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Public space as a designed product:
The designer's role in the future of our communities and cities.

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Resumen

El espacio público es un producto tangible con impactos a veces intangibles. Formado por el tejido de objetos, estructuras y políticas y normas sociales, los diseñadores tendemos a ignorarlo como objeto diseñado. Si es espacio público informa la cultura, sociedad y el status quo y equidad de la misma, ¿qué rol tiene el diseñador en la creación del espacio público?

Al analizar la disciplina de diseño, el proceso creativo y la injerencia del diseñador dentro de otras disciplinas, se puede explorar y teorizar sobre un mejor espacio público si este fuera abordado por la disciplina del diseño industrial. ¿Cómo puede el diseñador ser un catalizador para mejorar nuestra comunidad, calidad de vida y tejido social a través de la materialización del espacio público?

A través del análisis histórico, cultural y profesional de la planeación y diseño urbano, se pueden identificar espacios y momentos donde el diseño puede tener un impacto positivo y sustancial. Al entender el espacio público como un producto diseñado, se pueden crear mejores principios de diseño y como efecto colateral, una mejor comunidad y tejido social.

Abstract

The public realm is a tangible product with -at times- intangible impacts. Made up of a fabric threaded by objects, building structures, policies and social norms, designers tend to ignore it as a designed object. If the public realm informs our culture, society and its status quo and equity, what role do designers play in the creation of our built environment?

Analyzing the design approach, creative process and designers' agency in other fields allows for the exploration and theorization of a higher quality public realm if it were approached by the industrial design mindset. How might designers work as catalysts to improve the quality of our communities, their live ability and our social fabric through the materialization of the public realm?

Key words

Diseño urbano, urbanismo, espacio público, políticas públicas, cultura, sociedad, tejido social.

Introducción

We live in the public realm every day and interact with it more than we realize. We use public spaces as a means for mobility, socializing and recreating, amongst other activities. Even certain members of our society who are confined to a single space, for example, residents of a nursing home, correctional facilities inmates or hospital patients, tend to have access to some sort of shared space for collective use.

Despite the substantial amount of time we spend in the public realm, it is easy to ignore even the existence of these spaces and their designed features. It is typically when bad design happens that we actually acknowledge there is a design at all. Part of Dieter Rams' Design Principles includes "No. 10: Good design is as little design as possible." To further understand the role of designers in the creation and evolution of our built environment, we can analyze what happens when we apply this principle to the design of our public realm and public spaces. (Photo 1)

In the last two decades, with the exponential growth and leapfrog advancements of digital and manufacturing technologies, design has adapted to a changing social, economic and environmental ecosystem. The graphic, industrial, automotive, and other design disciplines have intersected and explored with newborn fields and industries. From web design to machine learning, and ever-evolving theories and strategies to address sustainability, design has had to rethink itself as a problem-solving tool for the social good and its role as a catalyst for social change.

The question is how might design and designers adapt and tailor their expertise and knowledge to support these problem-solving initiatives? Specifically, in the arena of the public realm and development of our built environment.

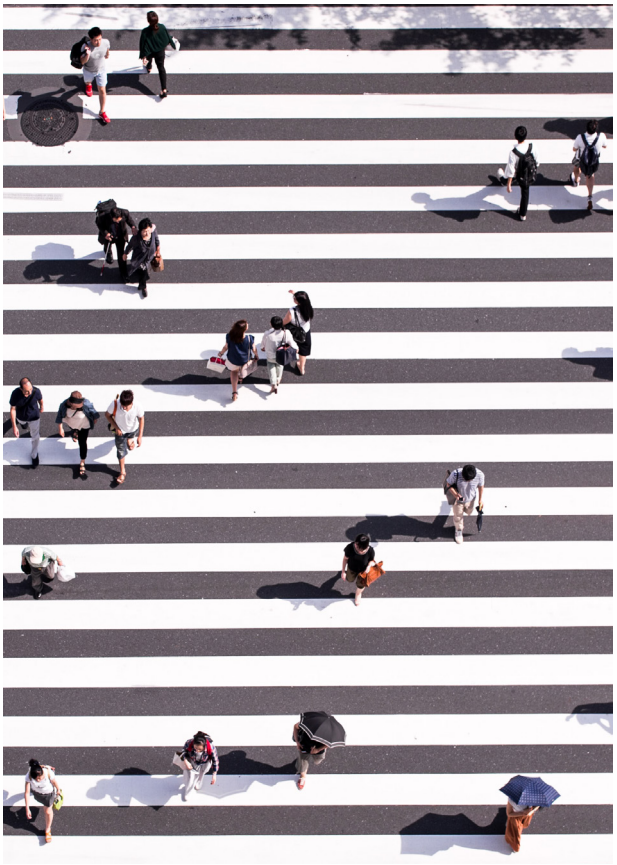

Photo 1.- Human interaction in urban spaces.

Photo by Ryoji Iwata on Unsplash

As designers, we set out on a creative and analytical process, to identify a project's challenges and constraints, to mitigate poor functionalities or conflicts within the product or service we create. The challenge -and potential for massive impact- arises when we identify the difference between designing a stand-alone product, service or project and the exponential complexities that riddle designing a public space that interacts with other spaces, structures and objects that live within and around it.

We are key in the future of our communities and have the potential to understand, dissect and re-evaluate how we build our public spaces. The design discipline is unique in the way that it lives and thrives at the overlap between the emotionally-driven creative process and the analytical, results-oriented technical mindset. Designers play a role where these two seemingly clashing worlds come together to create feasible, sustainable initiatives and solutions that improve people's lives.

If we examine a product relaunch, a home renovation or a marketing rebrand we can understand it from a designer's perspective. Understanding the user, identifying stakeholders, sketching concept designs are all parts of the creative and materialization process we go through in order to render a positive result. In order to understand the way we have built our public realm, we must do the same, but on more, high-complexity levels. We must humbly approach our own history and that of our community in order to better serve it. This means questioning the status quo, peeling historical layers off of our cities and neighborhoods and balancing history with current and future needs.

Currently, our built environment and public spaces such as parks, schools, and streets are a collection of historical decision-making and cultural narratives that have collided into what we know as cities, communities, villages and neighborhoods. These spaces tend to have defined borders, which have often been transgressed, erased or altered, as newer trends and social phenomena come into play.

We tend to both experience and navigate our public spaces, and unwillingly or unknowingly rate them in our minds. A subconscious evaluation of the spaces we use. On our commute home, there might be a street we prefer to walk, ride or drive through, and there might be certain spaces we avoid. We should aim to understand what drives these decisions, as users and as designers, and identify what part of the borders, stories and social elements of these spaces make them useful or dysfunctional, pleasant or obnoxious.

The public realm is intended to serve as the physical space where civic and social life happens; a place where society comes together and a sense of spirit and community can be fostered. Under the premise that good design is a design that is so user-friendly that we all but forget its existence, this presents designers with a new challenge and civic duty: Redesigning social fabric by applying design principles to the public spaces and built environment. (Photo 2)

Photo 2. - Use of color and geometrical elements to reimagine the urban landscape.

Technicolor Basketball Court in Paris. Photo by Ilnur Kalimullin on Unsplash

Throughout the centuries, changes in political, social, military, economic and industrial dynamics have reshaped our public realm. Many times the juxtaposition of these different changes creates a challenging and patch-like city fabric. In certain instances, these urban mosaics feed positively into each other, however, in other cases, they become conflictive and counterproductive. While this is natural, and foreseeable, our generational short-sightedness has hindered us from designing for the centuries ahead. It would have been hard for the creators of the Roman roads to imagine there would be rental cars or tour buses to deal with thousands of years later.

When Hernán Cortés and the Conquistadores rode into Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City), little did anyone imagine it would become home to 20+ million people within the next 500 years. When Tenochtitlan fell in 1521 to the Spaniards, what followed were a number of power struggles and political alliances amongst the newcomers and other indigenous peoples and city-states. However, the one powerful, systemic change was the transformation in the city's morphology from a wetland, floating city to a dry, brick-and-mortar city.

The Spaniards built the gridded-out Centro Histórico downtown core of the Mexican capital using endemic materials that can still be found in the archaeological sites spread throughout the city. This layout would become a model for other colonial cities to follow in Mesoamerica over the next centuries.

At the same time, Anglo-America and other colonial regions of the planet were being settled and, eventually, urbanized. The Industrial Revolution brought technological and economical changes throughout the world, transforming the way goods were produced and consumed, social and political dynamics on local and global scales and consequently, reshaping the way our built environment looks, feels and evolves.

The increased accessibility to suburban housing, tied with the boom in automobile use and ownership shifted the focus of the public realm from the town squares and city centers to the concept of private spaces. City centers took on a more commercial, productivity-focus role (office towers, corporate headquarters) and suburban areas offered a more recreational appeal, specifically around economic consumption.

The shopping mall and other commercial spaces became the gathering place for social life, arguably leaving civic life spaces in the background. So what happened to our public squares, parks, plazas, gardens and other public places for civic life? (Image 1)

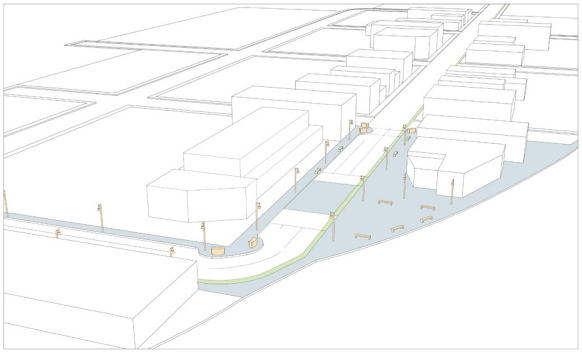

Image 1.- Isometric exploration of public space: Design of vehicular intersections, lighting and urban furniture.

Osorio, MacFarlane, Mei. Crowsnest Pass/Calgary, University of Calgary, 2021

When we have to consume and use our goods and resources (our hard earned money) to access and enjoy a space, we are productizing social life, and therefore, social fabric and the civic health that a vibrant social fabric can foster. The shift in value from a public, collective space to a privately-owned and transactional space creates a mindset of "I pay to be here, therefore I'm not an owner and I am owed a service. I am not responsible or accountable for maintaining this space".

This erodes our social fabric and sense of community, and leaves public spaces behind, not taken care of in both physical, tangible and cultural, ephemeral ways. Our public spaces become lost spaces.

Roger Transik defines lost spaces as '[spaces and projects] that have to be rebuilt because they do not serve their intended purpose. Generally speaking, lost spaces are the undesirable urban areas that are in need of redesign—antispaces, making no positive contribution to the surroundings or users. They are ill-defined, without measurable boundaries, and fail to connect elements in a coherent way.'

Some lost spaces come from the abandonment and neglect of existing spaces, as mentioned previously. Others stem from negligent design, being poorly designed from the get-go.

Through the design discipline and mindset, we can become not only ideators, but social facilitators. We can foster social equity and future-proofing of our communities. We can restore more sustainable ways of mobility, food security, housing and health. These are issues at the core of our society's -and our specie's- survivability in the decades and centuries moving forward.

The same way we have put design on the map through the development of medical devices, micro mobility vehicles and urban farms, we can -and we must- step in to the next tier of design and work closely with architects, urbanists, social workers and educators, among other professionals to improve the quality of our built environment, and our quality of life. (Foto 3)

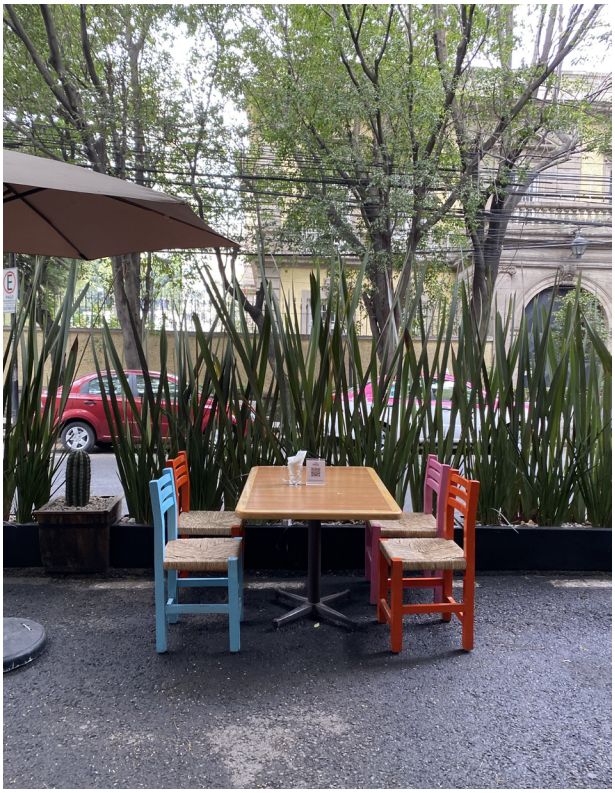

Foto 3.- Espacio comercial urbano emergente: Restaurantes en el espacio público durante la emergencia sanitaria COVD.

Osorio. Colonia Cuauhtémoc, CDMX, 2022

Designers, architects and planners are responsible for making the most efficient and positively impactful products, structures and spaces. The next chapter of human history also requires us to be accountable for how we rethink our current under-used and neglected spaces.

Designers have a not only a creative, but a civic duty to use their skills in the creative, innovation and materialization process to breathe new life to our public realm.

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Born in Mexico and having lived in New York and Canada, Ivan holds a BA in Industrial Design from Mexico City's UAM and Master in Planning from the University of Calgary. Previously, he did partial studies in Product and Furniture Design at the Centro: Centre for Design, Television and Film.

He has been involved in social and tech entrepreneurship, social innovation, design. planning and sustainable tourism projects. His collaborations include work with Fuckup Nights (Mx, LatAm), Start Alberta, Zinc Ventures, Calgary Downtown Association, the International Avenue BRZ and the 12 Community Safety Initiative (Alberta, Canada).

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En este décimo quinto número de la publicación de la Compilación de Artículos de Investigación. Administración y Tecnología para Arquitectura, Diseño e Ingeniería año 2021, los lectores encontraran siete artículos de investigación, que versan sobre temas tales como la evolución de los envases, la arquitectura y el uso de Tics, el espacio urbano como producto del diseño, la arquitectura en las grandes ciudades y la docencia virtual del diseño industrial, entre otros.

La virtualidad impuesta por la situación sanitaria a nivel mundial durante el año 2021 ha constituido una serie de retos para la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. Cuya comunidad ha llevado a cabo esfuerzos importantes para cumplir a cabalidad con las funciones sustantivas que caracterizan a esta casa de estudios: Docencia, investigación y difusión y preservación de la cultura.