Case study for the Forum d'Avignon 2012

Go digital and move for real, taking city spaces

The life in the cities is upgraded by the presence of digital communications. Interconnectedness, networking, ubiquitous information, ... in many fields and many levels. City is virtually wired within itself and with a world. We need it all. Virtual, fast, efficient, exceeded distance,... Parallel to this trend, bicycle is taking its place in the city, organic gardens become the part of urban fabric, people meditate in their offices or do yoga in the public square. Physical, slow, present, body - involvement,... appear shy as a big missing part in the city life. We need it too.

In the present trend of creating the „smart" cities of the future, it seems that we give priority to the virtual over the real, the technical, the fast, the business model over the cultural one. Somehow, we are still facing the dichotomy of our nature in a Cartesian rigid way, confronting, dividing, hiding or misunderstanding some of the human aspects. The way how the cities have been developed in the last century is very much the materialization of this state. The automotive and accelerated city, with barriers, divisions and segregations where traffic captivates much of the city space and excludes many human needs and activities. With integration of digital technologies we might be on the way of a new alienation of our nature but I would like to believe quite the opposite– we could be smart enough to give to digital world the meaningful role, and do not mistake virtual for real. We could integrate our complete human nature into our culture, create balanced coexistence of virtual and real, digital and physical in the living culture of the city.

In his book „The Master and His Emissary", psychiatrist and writer Iain McGilchrist explains: „Nature gave us the dichotomy when she split the brain. Working out what it means is not in itself to dichotomies ..." Our dualities could become more than excluding contradictions – it is the richness within we can constantly evolve, reaching a new balance. But through out natural and cultural evolution, particularly in the history of the West over the last few centuries, our divided brain was more in a state of conflict. McGilchrist states: „Both hemispheres clearly play crucial roles in the experience of each human individual, and both have contributed importantly to our culture... Nonetheless the relationship between the hemispheres does not appear to be symmetrical, in that the left hemisphere is ultimately dependent on, one might almost say parasitic on, the right, ..." Left hemisphere unconsciously took leading role creating „increasingly mechanistic, fragmented, decontextualised, ... lifeless and isolated world."

As a consequence of this utilitarian and rationalist direction, the big part of human nature was neglected. We are still experiencing the error of mind-body dichotomy, the misconception that thinking transcends feeling. With this background, the cities and spaces are created supporting the limited and uniform scope of everyday activities. fastness becomes the goal, slowness is excluded. We think fast, we hardly move our bodies. The cars, the digital contacts, the flow of information are speeding up but our bodies are static and atrophied. And the basic processes within us as a whole never change, as F.M. Alexander stated: "The way you use your body determines how well it works, how clearly you think and how good you feel". The process of 'de-mechanization' occurs as inevitable - through rhythm of slowing down, through integration of our bodies and revive of the urban spaces.

Living in the cities, we have to express more our natural powers, in the sense that physical interacting makes us more complete, alive and vital. We need real embodied interaction with urban environment. Experiences which will activate all senses, awake body movements and retrain perception. The rhythm which allows us to inhabit our bodies and therefore inhabit and feel the city spaces. The self- reflexive actions which can get our social values back in balance.

We need dancing plaza. There we can dance almost every day of the year. The bicycle boulevards. The magical child squares, where kids could teach the adults how to play. The place with trees on which we can climb on or walk up around them through the spiral stairs, enjoying the power of height and presence of living being. The squares for doing meditation. And tai chi. The more walkable winding streets and long pathways, just for walking and thinking, as these two activities were for millennia indivisible and led our brain evolution. The little meadows in the center of the city where we can lay down, tune in and take the energy from earth. The spots for spontaneous company gatherings and alive chat.

In all these experiences the digital communications are invisible supporting net that enables us to get together, to conquer the city space, to share ideas and actions, to enrich real life. The perfect compatibility. In this reawakening process which embraces digital technology and get people in action in the city spaces, Flash Mobs are one of the great examples.
And to mention a few other actions that are taking place of recent changing the urban living patterns.
In Melbourne, from this year, the Public Dancing is organized in the city square every 1st Friday of the month, inspired by similar events which take place in many Chinese cities where citizens spontaneously gather in public places to dance. In Times Square, New York, thousands of yoga enthusiasts celebrated the longest day of this year. Slovenian group of architects Prostoroz intervened in public space of Ljubljana, integrating people in new intimate relations with each other and the urban place, in the aim to provoke a new space use in long term.
Even if these activities occur temporary, they are the beginning of a gradual change of the cultural landscapes of our cities.

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