IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOUR IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT: APPROPRIATION AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE FOR CONFLICTS.

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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this study is to be of practical use. We thus overlook the criteria of a scientific approach. We will discuss the identity of recently built neighbourhoods on the periphery of Venice by describing specific patterns of interaction between the built environment and the behaviour of the inhabitants. We will briefly show how the conservation of the identity of the neighbourhood is necessary if we want to avoid conflicts generated by a modification in the patterns of interaction.

This study has been financially supported by Unesco and undertaken jointly by Laurent Chenu, Marie-José Dazio, Pierre Feddersen, architects and Kaj Noschis. The study is published by Unesco. Report 89/WS/29, 1979, Unesco, Paris.
1. Architects and environmental psychology.

One of the tasks for environmental psychology is to elaborate methods and to find results that can be of use for architects and planners.

Even if the aim of fundamental research is essentially to answer general needs for implemented knowledge, there is notably from the architectural profession a request for research that might give suggestions if not guidelines for architectural design. The psychologist will be tempted to answer this demand by extrapolating practical indications where the results of his research do not really allow for more than limited conclusions about a very particular aspect of a situation.

It is the purpose of scientific psychology to look for results that answer the criteria of scientificity, that is, where the situation is controlled by the experimenter. By doing this, although the objectivity of the results is guaranteed one is taken away from the reality and the complexity that the architect should work with.

The everyday reality is something far too complex for environmental psychology if it wants to remain scientific and if the researcher does not want to take the risk of abusive considerations. The alternative is either to limit oneself to fundamental research and to avoid all dangerous extrapolations or to attempt less systematic approaches that might be very rich as to their results and their methodological suggestions.

Among the studies concerned with proxemics the almost classical observations by Hall (1959, 1966) are among the best known by architects. They concerned a series of stimulating descriptions for the architect about behavioral characteristics and patterns of interaction specific to different cultures.

This approach, based mainly on personal observations, has the advantage of being easily understood, without having the pretension of showing in a precise manner possible applications for architects or planners.
Among studies done by architects a very stimulating effort comes from the group working with Alexander (1977). Their aim has been to give indications about planning and building different parts of architectural constructions, with respect to research already done and to make further "good common sense" considerations about the aspects that are discussed. Thus Alexander has developed a catalogue of patterns — concrete suggestions about how to build a door, an entrance, a veranda etc. — that again have the quality of being stimulating for the architect, and possibly for the dweller as the authors themselves would wish. However, let us note that the work of Alexander can be criticized given the tribute it wants to pay to a pretended objectivity following the example of scientific work. Alexander when he gives for example indications about how to build a door ignores all cultural specificity and other characteristics that make every context unique.

However, while reservations have to be made as to the claim for universality of this work, it is hard to deny its stimulating character and its richness.

Our study is at once to be situated in the complexity of reality. It centres upon a prolonged observation of the behaviour of the inhabitants in the public domain of neighbourhood in Venice and its surroundings. The analysis carried out on the data from the observation remain specific to the context, but the type of problem that our data raises and the procedure of collecting the data itself may be of more general interest.

The study does not have any claim to scientificity but we try to show that by a very simple observational technique it is possible to discuss proxemic problems with a direct interest for planners. It is an approach that deliberately is more in quest of immediate applications than scientific validity and that from this point of view would not be placed within the core of environmental psychology research.
2. Proxemics in Venetian neighbourhoods.

We examine the relationship between the Venetian built environment and the behaviour of its inhabitants. It is a study about proxemics. We consider recent peripheral neighbourhoods of Venice that since the 1950s have accommodated a population with the Venetian cultural characteristics. To all physical spaces correspond activities, gestures, a mode of appropriation. A description of situations that are specific to the neighbourhoods is the aim of the study.


The concept of identity will be useful. It will be considered at two levels: individual identity and the identity of a neighbourhood. Individual identity is defined as the perception that the person has of himself according to his social and physical environment. The identity is thus gradually shaped in relation to traditions, habits and behaviours in connection with specific characteristics of the surrounding built environment. In such terms individual identity appears as a social conditioning, but it guarantees the person some stable cues that he can rely upon and that allow him to affirm his origin: "I come from here"; "This is where my roots stand"; "I know everything here; I know what is done, where you go". The oppressive role that such a conditioning might have will not be discussed, nor will its diversity for different social categories and individual situations. It should however be noted that an abrupt change in the everyday environment of the individual in terms of "rituals" that are associated to it - specifically in our case to the built environment of the neighbourhood - will inevitably have repercussions on the individual's identity.

A concrete analysis of individual identity might be attempted by an examination of individual relationships between behaviour and the built environment as they are observed in everyday situations. The resulting constellations would however necessarily differ from one individual to the other, without mentioning
the difficulty of making inferences from such data about the perception the individual might have about himself.

However, neighborhood identity might be introduced here. It is defined by the characteristics of the social and physical environment that can be considered as shared by a category of inhabitants of a neighborhood and that they acknowledge by their specific common behavior. (*) It is thus possible to describe the identity of a neighborhood by systematic observations of the inhabitants' behavior as it takes place in specific physical surroundings. Neighborhood identity will be described by the use of patterns - i.e. by isolating specific situations of a continually reappearing relationship between behavior and a physical setting of the neighborhood. The neighborhoods under consideration being socially homogeneous, distinctions will not be made at this level.

4. The patterns.
The study takes into consideration fifteen patterns in all. By a pattern one should understand the description of a specific context of interaction between the individual and the physical environment of a neighborhood.

We will describe how the individual appropriates (Noschis, Dazio & Ceddrensen, 1978) the public space of his neighborhood and, reciprocally, how space structures human activity in specific contexts. With more patterns the understanding of the neighborhood will be more complete.

Mainly, we will try to give indications about our approach so that we will here make use only of two of our patterns. They will allow us to illustrate the specificity of the study and to show the problem of conflicts potentially inherent to certain manifestations of appropriation.

(*) We define individual identity by what is interior to the person and not to be observed directly and neighborhood identity by what is exterior to the person and directly observable - with respect to the person's relations with the neighborhood.
5. The pattern: "Wharf / Bus-stop".

5.1 The Sacca Pisola neighbourhood: the wharf.

Sacca Pisola is located at the western extremity of the Giudecca island, in front of the historical city of Venice. The neighbourhood, formed by aligned housing blocks from four to six floors, is connected to the rest of the world by two points of access: the bridge from the island of Giudecca and the wharf that connects Sacca Pisola to Venice and the mainland (fig. 1).

It is a workers neighbourhood, a dormitory town. With the exception of a few shops and teachers who have their working place on the island, it becomes an empty place each morning when all the active inhabitants leave. More than half of the island’s inhabitants - totalling 2500 - leave Sacca Pisola and take the ferry in order to get to Venice, and others, in large number, to the industrial centres of the mainland.
Later in the day some women will leave for shopping in Venice and some youngsters for their apprenticeship. Those who do not work too far away will return for lunch. In the early afternoon some women will leave again for Venice.

The coming home at night takes place in reverse order (fig. 2).

A particular aspect is the arrival very early in the morning of the "street cleaners" who have to walk across the island in order to reach their working place. Their work is done by noon and they leave the island in the opposite direction.

5.1.2 The environment.

On the wharf situated along the Canal de la Giudecca next to the booking-office window, the waiting-room and the landing stage (fig. 7), is a little bar (fig. 8).

A newspaper-stall, a phone-cabin and a mail-box are located on the wharf. Telegraph boards, strategically located, inform the inhabitants about the meetings of the neighbourhood-council, public meetings and statements of the different political parties.

5.1.3 Behaviour.

When the inhabitants leave for their work or when they come back at night the wharf is the focal point on the island.

By preference men wait for the boat in front of the newspaper-stall or next to the foot-bridge leading to the landing-stage, while reading the newspaper or talking. The women rejoin inside the waiting-room where they chat.
FIG. 3

PIAZZALE ROMA
LE VARRETTO
SAN MARCO
LE PONTOON
LA BASERELLE
LE BAR "SEGAFREDO"
LE GRAI

LE DEBARCADERE
A SALCA FISOLA

FIG. 4

LE BAR "SEGAFREDO"

LE BARMAN
L'EAU
LES AFFICHES
LE CONGELATEUR
LES VITRES
LES CAISSES DE BOUTEILLES
LE GRAI

UNE POSITION PERMETTANT D'OBSERVER LE CANAL ET LE GRAI
In the evening children will come and play in front of the wharf. Some women will wait for the return of their husbands. Again it becomes a meeting and discussion point while waiting. These are "rituals" that repeat themselves day after day and which provide a constant reference for the inhabitants.

5.2. The Villaggio San Marco neighbourhood: the bus-stop.

5.2.1. Generalities

Villaggio San Marco is the neighbourhood on the mainland that is closest to the extremity of the "Ponte della Libertà" bridge, that connects the historical city of Venice with the continent.

The neighbourhood is delimited by two peripheral boulevards and cut into two parts by a major traffic road: the Viale San Marco (fig.5) where the public transport directed towards the city of Venice and Mestre is concentrated.

On each side of the central axis, one finds housing blocks of six floors and one-family housing units organized according to the
following principle: one-family houses placed contiguously and grouped around small housing blocks of three or four floors.

In this neighbourhood originally intended for low-income families, the inhabitants, coming from Venice, favoured by particularly advantageous renting conditions, are today most often owners. A car, something unthinkable at the time of the neighbourhood's construction, is today to be found in almost every family. However buses are used by a large number of the inhabitants to travel to work and by the youngsters to travel to school. This movement with its peak activity in the morning and evening corresponds to that of Sacca Fisola (fig.2).

5.2.2 The environment.
Several bus-stops are to be found along the Viale San Marco. Road-signs are the only mark of a stop. In the centre of the neighbourhood a newspaper-stall is located in the immediate proximity of a stop (fig.6).

5.2.3 Behaviour.
The bus-stops are never overcrowded by people waiting for the bus. It's in the morning that most people are to be found; people wait in small groups while watching the cars continually passing by. At the newspaper-stall bus-stop some people will be reading a
newspaper. They are few. Often cars will stop in front of the newspaper-stall and the driver will rapidly alight and buy his journal. It is the occasion for those who wait for the bus to simply look at the car, or comment.

When the bus arrives there is some pushing in order to be the first person to get aboard and have a seat. On the way back home at night people do not stop at all after they have alighted from the bus as everyone is immediately directed towards his home.

The bus-stop is a more anonymous place than the wharf. There are several bus-stops and they are less marked compared with the wharf. There is no real social event given the dispersion of the people and the lack of structures that could force the people to gather.

The arrival of a bus is less an event than that of a boat. The arrival of a bus depends exclusively on the traffic. Meteorological conditions do not interfere. The bus is useful but the car is to be preferred: the bus is experienced as something transitory replacing a car.

6. The pattern: "Undeveloped land".

By undeveloped land we mean free areas of ground, neither built nor taken care of, that are left to themselves, aside from the inhabited areas. These places have for the inhabitants a poor reputation. In the urbanists' jargon they are also called 'residual spaces' meaning that they are located in between the planned and built territories, as if one should have forgotten them.

6.1 The undeveloped land of Sacca Fisola.

6.1.1 The environment.

At Sacca Fisola a belt of undeveloped land is situated around the housing-blocks next to the water. This land is where the original development project had foreseen more housing (fig.1). At a certain place on the island, while waiting for new constructions, a house dating from before the construction of the neighbour
has been abandoned, and is waiting in the middle of undeveloped land to be demolished.

6.1.2 Behaviour.
Parcels of undeveloped land offer a dimension for free activity. They are protected from prying eyes and no social control is exercised here. Different age groups might undertake momentary activities: shouting, rolling in the grass, cyclecross, have secret meetings...

A group of children from eight to twelve took us via a secret path to their roller-skating track. They have transformed the floor of the abandoned house into a hockey ground; they were helped by elders to demolish the dangerous roof of the house and they now organize games among themselves. The mystery dimension of these abandoned places fascinates the children who follow secret paths built by themselves.

6.2 The undeveloped lands at Villaggio San Marco.

6.2.1 The Environment.
At Villaggio San Marco the parcels of undeveloped land are an outcome of an urban conception: the juxtaposition on the territory of groups of family houses placed around small building complexes seems somehow artificial. It has given rise to a series of interspaces (fig.5). These have been embellished by a few trees, some benches and a geometrical network of streets and squares that does not result from practical use.

6.2.2 Behaviour.
Some of these plots of land - one situated in front of a large building complex, others in front of the little gardens of the family-houses - have been appropriated by some inhabitants, who have started to cultivate them. The ground is owned by public authority and it is officially not permitted to cultivate plants. However, some of the plots of land have been enclosed and are transformed into small private gardens. Other plots are used for occasional events for instance
gypsies and fairs.
Moreover we find the same utilisation as at Sacca Pisola. They are
privileged places for social relations among children.
Thus in the case of the two neighbourhoods we can say that although
given the state of apparent abandonment of these grounds, a series of
activities that take place there make them a constituent part of the
neighbourhoods themselves.

7. Appropriation as a potential source for conflicts.
From the general description of the two patterns that we have just
recollected, we will discuss some more problematic reflections about
the relationships between the inhabitants and their neighbourhood.

7.1 Identity and wharf.
The interaction between man and his environment in the case of the
two patterns covers appropriation modes. The appropriation of a
public space is a function of its position in the life of the
neighbourhood, and this can be illustrated by the difference be-
 tween the wharf and the bus-stop.
The role that these two places play is different: their use and
development are specific.
The wharf is a meeting-place, the bus-stop a place for passing-by.
in one case the inhabitant attaches a symbolic content to the place;
it is the point which provides contact with the rest of the world.
In the other context the place is utilitarian; it is the place
where one stops and gets inside the continually passing-by flood
of cars, when one doesn't have one's own car.
The wharf at Sacca Pisola is one of the constituent aspects of what
we call the identity of the neighbourhood by the "rituals" and
significations that are connected with it.
The physical characteristics of the place - the newspaper-stand, the
bar, the telegraph-boards - have gradually been invaded by the
inhabitants and a very dense network of relations exists today
between these features. This is apparent by very simple means, such
as encounters, looks, positions and thoughts while standing and
waiting. For the inhabitant these custom while being almost automatized activities, are precious and become an integral part of what we have called the identity of the individual.
The bus-stop at Villaggio San Marco is less constituent, although its official function is corresponding.
There is a talk of transferring the Sacca Piccola wharf to another point of the island. Given its importance for the inhabitants it becomes crucial that such a transfer is successful.
Above the functional aspects, it is important to succeed with the transfer (in the psychosomatic sense of the term) of all the "rituals" that are associated with it. It is only if this condition is met that such a change will be accepted by the inhabitants; without it, the appropriation will remain a potential source for conflicts, given the repercussions that an abrupt change could have for what we have called the identity of the neighbourhood.

7.2 Identity and undeveloped land.
If the wharf is an example of appropriation of a public space that concerns practically all the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, the undeveloped lands are the privileged domain of different restricted user groups:
- groups of children for collective play;
- youngsters for flirting;
- adults for occasional activities.
It could be tempting to concede less importance to these forms of appropriation as related with the identity of the neighbourhood. However they cover a series of activities that, under all circumstances, will somehow find an expression in the neighbourhood.
If the users do not have a place protected from the prying eye of the inhabitants at their disposal these very activities could easily become the occasion for tension, jealousy, violence.
In that case they would - in a visible manner - contribute in marking the identity of the neighbourhood, in a negative sense.
The undeveloped lands thus have an important role in maintaining the equilibrium of the neighbourhood and if they are only indirectly
constituent of its identity, they are directly constituent of the identity of the small groups of inhabitants that use them, such as the secret skating ground of the children.

Thus one can understand how an intervention aimed at the reversion of these undeveloped lands could easily create conflicts in the neighbourhood.

8. Conclusion.

Let us emphasize that the definition of the identity of a neighbourhood by patterns is only a tool for reflecting on the relationships between the behaviour of the user and the built environment, and that the critique that can always be put forward is that the researcher becomes the "interpreter" of the user's needs.

However we think that it is reasonable to attempt an approach with all the weaknesses that it might have, that can look for an architecture that tries to understand the users, adapting itself to their way of life, not forgetting that the activities and habits of the inhabitants are the result of long traditions.

References: