The Unresisting Allure of the Cloned Places

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Abstract

Contemporary urbanization poses difficult situations for architectural researchers. On the one hand, changes due to increasing "regionalization" of cities impart distinct meanings to the very concept of city. On the other hand, new iconic projects signal to remarkable changes in townscapes. Newly invented *places* offer innovative spaces for people's conviviality and information interchange—an urban quality known as *urbanity*. However, such manifestations may fragment the urbanized territory, creating compartments that act as disintegrative forces. A question invades the architectural *milieu*: are such changes beneficial, or the source of severe distortions?

The paper recalls the *concept of place* and the progresses that led to its actual transdisciplinar perspective. In their move from internationalism to globalism, the urban landscapes of globalization experience crucial changes, often manifested through an insertion of prettified images of places that "clone" selected spatial features perceived as attractive. Created predominantly by market forces, they act as tools to attract people to an exciting array of spaces, contributing to the competitive use of *urbanity*. Their production and diffusion are identified in the literature as *placemaking* and *placemarketing*. The paper argues that planned placemaking substantiated by pragmatic placemarketing may bring opportunities for enhancing the quality of urban life.

Keywords

1. Introduction

An important topic seems to remain reluctantly unattended by most manuscripts that address Latin American contemporary urbanization: changes eventually experienced in societal behavior due to the growing presence of newly invented urban places. Such places, which can be identified through a large variety of manifestations—viz. festival marketplaces, shopping centers, museums, mega bookstores, multifunctional complexes, themed malls, theme parks, and other facilities of similar kind—are increasingly incorporated into the repertoire of modern urban environments. Though an overspread global phenomenon, their manifestation—and, more importantly, the aftermath of that manifestation—in Latin American urban centers has not been sufficiently highlighted yet. Its growth, on the other hand, is enormous, and few—if any—Latin American society resisted to the allure of aggregating invented places to their urban repertoire of planned spaces. This paper tries to provide a closer look at the phenomenon; particularly insofar it refers to Brazilian urbanization. In order to do it, it will elaborate about selected topics, namely: the concept of *place*; recent *updatings* to its state–of–the–art; the changing perception of *urbanity* in cities; the construct of *cloned* (or "invented") places; and finally, current trends in urban–architectural practice, mainly those gathered under the *post-modern urbanism* heading (Ellin, 1999). A noticeable consequence of the invented places insertion is the progressive rearrangement the perception of *urbanity* (that unique quality forwarded by cities to their citizens in terms of communication and sociability) is experiencing nowadays in urban surroundings. This is so because the new places are usually designed through a process of "cloning" the general characteristics that, originally, provide for producing the sensation of urbanity. The expression "cloning places" is employed in a positive way in the present paper, intending to evoke the strong human content present within Architecture and Urbanism actions, suggesting that whereas bio-technological cloning may create life, urban-architectural cloning may create places where life can be lived and shared. Therefore, it is important to investigate the eventual consequences invented places may exert upon the perception of the urban environment, since the quality of the perceived environment is extremely influential in conditioning the quality of life in cities. Therefore, on the contrary to many of the criticisms that surround the making of cloned places, the paper assumes that there are good opportunities in terms of improving the urban quality of life associated to the creation of such places. Supported by recent progresses in the theory of place, the arguments try to raise a reasonable doubt about the quality and pertinence of the novel places, as an attempt to abridge the gap that separates places believed to be authentic from those depreciated as invented. Finally, it illustrates the possibilities opened by the dual action of place-making and placemarketing to recent urban planning strategies. It does so by collecting evidences dis-played in recent research work carried out in a southern Brazilian city, whose outcomes hint at the possibility that the new cloned places grow more perceived as legitimate urbanity places as the population progressively appropriates them in their daily life practices.

2. The Concept of Place

Place is a well-accepted theoretical *construct* of the area of spatial studies. The various disciplines involved in the area approach the concept according to each individual *rationale*. In this way, one may say that there is a *psychological* interpretation of the concept, an *architectural* interpretation, and so forth.

In the field of urban development, the concept is frequently used to facilitate the understanding of man-environment relationships, since the two major factors the concept deals with (people and space)

are at the central core of attentions. On urban-architectural grounds one can say that a place is a created environmental form, imbued with symbolic significance to its users. During Modernist Urbanism, the concept experienced a predominantly *functional* bias: places were understood as urban spaces carefully allocated, quantitatively dimensioned, and adequately distributed along the urban territory, to stimulate social opportunities for the city's inhabitants. Curiously, the use of the expression "place" was not very common in the town planning discipline of the times; places were frequently referred to as *centers* or as *activity centers*. Places were recognized strictly as functional areas, intentionally designed to produce social interaction.

Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, an encouraging approach trying to gather the joint efforts essayed by both architects and psychologists started to ascertain the scientific interest raised by the subject of place. On the *urban–architectural* side of these efforts, important contributions were brought to the area by authors such as Kevin Lynch (1968), who advanced the idea of constructing what he called "place utopias," in which people and place would bond naturally, developing a pleasurable *sense of place* (Banerjee & Southworth, 1991). An enlightening contribution forwarded by Lynch remarks that "A good place is one which, in some way appropriate to the person and her culture, makes her aware of her community, her past, the web of life, and the universe of time and space in which those are contained" (Lynch, 1982). In his influential *Architecture of the City*, published in 1966, Aldo Rossi (1977) was another author who pointed out specifically to the extraordinary significance of place as a *locus* of collective memories, suggesting the importance of bridging the thoughts of other fields of study, such as anthropology, psychology and urban history, to those of architecture and urbanism. On a similar line, Norberg–Schulz observed that "It is common usage

to say that acts and occurrences *take place*. (…) Place is evidently an integral part of existence," in view of which, "The existential purpose of building (architecture) is therefore to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment" (Norberg, 1980).

Surely, thoughts like the ones issued by authors such as Lynch, Rossi or Norberg–Schulz, ended up producing a suitable *momentum* for the setting up of a revisionist process about the concept of place on urban–architectural theory. Increasingly, authors started to acknowledge the crucial role that places had to play in humanist matters. Progressively, though slowly, the understanding of places within the profession started to move from the strict functionalist focus it had so far, to a new phenomenological approach, rightly encompassing the extraordinary importance places play in human existential matters. In other words, the concept of place progressed from its former status of places being merely material *functional areas*, and upgraded into becoming subjective *existential areas*. One way or another, though, the concept of place retained its condition of being the result of a *social construction*—a very trying condition, if possible at all—for those who, like urban planners, intend to create a place by means of *urban design*.

Not surprisingly, on the *socio–psychological* side, the Environmental Psychology approach to place focused on a very similar direction to that employed in Architecture and Urbanism. It understands the *place construct* as units, in which human experiences and physical forms are fused together, so as to create a unitary context (Canter, 1977). Evidently, as a general rule, there is no single factor that can explain all phenomenology involved in man–environment interactions. Once again, however, it is worth remembering that, also as a general rule, places may be approached through a variety of ways:

They may be seen from the viewpoint of a behavior setting, and, in this case, people's environmental behavior on them is what really matters in the analyses. Social representations of places are another way of approaching the subject, and there, the symbolic representation of society's territorial identity is what counts best. The appraisals of the physical–spatial images of the urban form people get affectionate with, occupy the efforts attempted by researchers of the environmental design areas, and are usually captured by means of techniques such as cognitive mapping. Trying to understand why people do so, however, may be best approached through the environmental perception research (Castello, 2005).

3. Postmodern Urbanism and Today's Polysemantic 'Public' Spaces

As changes in the concept of place were being introduced, a drastic revolution in what used to be the concept of *public space* was also going on. As observed by Denise Scott-Brown (1990), "(…) in all cities there are private places that feel more 'public' than many public places: (…) Main Street in Disneyland and the interior of Quincy Market in Boston, are examples of such private–public places". Surely, nowadays this interpenetration between the public and the private realms is even stronger, so as to motivate 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" (Tridip as cited in Carmona et al., 2003, p. 114).

Furthermore, the variations surrounding the concept of place cannot remain confined to the boundaries of Architecture, Urbanism, and Urban Planning. There are several disciplines, like Economics, Administration, Marketing, Laws, and even Politics, which can establish a fecund relationship to place but, occasionally, do not pay a specific attention to the topic or, alternatively, leave the concept only superficially insinuated in their questionings. Then, even if at random, it seems worth to pick from the various looks that certain disciplines give to place, and to select some that allow to establish a closer connection between the postmodern conditions said to prevail among our consumer society of today, and the postmodern urban–architectural trends that try to respond to the new societal mores assumed by that society.

4. Recent Contributions to the Concept of Place

The turn of the 20th to the 21st century has brought some provocative variations in the conceptualization of place, insofar as the concept moved more intensively from its functional to its experiential bias, as well as incorporating its expressive economic value more thoroughly into the parochial social realm through which places use to be more commonly appreciated.

As discussed above, there were some rising criticisms about the employment of the concept of place on urban projects. More often than not, the design of a place was not strong enough to make a place come true, whereas, on the other hand, certain urban spaces showed an undeniable vocation towards spontaneously becoming places of conviviality and sociability—in other words, to becoming places of urbanity. This led to a situation prone to bring a somehow disquieting provocation to the architectural thinking of the time: at the end of the day, could places be effectively *designed*? Even considering that places are the result of a *social* construction?

Generally speaking, the criticisms were born as a reaction to the rising claims that the design of places might be conducing to situations of "placelessness" (Relph, 1976) or of "non-place places" (Auge, 1994), just to name two of the most recurrent complaints against the design of places. In the same direction, as a growing disapproval to the Modernist canons was gaining corpus, noticeable alterations to the original concept of place were ripe to become enunciated. Consequently, new interpretations about place began to come into light, especially in the United States, where—thanks primarily to some of Walt Disney's most notorious experiments with theme places—the idea of "placemaking" soon found fertile ground for germinating almost indiscriminately.

The practice of making places aims at a general target: the makers of the places want to create, or to re–create, in certain cases, lively "social" areas within the cities—as well as to bringing them into businesses as fast as possible. Criticisms apart, the excellent results attained by some of the initial placemaking projects turned out to be ultimately responsible for comfortably including the new practice within the urban designers' preferred choices, especially when enlivening the public realm was the specific objective of their proposals. Probably herein lays the most drastic variation in the core of the place concept: thanks to the goal of transforming fantasy into materialized constructions, places became highly tied to the construction of *images*. Differently to what had characterized place in the Modernist Urbanism period, to make a place now also entails strategies to *marketing* it. The quickest and safest way to market a place is surely through the construction of an *image*. In this way, places can become more rapidly included within people's *imaginary* repertoire, thence, working in their minds the same way that *brands* do.

Obviously, such a drastic turn can only proceed when accompanied by equivalent changes in the general lines of the different disciplinary thinkings. This way, it can be learned from Geography, for example, from none less than the renowned American-Chinese scholar Yi-Fu Tuan (1998), that the so criticized *escapism*, usually associated with the creation of cloned places, is nothing more than a spontaneous manifestation of a humane act, relieving, thus, many researchers from the guilt that afflicts them when they opt to study today's places. Besides that, Tuan cunningly teaches that the perception of a place may vary throughout time. As an example, he mentions that the *Tour Eiffel* needed a whole century to become perceived by the Frenchmen as it is nowadays, legitimated as the place of urban quality that it exhibits today (Tuan, 1980). Like this, other examples of places all over the world have been subject to criticisms, but many of them—throughout a process of becoming popularly appropriated by the public — have finally acquired the perception that awarded them the "qualification" of places.

The geographer Edward Relph unadvisedly became one of the great instigators of criticisms against "invented places," because he coined the neologism "placelessness" in his book "Place and Placelessness" (Relph, 1976). Twenty years later, however, in "Reflections on Place and Placelessness," he positioned himself against the simplistic duality he had previously established between "placeness" and placelessness, pointing out that, paradoxically, there are negative aspects tied to "places," whereas there can be unexpected positive aspects attributed to "placelessness" (Relph, 1996).

Fainstein (2001) brings a totally revolutionary vision of the role "cloned" places can exert in today's cities. In her vision, also areas like Administration, Laws, Marketing, Tourism and Politics should not be absent from the place's concept, since her major point is to add to the classic conceptualization of place as a *social construction*, an opportune breach for explaining place also as an *economic construction*.

Hannigan (1998) brings from Urban Sociology the understanding that the so–called fantasy–places may be powerful generators of sociability. And that even in face of their apparent mask of selectivity, those places are fully permeable to become *publicly* appropriated. Also from Sociology, Zukin (1996; 2002) reinforces that a concession must be granted to the present public–and–private integration manifested in some of today's urban environments. Many of them, even if legally private, reveal an overwhelming perception of being public spaces *de facto*, which entails their appropriation as such by the public. The Brazilian sociologist Rogerio Leite (2002) is another one to bring an important contribution to the public appropriation of urban spaces. His research deals with the topic of places that result from the reuse of old historic areas, areas which were usually vacant or derelict, and that experience a process of placemaking that gives a rebirth to them in the form of new places. This process, though quite common nowadays, is often criticized due to its eventual tendency to originate the phenomenon known as "gentrification". However, Leite convincingly points out that, as far as one must recognize the presence of new uses in these spaces, one must also recognize the "counter–uses" that eventually get introduced to the scenario and that concur to the reactivation of the reused spaces as public places.

Magnani (1996), in his anthropological appraisal about places in Brazilian cities, pays careful attention to the role played by the human *tactics* and *strategies* of *everyday life*. In a manner very much like De Certeau (1984) he brilliantly discusses what he calls the "morphology of the practice" in people's daily appropriation of places. In a similar line, Mendes De Almeida & Tracy (2003) try to find an explanation to what those authors call the night "circuits," through which, youngsters move around freely in Rio de Janeiro. In their considerations, those "circuits" represent a sort of a variation

in the concept of place, in fact, a very important contribution to the new studies about places, since allowing to introduce the idea of *movement* into the concept—the "displacement of places"—an idea that proves absolutely fundamental in the face of the intense number of fluxes that characterizes contemporary society. In fact, the lack of this movement component had already been signaled by Leach, who correctly registered the discomfort he felt in the actual discussions of place about the "(...) more static notions of 'dwelling' that emanate from Heideggerian discourse, which seem so ill at ease with a society of movement and travel" (Leach, 2002).

Finally, the rethinking of the concept of place is actually flourishing within the Philosophy world as well. Both Foucault (1997) and De Botton (2004), for example, conclude in their reflections that it remains indifferent whether today's places result from the actions of an economic strategy or from the efforts of a subjective lucubration. In the end, place is always existential, place results from the human beings interaction with their own location, place represents our correlation with ourselves "(…) so that we can at last find it, and thus our own ineluctably implaced selves" (Casey, 1998, p. 286). Curiously, Edward S. Casey employs the term "implacement" in a sense in which "The primacy of place is not that of *the* place, much less of *this* place or *a* place (…) but that of being an event capable of implacing things in many complex manners and to many complex effects" (Casey, 1998, p. 337).

5. Empirical Lessons from Porto Alegre

Sooner than possibly expected, the new trend of placemaking and placemarketing spread throughout the world, and a sort of a globalized style of planning places became indiscriminately applied as *the* very new (and very lucrative) planning tool of the global landscapes.

Urban planners' reaction was of perplexity. Is this good? Is this bad? Will it entail a severe distortion upon local cultures, by introducing alien global ways of living?

Surprisingly, as discussed next, the practice of placemaking+placemarketing must not always entail adverse consequences—at least, as a rule. To this matter, two interesting experiences of making and marketing places in Porto Alegre point out to situations in which some of the invented places have been successfully appropriated by their users, and hence, became real places of urbanity for the city as a whole. And, more unexpectedly yet, received a substantial public appropriation also among the poorer segments of the population.

Porto Alegre is the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in south Brazil, with a population of 1,360,590 in 2000 (IBGE–Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Demographic Census); an adult literacy rate of 96.7%; and a HDI (United Nation's Human Development Index) of 0.865 (> 0.800 = "good").

The two experiences in Porto Alegre, namely, the construction of a new shopping mall that "clones" the patterns of a city hub; and a reused old historic area, revamped according to features that try to "clone" its old configurational patterns; will be very briefly discussed to illustrate the point.

5.1 The Shopping Mall as a New Urban Place

A field survey in one of Porto Alegre's most important middle–class shopping centers—the Praia de Belas Shopping Center (PBSC) (Figure 1) —motivates the kind of reflections commented above, allowing to hint at an interesting speculation: the PBSC is being perceived as a place, even by the poorest segments of the population.

This conjecture was suggested by the visits undertaken by poorer people to the centre in a precise circumstance: in the days they gain easy physical access to the mall. This occurs in the "free pass" days, that is, in the particular days in which the city's public transport, in response to a local government policy, becomes liberated from fees. The number of people circulating on the mall those days increases extraordinarily. Thousands of persons come from the most recondite urban areas, including from slums, and flock into the shopping in batches, most of them just for merely strolling up and down the mall, rubbing shoulders with other people, seeing other people under an unusual angle—an angle very much detached from their familiar everyday reality of dearth.

In the surveys, clients were interviewed at random, answering questions, applying apperception tests, measuring attitudes, and/or simply being observed. The study indicates that in the free–pass

Photo: Lucas Welter.

Figure 1.   Praia de Belas Shopping Center, Porto Alegre, Brazil.

day, over 70 per cent of patrons belong to the lower–middle and lower classes, with teenagers constituting the vast majority. This is quite revealing since it suggests that these "newcomers–to–a–world–of–simulation" are cultivating a new tradition: to patronize "hyper–real" places as one youngsters' favorite practice (Figure 2). Like elsewhere in globalized urban environments, Brazilian cities' downtown areas suffered a severe process of dereliction and abandonment, especially from the second half of the twentieth–century onwards. Therefore, the emergent tradition of promenading along the aisles of a shopping mall youngsters are developing may rapidly assume a crucial role in the Brazilian leisure experience. Soon the "cloning" of the hub of a central area, a newly invented place, will become *the* favorite hub for many people (Figure 3 and 4), a revelation very much in conformity with what scholars use to state about today's postmodern society perceptions (Eco, 1986; Baudrillard, 1994).

5.2 The Reuse of a Historic Area and its Transformation in a Place

Two major field works in the central area, one in 1986 and other in 1995, focusing basically on the interaction between people and their physical settings, led to a collection of elements—buildings and places—perceived as the most significant for Porto Alegre's central area users. Crucial to the concerns of this paper were the findings relative to one specific building, the old Gasometer plant, and its surroundings. At the time of the 1986 survey, the Gasometer was just an old building in ruins at the edge of the river. In spite of that, the survey registered that its image remained quite vivid in people's more recondite memory, probably by its strategical presence in the Center's visual structure. Or by its privileged location at the very interface of water and concrete, of nature and culture, at the edge of the central peninsula (Figure 5). It offered an image of permanence, an image of reference, an image deeply immersed in the cultural memory of the population.

Photo: Lucas Welter.

Figure 2. Youngsters promenading along the shopping aisles.

Photo: Laura Marques.

Figure 3. People gathering on the shopping.

Photo: Lucas Welter.

Figure 4. Pop concerts on the mall.

Photo: Lineu Castello.

Figure 5. The old Gasometer plant.

Source: Brochure.

Figure 6. City's logotype, showing the Gasometer silhouette as a marketing device.

Figure 7. The Gasometer mill as an urbanity place for the community.

In the 1995 research the Gasometer had been rehabilitated by the implementation of some minimalist design strategies, mostly addressing to the old building's basic maintenance. Besides that, the building started to operate as a multifunctional activity center. All this was achieved by "cloning" the memory images the building and its surroundings had always offered to the population, and by using those images as intelligent marketing tools. The city's administration of the time used the stylized silhouette of the building as a symbolic mark to promote the placemarketing action (Figure 6). Interaction soon reached unexpected peaks, up to the point to confer to the place the label of being one of the most popular areas in the Center— unarguably, a real *place*. Furthermore, it managed to create a new "behavioral setting" (Barker, 1978; Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995) for the leisure times of the community, for becoming a desired destination for visiting groups heading to the center, for providing a place where people can assemble to see and to be seen, to play musical instruments and to sing—ultimately—to enjoy the urbanity a place has to offer (Figure 7). This way, the old abandoned central space gained the label of a genuine *place*, fully marked by sociability and urbanity, and is now one of the most popular sites in the City Center.

The newly conserved area also gained in political status. It symbolizes, today, the awareness the inhabitants of Porto Alegre share about the political power they possess, since it is in the Gasometer newly born "agora" that most of the public manifestations take place.

6. Conclusion

The concept of place, positioned as it is at the very interface of physical, social, and behavioral disciplines, seems to provide a likely means for tackling the challenge of communicating global and traditional local planning styles. The cases discussed

are symptomatic of the possibilities opened by the use of the place approach for promoting an interconnection among diverse disciplines. Consequently, they also provide grounds for understanding that there are benefits that may be earned when one tries to approximate place theory to the purposes of increasing the amount of urbanity a city has to offer to its citizens. Certainly, the cases chosen are modest, but they surely indicate solid directions to follow when the intention is to widening up the opportunities for urban development forwarded by strategies that bridge the global disciplinary knowledge that the technical side of the urban–architectural practice has already accumulated over time, to the non–disciplinary perception people show in relation to the elements of their new urban local environments. This bridging will be able to capitalize on the multifaceted dimensions involved in a place —behavioral, sensorial, experiential, historical, preservationist, economical, financial—and to indicate fresh directions for the alternatives open to enhancing a city's quality of life.

Fortunately, from a more accurate review of contemporary bibliography on the topic of place; and from the empirical evidence obtained in Porto Alegre; it seems that a general lesson can be advanced: the usual criticisms to the new places are not necessarily imperative and indiscriminately applicable as an inevitable dogma. Furthermore, the acceptance of cloned places is so overwhelmingly popular nowadays that to keep stubbornly resisting to their allure, without giving a try to understanding more deeply the phenomenon, may imply on remaining confined within the narrower boundary of a repetitive and innocuous exercise of intellectual snobbishness.

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