rather than being critical of exclusive, uneven development public art has in many cases become complicit in those process by “providing ‘amenities’, by ‘humanising’ or ‘beautifying’ the city” (Deutsche, 1991: 49). Even more, ironically, the flourishing of studies on the economic importance of public art sector and the role of cultural activities and policies on the employment and wealth of cities, point to the direction that the economic sector has succeeded to incorporate and for their purposes and means adequately evaluate the use of public art.

Despite the controversy that surrounds discussion about the role of public art in urban space, it is necessary to develop new methodologies and indicators to evaluate the impact of public art in terms of quality of life, skills enhancement, the development of a creative milieu and social inclusion. To do that, the task is first to identify different kind of values that exist on a specific locality and connect them to public art. For this purpose new “methods for measuring non-monetary values” (Olsson, 1999: 436) will have to be developed. Public art operates at the intersections between values, emotions, culture, economy and other spheres of everyday life. Due to this fluid borders of public art, both tangible and intangible impacts will have to

measured to provide a good assessment of its impact. Next, public art will have to enliven public space through the encouragement of controversy, debate, disagreement and open discourse when it comes to uneven spatial development. The most successful public art projects in a city are usually found in places with the highest contrast between apparently non-compatible ingredients. Concentration of extremes and diversities is undoubtedly highly problematic and potentially conflictive and could affect the way public art is functioning. For these reasons, specific formal and informal methods of evaluation inside the public art sphere undoubtedly have to be in place - not with the intention to exclude, but to integrate and enable the coexistence of various stakeholders, institutions, services and preserving or elevating the quality of life in a city.

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