

Marco Russo, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5616-3667>

Department of Architecture and Industrial Design, Università degli Studi della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Italy

marco.russo2@unicampania.it

Abstract. The paper presents a series of reflections on the street as a place for relations, a significant aspect of European city design. This 'new' approach focuses more on interaction and the active use of outdoor spaces, starting from criticism of some solutions proposed by the Modern Movement by Team 10 members. However, this design vision has recently gained significant traction, marking a notable shift in European city redevelopment. The text explores the concepts behind public spaces where the interaction between inside and outside is becoming less distinct.

Keywords: Architecture; Superblock; Street; Commonplace; Open City.

The street as a commonplace

A profound reflection on commonplaces has been launched in the last decades. This is not relegated to the amount of urban space in our cities but, above all, to its quality, its connection with architecture, and how public and private spaces influence each other. These aspects have always been an invariant of European and Italian cities, where, for example, some architectural features like the portico or the courtyard function as a filter between inside and outside, while, the façade organisation participates in street life, playing a crucial role in our social life by transforming the street in "urban interiors" (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). We do not want to retrace the development of urban spaces from a historical point of view but to analyse a series of essential features partly present in the work of Modern Movement masters, though, for them, the street is anachronistic (Pérez de Arce, 2018) and is perceived as an essential element of the '800 plans¹.

For Le Corbusier, the exterior is essentially framed in the wall. As stated by Robert Venturi (1966), the exterior derives from the construction of the interior. For the 'first' Le Corbusier (1965), the street is essentially the place of cars, a rectilinear space governed by a flow with a speed of "50-100 km/h". Instead, pedestrians have dedicated paths that flow towards the buildings raised on pilotis, one of the main principles of a new life model to resolve the hygiene problems that exploded in the early Twentieth Century. This, topic moved Haussmann himself to rethink entire neighbourhoods of Paris, and is reflected in the work of all the masters of the Modern era (Colomina, 2018). Detachment from the context becomes less evident in the projects after the 1940s, where increasingly permeable surfaces replace the pure and "cold" geometries, to use an expression by Zevi (1974). In the *Maison du Docteur Curutchet* of 1949, the white wall with ribbon windows leaves space for a large void on the street. This mechanism implies a total opening towards the public street, which remains only apparent and not functional. In the same period, the buildings designed for Chandigarh showed greater openness towards the landscape, even if this choice resulted from his research on North African plastic forms (Curtis and Doshi, 1989).

When Mies van der Rohe moved back the Seagram building volume between 1956 and 1958, he created an unexpected void in the dense urban network of New York. It is widely documented that Mies proposed this space to give the building more prominence and to observe it in its entirety (Cf. Capozzi, 2019). Still, it is equally valid that such a 'European' urban space was immediately perceived as "an oasis for office workers and passers-by," as highlighted in an article published in the R section of the *New York Times* in 1957². The difference in level on the street becomes a seat on which many citizens are portrayed in the several photos of the building (Fig. 1), demonstrating the great interest generated by this solution³.

The role of architecture in social life and indigenous identity was a key focus in Wright's work, contrasting with the English colonial style (Wright, 1945). As highlighted by Venturi (1966), the construction of his architecture started from the ground, resembling a biological process. This method was different from the previous ones described. The American master revolutionised the concept of "box" in favour of a thick roof and a podium to gradually approach a renewed domestic space. Above all, the massive covering, the shelter described by Giedion (1928) as the original cell of Modern architecture, mitigated the detachment between inside and outside by creating different open-air spaces⁴. This concept is more relevant today than ever, as the development of increasingly punctual structural systems releases the building's perimeter, opening the possibility of more permeability towards the outside. However, since the mid-1950s, attention has been turned towards urban space more focused on interactions or commonplace, trying to imitate the mechanisms of historic cities where the street became a "corridor" or an extension of the building (Rasmussen, 1964). These experimental projects aimed to recover the urban voids generated following World War II, as in Amsterdam, where Aldo van Eyck created hundreds of playgrounds around 1946. They were small but fundamental 'pocket parks' where we can find several contacts with current urban projects. Some of the Smithsons' (1967) writings on the street, where they underline its use as a vital area for social expression, recalling the famous words of Jane Jacobs (1961), who hopes for a more dense, unpredictable, and diversified urban system are also of great importance. Always Jacobs emphasises the importance of the street as a necessary place for collective life in a neutral environment. However, when this principle is missing, people can only interact in their homes or public buildings. This experimentation was mainly concentrated in the 1950s and had the merit of focusing on people's needs and on the effects of the neighbourhood organisation. Years of various spatial experiments followed until the late 1980s, when studies published by Whyte, Gehl, or Anderson (1978) unanimously described «the street as an organizational



subsystem of the city», removing the barrier between inside and outside. In Italy, the writings of Secchi and Gregotti (1989) take up these principles and bring back the street into the 'sphere of architecture.' Secchi (1986) describes the permanence of such mechanisms in the historic city, underlining once again the critical issues in the new peripheral neighbourhoods, where the street becomes only a distribution space.

Today, we recover this relationship with the outside by rethinking the public space or the same furnishings. Recent studies, as *The City at Eye Level* by STIPO (Cf. Karssenberget al., 2017), highlight the importance of the ground floor of buildings, a hybrid area called "plinth", designed as a space for social interaction. The privacy problem in domestic spaces remains valid, but many ongoing projects propose a gradual approach to the building's façade, solving the problem with new street furniture. Among the most innovative urban operations implemented in recent years, we can briefly mention the Superblocks programme in Barcelona, the first stage of an ongoing transformation, representing a solution to rethink urban places. The phrase «an ephemeral project could thus anticipate grand plans» (Pérez de Arce, 2018) perfectly summarises the original work carried out in the last five years in Barcelona. It opens the way to an original model of public space, increasing the connections with its surroundings, new or old. Furthermore, the strategy described in the next paragraph highlights two fundamental aspects, namely the role of architecture and a renewed connection with the outside. The choice of the case study examined, the Sant Antoni district in Barcelona, is not accidental. In this specific part of the city, we find a series of projects implemented in different years that have contributed to creating a contemporary or functionally ambiguous space. The key points of this vision will be discussed in the next paragraph. As anticipated in this part of the text, these projects bring the road back into the sphere of architecture through a shared vision but with many interventions that can be carried out in different ways, times, and identities.

Barcelona: buffer zones and urban interiors

Barcelona is redeveloping different city areas with an innovative approach. Some massive interventions involve entire zones, such as the former industrial district of El Poblenou, which was affected by considerable investments to transform its productive nature into a factory of culture. Among the most renowned interventions, we can mention the Can Framis Museum by BAAS Arquitectura, where the museum opens to the city, becoming at the same time a cultural and social reference through the large square at the entrance of the lot. We also find interventions aimed at redeveloping several lots simultaneously by modulating the chessboard of Cerdà's

Example through the Superilles programme. While it was initially possible to cross the entire city grid by car, today, part of the vehicular traffic is significantly reduced with limited traffic sectors and speeds reduced to 10 km/h. Maximum priority is given to pedestrians with spaces designed to encourage community life. Furthermore, these interventions aim to eliminate the architectural barriers present in the current road section by creating a single level that runs transversely from façade to façade. Particular attention is also paid to commercial activities with areas for loading and unloading or careful waste management, both themes preceded by an analysis aimed at preventively identifying the economic impact of the superblock on the lots involved.

Leku Studio has designed several projects in Spanish cities and is among the most active studios on this topic. In 2019, they designed the *Superilla de Sant Antoni* (Fig. 2), one of their most iconic projects, where they joined four city blocks, expanding the pedestrian area along the four main streets and creating a new square in the middle of the neighbourhood. The nature of the initiative is temporary⁵, with the supply of modular furnishings and the delimitation of flows through graphics painted on the asphalt. Although the works may "not" seem permanent, they are now part of the life of the neighbourhood and blend perfectly with the recent works created in recent years, such as the Joan Oliver Library by RCR Arquitectes (2007) and the Mercat de Sant Antoni (2012-18) by Ravetllat Arquitectura. The library started the neighbourhood's renovation with a new space focused on pedestrians and a new architectural language in the typical style of Catalan architects. The building opens onto the street through a large portal from which pedestrians can reach a small internal garden, anticipating the future urban development of the neighbourhood by purposing a mechanism like the one described by Rasmussen (1964) for the Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne in Rome designed by Baldassarre Peruzzi in 1536⁶. The market, renovated in 2018 but existing since 1882, offers a new square and an original connection with the underground⁷. The strategies adopted aim to make Barcelona, piece by piece, an increasingly pedestrian-oriented city with more vegetation. The significant limitation of vehicular traffic is undoubtedly an element that opens up countless implications and is not well-regarded by everyone, especially shopkeepers, even if the higher qual-



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ity of public space is unquestionable. The central aspect of this urban strategy is its reproducibility in different contexts, even in cities with a strong historical stratification, such as Naples.

Boundless public space

The description proposed in the first part of the paper suggests that establishing an active dialogue between interior and exterior has been resolved without interruption throughout the Twentieth Century. Venturi (1966) underlines that Modern Architecture tends to reject inflection at every scale in favour of the independence of the building, «like a Greek temple» (Venturi, 1966). Functionalist urban planning or slogans such as “form follows function” have generated the illusion of solving the problems of the city and architecture through an organisation of space for dissociated functions. Immediately afterward, the protagonists of Team 10 researched different and experimental solutions, starting from social and individual needs. However, the Smithsons themselves, in the competition for the Golden Lane of 1952 or in the Robin Hood Garden of 1972⁸, “fail” to design the col-

lective aerial spaces that the residents perceive with significant discomfort (Jencks, 1973). Jordi Badia (2020), the founder of BAAS Arquitectura, underlines that the Modern architects were ‘concerned’ more with the construction of a language in antithesis with the academic style, leaving out some elements such as «the balcony, the molding, the cornice and the shadows cast»; for Badia. These elements «enrich the morphology of the street and the quality of the city’s public space» (Badia, 2020). Contemporary architects use several spatial tricks to relate to the outside, such as attention to the lot, the role of the building in its surroundings, the point of view facing the community, or traditional materials laid innovatively. From this perspective, a city built in diversified pieces is configured, a vision advocated by Sennett (2019) in describing an open city based on interdependent lots without barriers (Fig. 3). In this context, architects are actively involved in this change as the commitment to tend toward the complex unity described by Venturi (1966) leads to unexpected relationships with the outside, and favours a diversified and ambiguous use of urban space. The superblock, the union of

03 | Sant Antoni district development in 2004, 2009, and 2021. The sequential images indicate the polarities around which the renewed urban space develops: the market and the library.
Source: Image by the author

04 | Street use diagrams in Sant Antoni district in Barcelona. Drawing: Leku Studio, source: Barcelona International Landscape Biennial

03 |

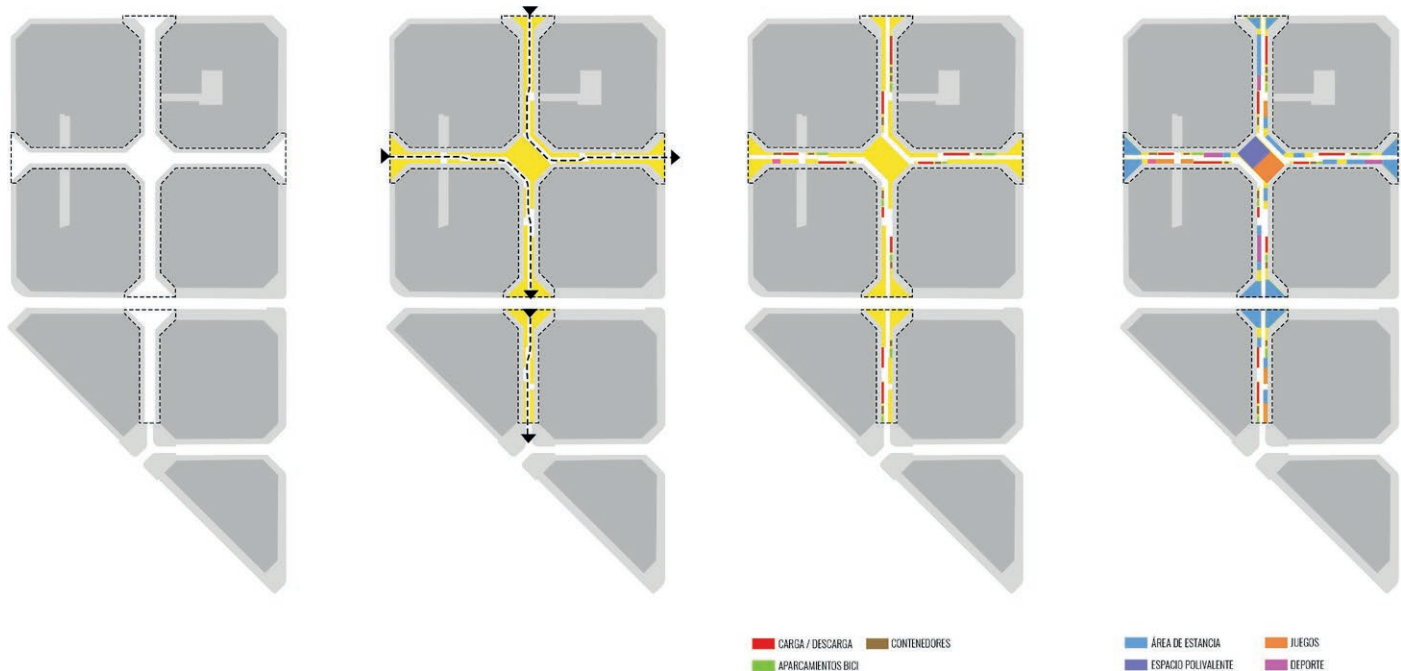


04 | ÁMBITO DE ACTUACIÓN

ESTRATEGIA SUPERILLA

BANDAS DE SERVICIO

NUEVOS USOS



several blocks in a single neighbourhood unit, implies a city focused on relationships and interactions between citizens. It can be considered the solution to the development of detached pieces

of the Twentieth Century city, re-proposing the model of the self-sufficient village, as already seen in the masterplans for Chandigarh by both Mayer⁹ and Le Corbusier (Cf. Evenson,

1966). In Scandinavian countries, where these principles have already been assimilated, we witness the construction of entire neighbourhoods based on this assumption, creating an urban space at the residents’ service¹⁰. The street becomes part of the building again and its use becomes increasingly varied, not limited exclusively to cars, bringing about both a change in the social life of citizens and a new approach of architects towards public space. In conclusion, the ground and the street have become “an organizing axis of the social fabric” (Nicolin, 2017), bringing architecture back to the ground.

NOTES

¹ Robert Venturi, in the ninth chapter of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, highlights how in Mies, the buildings are independent of the context like Greek temples, while in Le Corbusier, the exterior is the result of an interior. Indeed, only with Wright does the construction occurs in reverse, as if it were the result of a biological process born from the earth.

² In 1962, in the magazine *Beverage Retailer Weekly* (May 21, 1962), the square became the setting for the display of the Polaris ballistic missile. The symbol of the technological and military progress of the USA is compared to what immediately became a point of reference for global architecture.

³ Furthermore, as highlighted in the Landmarks Preservation Commission report of 30 October, 1989, this architectural choice influenced the city’s urban planning regulations. This practice was encouraged by offering “a bonus of extra floor space” to those who introduced public spaces into their projects. The studio Voorhees Walker Smith & Smith curated the 1961 zoning code revision, dividing New York City into residential, commercial, and manufacturing areas. It introduced the concept of incentive zoning by adding a bonus of extra floor space to encourage developers of office buildings and apartment towers to incorporate public plazas into their projects.

⁴ Like the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959), the entrance to the building is beneath a massive horizontal volume.

⁵ The first superblock projects extensively use paints to create graphic patterns on the current pavement, significantly reducing the costs of the interventions. The ongoing projects (2022 and 2023) have a higher financial endowment, and involve the replacement of the existing asphalt and a less ‘temporary’ appearance than the previous ones. In particular, the costs relating to the Barcelona Superblocks programme for the interventions planned for 2022 and 2023 correspond to 32.8 million euro for ‘the green hubs’ and 5 million euro for the ‘squares’. (source: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/>).

⁶ This trick can be considered a constant in the Catalan studio, and we find it in another project drawn up in the same years, the *Espacio Público Teatro la Lira* in Ripoll (2011-13), in which it is impossible to identify the building’s boundary from the public.

⁷ This work is significant, especially in the Italian context. During the excavation, the remains of medieval walls were found and integrated into the underground works project.

⁸ Jencks notes that the desire to recreate the vitality of the classic street at different levels is not supported by the characteristic elements of the same, shops, pubs, or other functions necessary to support this solution; “the street deck” only supports the flow of residents towards their accommoda-



tion, with an undoubtedly generous size, but without creating the conditions for a place of aggregation.

⁹ Mayer takes the idea from the Baldwin Hills Village of ’35, designed by the group composed of Reginald D. Johnson, Lewis E. Wilson, Edwin E. Merrill, Robert E. Alexander, with Clarence S. Stein and Fred Barlow, Jr. The idea was to develop ‘a village within the city’ with low-cost homes without giving up the necessary services. Among the main characteristics of the initiative, we find the separation of vehicular and pedestrian flows, while the road surrounds the perimeter of the rectangular site.

¹⁰ The new Ørestad neighbourhood in Copenhagen reflects this vision. In less than twenty years, an urban project has been created where public space is continuous and physically enters the private lots, eliminating or mitigating the division between inside and outside. Among the most significant interventions, we find the masterplan curated by the Vilhelm Lauritzen Architects for the Bellakvarter neighbourhood, a large area with several brick buildings and lots of vegetation for 5.000 inhabitants. In some of the lots, there are multi-story car park disguised as office buildings. This choice releases the streets from their stalls and allocates as much surface as possible to parks, vegetable gardens, or quality greenery.

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