THE CASE OF NEWLY CONSTRUCTED ZONES: FREEDOM, CONSTRAINT AND THE APPROPRIATION OF SPACES

Perla Korost-Szefaty
E.S.E. des Sciences du Comportement et de l'Environnement
Section de Psychologie - Institut de Psychologie Sociale
12, rue Goethe - 6700 Strasbourg - France

Abstract

Psychosociologists often analyse urban spaces as a text of which the semiological analysis would reflect the ideology prevailing at their emergence. However, the reduction of spatial structures to a signifier ('signifier'), that of the dominate ideology to a signified ('signified') artificially introduces a void between two poles of the same process which is built up by successive mediations between the proposed spatial forms, their degree of univocality in the transmission of directives for social practice, and their style of reception by the users. The means of exploration, the exercise of principal or interstitial liberty remodels the areas in an exchange whose limits are the very ones of individual creativity in the frame of a determined social order.

Today's public opinion of a highly organized and consequently constraining social life finds one of its bases in the authoritative distribution of vast areas for a specific function: residential cities, cultural centres, green spaces ... The parceling out of the areas and the segregation of the classes and the men which it betrays does not improve the reception given by public opinion to these spaces with appear to be not wanted, not chosen, emerging, it seems, in their exclusive form, already structured, because they are the crystallization of global plans, of more or less long-term housing projects.

The observer, the psychologist, is sometimes tempted to adopt this point of view, in effect alluring, but at the price of a methodological double reduction of the city on the one hand to its simplified and idealized history, and on the other hand to a text whose detailed and correctly interpreted reading, in short whose content analysis, would reveal the implicit ideological meaning.

In the first case, and since architecture and urbanism have become subjects of public opinion, the user, the citizen sees the city born out of progressive and instantaneous design, from slow creations due to individual initiative or collective action. Our predecessors would have made their city, while we submit ourselves to it. They were able to follow its development while we discover each day new zones, freshly inhabited at too fast a pace, etc ... This stereotyped vision erases all that the historian of cities gives us: precise details on principly initiatives, those of the corporations, decisions which were arbitrary or dictated by the imperatives of economic and industrial development, which really made the city, etc. ...
In the second case the city is, according to the perfect expression of Henri Lefebvre, the projection of a society on the soil. That is why some authors see in a topography a privileged means of bringing to light a certain structure of the society concerned, and by extension a style of relationships between the groups that compose it. But any toposociology, in order to guarantee its objectivity, must limit itself to the inventory of spaces and their relationships. It can propose an interpretation, that is to say a more abundant material, only by developing itself through semological analysis consisting in separating artificially and right away the text, or signifier, represented by the anxiety of the architectural foundations of an urban structure, from its implicit form, the signified, represented by the ideology having pressed at the erection of this very structure. This ideology would be the pretextual signifier which would revert back to a more important signified, by the simple means of deduction. It is thus that, pushed to its extreme, the distribution of the industrial zones would reflect a social morality of profit, the bedroom-communities the maintenance of the work force, the campus the segregation of the intellectual elite, and that alone, and the more complex analysis of the relationships between these zones would revert back to the elucidation of the action principles of a society.

The reading of spaces, much more fertile than a simple toposociology, introduces, however, an arbitrary equivalence between a formal structure of the urban and its interpretation in universal terms. Everything occurs as if the monument, the urban furnishings, etc... constituted unambiguous signs, united under the form of a code, not taking into account the social practice of spaces by men. This expulsion of the environment-user relationship is even more serious when it concerns newly inhabited areas which are thus fixed in the common-place of predefined spaces, already achieved, wholly structured at the time of the elaboration of urban plans. Finally, the introduction of a distance, of a void between signifier and signified reduces social practice to a collection of foreseen, expected and defined areas, at the most determined by the disposition of the places. All spaces would carry orders dictating behaviors invested by one meaning, and the accidental would be restored to its simplest expression. But is the utilization of surfaces fully oriented, invented to its utmost? It is because this reduction of the unexpected, of the individual expression is far from being absolute that numerous urban areas remain attractive, alive in spite of the growing number of problems of inhabitation, extension, sanitation...

The interest of a reading of the urban form remains entire to the extent that it permits the preliminary description of a latent structure of a society through the explicit disposition of its spaces. Our project is to reintroduce the daily practice as a mediation between these two poles, to determine the means by which the spatial form unit directives or suggestions of behavior, the manner by which the user reacts, adopts these directives to himself, in order to come up with an enriched definition of the utilization of spaces.

We have chosen for this project a newly-constructed area in Strasbourg (France) which corresponds roughly to a complete university campus. We will call this area "exemplaire" after its original name. It is a new neighbourhood, developing during the past ten years and linking the old
city and the suburbs. What we must remember is the idea of a spatial structure already written, since the plans are global and where prepared long in advance. The deciphering of this text by the users should be simplified. It was is facts, but not in the form of a code. There was no inevitable directive issued by the area, but a diversified usage of a same form. It is this unexpected apprehension of this area by the inhabitants, primarily the student, which will lead to a remodeling of the campus, in a concrete yet silent exchange between the student himself and the party responsible for these areas. The tracking of this going back and forth of this dialogue between two anonymous (the user vs the authority) is the establishing of the margins of liberty. (Noles) of necessary restrictions and of forms of appropriation of spaces. But, first of all, how do we define these terms: freedom, constraint and appreciation, or rather free area, constrained or appropriated area?

We shall define an objectively free space as a space which is not confined (plaza, garden, lawn, etc ...), where the number of architectural supports of constraint (barriers, chains, hedges, fence, etc ...) is limited or tends towards nothing, and where the body and the mind are not submitted to a high number of objective constraints: private walkways, hedges around yards, fear of being arrested in an aggressive manner etc ... The body, for example, in a confined or too densely populated area is submitted to objective constraints such as the lack of room in which to run, the impossibility to be out etc ... The mind is submitted to immediate urgencies which become preponderant: to protect oneself from intrusion, to organize one's vital activities etc ...

Inversely, we shall define an objectively restricted a confined area, which limits the range of actions, whose boundaries are clearly delineated (entrance, obligatory walking, toll, obligatory exit, itinerary planned in advance, etc ...) where the mind and the body are submitted to an increased number of restrictions: no running, no loitering, forbidden to play, to rearrange the area etc ...

But an area cannot be perceived as intrinsically free or constrained. It is laden with affectivity and meaning, and the mode of being in a given space attaches us to it or pushes us to reject it. This is why an objectively free area can be experienced as restricted. Keeping in mind the psychological apprehension which the individual might have (the list - case revealing itself through agoraphobia), and keeping in mind the social pass, the presence of others, positively or negatively perceived, and the density of people, the overpopulation.

Collective psychology spontaneously assimilates private areas to freedom. It is the communal and individualistic definition of the term which is here in play: "At home" (private area), one is free because "one can do what one wishes". One thus suppose that in a restricted yet appropriated area, in which one is master and owner, social controls and limitations are put aside, rejected, thanks to the presence of architecture supports (walls) which demarcate the interior from the exterior and which prohibit the regard of the other persons to the point of possible aggression.
Similarly one commonly associates public areas with restriction, because the intrusion of others and their hold on oneself is more probable: unwanted interpersonal relationship, necessary urbanity, restriction of too egocentric expression etc.

The oppositions open / closed are thus corrected by these, public / private
complementary ones of

subjective liberty / objective liberty
objective restraint / subjective restraint

In order to describe the actual experiences of open areas, objectively free, in the mode of restraint or that of closed areas, objectively restrained, in the mode of freedom.

The appropriation of spaces is often abusively assimilated with the property which can, in fact, be the dispenser of well-being in a society based on the respect of possession of material wealth, and where the social status of the person is defined by the statute of the objects he possesses. But property can not in itself determine the appropriation of an area by an individual, and is not its necessary condition. By the same token, it is not actualised by one's taking it over, or by the maintenance of an area, things which can be accomplished without affective implication of the user. Appropriation is a collection of acts, sequences of daily life which manifest itself in:

- delineating the territory where will take place a certain number of events adapted to the functions of the latter, all functions defined by the subject, the user itself;

- the possible destruction of certain elements of this area, in other words its remodelling. An area where a person should act as "a guest" who can touch nothing, is not appropriated;

- the exploration of forbidden zones, that is to say the transgression of the anonymous law and the exercise of a temporary, but subjectively important, freedom of usage of spaces. This liberty often leads to the justification and thus the taking over by the user of this restriction;

- play activity, in other words one of the most intense moments of appropriation, in which it opposes a rhythm of usage of freely chosen spaces to that of socialised activity, in that which permits the individual exploitation of its resources. The play is creativity, miniaturised perhaps, but they are hardly any "great" forms of appropriation of spaces to oppose to any small ones which would be negligible, and this is one of the strange errors of reflection upon the urbanite to be solemn, to count as futile the micro-events, the fugitive actions, the impulsive actions, the habits of meeting and exchanges etc. --- which truly make urban life so alluring;

- the display of objects around oneself is another form of possession,
of which one generally has a clear understanding. It is the most visible mode of taking root, linked with the delimitation of territory. It units several psychological functions: utilitarian, the object is justified in its acquisition, pretty, it satisfies an aesthetic aspiration latent with symbolic, it reveals a social statute of a cultural belonging, given or received, it is a social medallion and as such a carrier of meaning filled with affectiveness. To retain even an ugly object, even a useless one is often important and can define the very mode of appropriation of a given space:

Finally, the presence of others, received of not according to the wishes of the user completes the format of appropriation. The owners of rooms for rent to single persons are fully aware when they often forbid in Strasbourg for example, students, foreign workers, immigrants etc, to receive visitors, expressing thus their awareness of a limitation on the enjoyment of space. At the university students center in Strasbourg a long conflict, resolved in favour of the students, opposed the latter to the administration who refused invitation rights in student dormitories and collective, social rooms such as TV salons, tea-rooms etc...

At the Esplanade, the overall plan provided for laws, automobile traffic routes leading directly from one point to the other, pedestrian walkways connecting the buildings. Spatial distribution of the latter was not destroying the impression of openness, and certain privileged areas, in particular a vast space in front of the "Faculty de Droit", oval, paved and colored, gave an impression of luxury because they presented themselves as areas "for living", not just functional areas.

At the beginning the objective freedom of evolution is considerable. Everything seemed to be designed for discipline without pain. The single sign of restriction was a speed limit sign. Subjective freedom in open space is also real, since only the students frequent these places and express themselves freely. But this freedom, and first of all that of the student driver, is concretised by playing naughts, cigarettes, controlling sliding, the whimsical disposition of parked cars etc...

The student, in this completely new space, enjoy the environment, however close, of the luxurious or modern buildings to get themselves up as masters sacrificial by their playful incursions in the most prestigious areas, such as the oval shaped square. The usage of space is essentially freedom. In this case, principal freedom, in the course of a revitalization movement, a famous architect invited by the students transformed the oval place into an auditorium. The appropriation is manifested by graffiti, the creation of new paths etc... But someone was surveying.

The first measure relates, it seems, to protecting the pedestrian and to reintroduce these great losers of the rhythm of automobile, children and the elderly. No road boundary markers appear at the entrance of pedestrian routes and the automobilist who would venture there was simply stopped, restricted to useless detours, travelling three times as far as necessary, and always retracing his path. In a second time, automobile routes were seen spreading up, after three years and on 200 meters, of two entrance barriers obliging the driver to slow down, three signs indicating the possibility of obstacles and the speed limits, two signs indicating the obligatory direction of traffic, and the obstacles themselves. In this precise case, it concerns a forest of signs, an unambiguous text of supports of the constrained in strict to
limit behavior. The objective and subjective liberty is reduced here by the introduction of directions for adjustment. Free spaces have become functional spaces. The effectiveness invested in the exploration, the playing, given way to plain legal acts. The moments of the individual, those that permit the forgetting of conventional society are replaced by socialized time occupied by the accomplishment of prescribed acts. The reason for existence of behavior limitations is the security of the greatest number. But, in its social practice, these regimented spaces are no longer positively inhabited in a joyous subjectivity. The spaces are, in a predominant manner, subjectively restricted.

What happened to our oval-shaped place? Space cross-road, for strolling for meeting people, its "civilized" character is attested by its monstrosities, its heightened autogamy constructed and planted with shrubs the semi-circle building in black and white marble that surrounds it on one side and which tries to recreate an atmosphere particular to the "pavía", the space which extend in front of the princely houses public buildings filled with symbols or prestige. Its functionality which is of a playground and meeting-place is not usually called such, but called luxury, beauty, etc... By this name, it is a gift, given in addition, freely, without condition or obligation since it is not furnished with any evident directive for usage. In fact, it seems that no one was mistaken since lovers strolled by there, the neighbourhood children and students animated it, etc... It seemed as if an embryo of a place, a plaza, in the traditional sense of the term should develop itself there. But the automobilist always had access to it.

The automobile is linked with danger. Its power, its speed makes it see as a monster suspected by pedestrians. On this place, it goes in all directions, and its violate a civilized and urban space. It is this power and this intrusion that had to be sanctioned. Objective, the goal consisted there again in protecting a space inhabited in another style and at another pace. That is why benches were planted all over the place, in an effort to combine the necessary with the pleasant: the benches are at the same time borders and seats for the users. The chairs were by the introduction of directions for adjustment. Free spaces have become functional spaces. The effectiveness invested in the exploration, the playing, given way to plain legal acts. The moments of the individual, those that permit the forgetting of conventional society are replaced by socialized time occupied by the accomplishment of prescribed acts. The reason for existence of behavior limitations is the security of the greatest number. But, in its social practice, these regimented spaces are no longer positively inhabited in a joyous subjectivity. The spaces are, in a predominant manner, subjectively restricted.

The Esplanade possesses long gardens parallel with housing buildings and rocks reserved for the automobile. The gardens are thus rectangular and separate in large strips the housing buildings on the one hand, the rocks on the other hand. But the children of the buildings, contrary to what was expected, do not run obligatorily along the hedges. They trace their own paths in order to run from the street to the gardens and refuse to go along in right angles. The bushes were crushed and stopped now, so much that the adults followed the initiative and that was born, across the garden, a real path: it avoid the obstacle, it respects the law of minimal effort, it emerges slowly. As strong as the rationality
of the builder was, and great his desire for esthetics, the force of inertia of the user and the daily practice of the pace always introduces the spontaneous element, unforeseen.

Sometimes, this interstitial but powerful liberty, sneaky but authentic, is deliberately taken, then recognized. It is one of the signs of the evolution of spaces. In the case we are dealing with, the path designed by the child was afterward passed across the hedges and in this way accepted. It is this very law of minimal effort that lead the users of the campus to neglect the architecturally shaped paths, at right angle around the lawns or in long incomprehensible curves in a perfectly flat terrain, for these they trampled themselves alongside, often on a lawn, but in a straight line, or a diagonal, going without detour from one point to another. This intelligence of economical walking that users oppose to the builders could suggest to the latter that they take this into account. To maintain, for example, the paths which were spontaneously traced by the pedestrians on the spaces still under construction, not yet completed, would be an experience worthy of interest.

Finally, the buildings themselves of the campus possess objectively free spaces which invite appropriation. They are patio in the centre of buildings constructed at a right angle. They all are opportunities for esthetic effort: one is provided with massive of flowers and an mosaic waterfall, the other with a rock - garden and plants, two of them with large windows which delineate the galleries permitting traffic in the some hallways lighted all year long by electricity. All have forbidden access. Space not appropriated, but carefully maintained, they fill principally a role of "analogon", that is to say an invitation to dream. No space is neutral and these in their somewhat formal beauty, less than others. Offered to be looked at, from a distance, luminous and empty among obscure and densely inhabited areas, they are "spaces to be seen", filling one role which is becoming rare in urban spaces of big cities. They are supports of evocation of the luxury of unused spaces, perhaps a rarity tomorrow.

The opposition liberty/constraint is, in these cases, subtly lived: objectively restricted by their limits, they are subjectively free by their actual role. Because they are not appropriated, because they do not submit to the model of social practice, their ideological sense is explicit. It remains that every ideology is endowed, when it is driven by forms, with a certain density, "margin" of the indeterminate which authorizes a personal interpretation, a possession or a refusal of the space upon which no authority can be taken.

It is necessary to go more deeply into the study of these two privileged cases, the real and the patio, to touch on the problem of their symbols. We are dealing with spaces which represent something other than themselves. Without utilitarian role, in the narrow sense of the word, they speak of leisure and luxury, of modernity and of social insertion. Reserved for the campus, they speak also of segregation and privilege. Closed, selective, they dictate several possibilities of expression. But here, we ought to touch on the user and to resort to some other tools of analysis.

What we hope to retain in this brief example, and even more from the studies we have been able to conduct in Strasbourg, centered particularly on the separated, aseptically spaces of Research Centers ("la Cite Scientifique"), is that it would be hazardous to read straight off the principles of the social structures in stone or in
concrete, and that reveals itself slowly in the exchange between main-
tenance of the space and the users. It is the effect of this exchange
on the latter which describes the field of liberty, the inevitable
restraints and the degrees of appropriation tolerated. - Thus, in an
open public space, all appropriation by objects, the exploration of
the forbidden, and the demarcation of territory is reduced to zero,
for reasons of general interest. The very temptation to break this
rule of general interest understood in a certain way, reveals the
density of this dialogue where two protagonists recognize each other
to be effective, alive. The user perceives more or less clearly what
is wanted of him, but he can, involuntarily or in a deliberate fashion
introduce a misconception or exercise his liberty, thus bringing the
dominant ideology to be discovered, to be expressed.

One ought to start from this liberty in action, from the tolerance or
the limitations that are imposed upon him, from the study of temporary
and durable constraints, from the models of appropriation of spaces in
order to open up the effective and social meaning that the spaces
carry for the user, to oppose this to the intention of departure,
explicit in spatial form and structure, explicit in the forests of
signs which sanction the social practice of these accesses in order to
emerge on a real psychosociology of spaces.

References

Alexander & Chermayeff, 1962, Community and Privacy, Penguin Books,
Harmondsworth

Audrey, R. 1966, The Territorial Imperative, The Fontana Library


Jouvenel, R. de, Arcades: Essais sur le Mieux-Vivre, E.D.E.N.S.
Futuribles, Paris 1968

Lefebvre, H. 1968, Le Droit à la Ville, Anthropos, Paris

Moles, A. 1966, Liberté interstitielle, liberté marginale, liberté
principale, in Revue Française de Sociologie, 1966, Vol. VII, no 2,

Moles, A. 1969, Principal freedom, marginal freedom, interstitial freedom
in Ekistics, p.p. 420-422, Athens

Moles, A and Rohmer, E. 1972, Psychologie de l’espace, Castelmas,
Paris

Prechensky, Ittelson, Birling, Environmental Psychology, Man and his
Physical Setting, Holt Rinehart.