THE CITY AS PERFORMANCE SPACE: TOWARDS A RECOVERY OF URBAN THEATRICALITY

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My quest in this paper is one of visiting the world of theatre, to examine its performance space, its occupants, their relationships and the architectural containment of all these, - and then, to explore from this heterotopic domain, the extent to which the surrounding city centre too is committed to such a theatrical identity and is indeed itself a performance space related to it, both physically and figurally.

Before proceeding with this quest, a declaration of positions is due.

Firstly, the city centre - specifically Auckland’s - is growing in its built capacity, its self-consciousness and its world-awareness.

Yet, its range of provisions for urban life and its ability to be urbanely unpredictable are both shrinking. An unbearably monoculture has been developing at the growing expense of the greater public and many of the traditional retail and service functions to which popular main street loyalites attach.

Usage of this vast investment is increasingly selective, exclusive, even punishing of old and new ventures in diversity. By numerous consumer measures, the new generation suburban centres are outpacing Auckland city centre in the shopping and social indices.

Faced with this trend, counteraction is under debate and under way - mostly upmarket in new developments but increasingly downmarket too as the business and property slump and land tax together wane. From the older quarters, adaptive strategies long ignored.

However, self-atrophying as the market city may hopefully be in redistributing affordable consumer services, it is my belief that their delivery and their demand in the city will remain thwarted without radical urban and architectural design contributions which excel (by comparison with the suburban culture) in their capacity to serve the interests of the greater city public.

Some of these necessary design strategies need to address inadequacies of accommodation, comfort, shelter and retail management; others will address visual, cultural and figurative inadequacies.

Secondly, about theatre and all the moving encounters it embodies, between worlds of spectator and performer, of reality and illusion, of private and public, of present and past, of the imaginable and the unimaginable, one can only continue to marvel at its validity as a modeler of the drama of urban life, as well as a metaphor for the urban life facility which is the city.

It is this validity of the theatre model in addressing city issues which I now wish to examine further, before returning to principles and proposals for some urban reformations.


The idea of performer and spectator is both inherently theatrical and intensely public, hence civic. While a setting for civic life ideally facilitates a ‘performance’ and even supports the actions of those in the limelight, nevertheless, a public place is at once both performance space and spectator space, store, in towns, the spectators may from time to time choose to become actors themselves.

Indeed as Parr states:
... "simply by virtue of being in the public realm, an individual is potentially on centre stage all the time. As soon as one steps out from behind a column into the openness of PiazzaSan Marco, one feels as if hundreds of people could be watching, and possibly they are. However, the dignity with which every performer is imbued in this particular stage setting is inebriating. The space seems to celebrate life in all its forms - indeed any form. Without a doubt the carnivals and processions which are staged in that magnificent arena are veritable spectacles, but even the mundane ordinariness of life acquires a certain drama. It is the ability of public space to transform "the unbelievable richness of human ridiculosity" into something worth celebrating that makes it memorable and successful."

Aldo Rossi in 'A Scientific Autobiography', it repeatedly draws to the theatre and the idea is raised of potential, suspension and unassessability - notions he validates for life, the theatre, architecture and the city. Parr quotes him:


* Similarly architecture becomes a vehicle for an event we desire, whether or not it actually occurs... ... But it is for this reason that the dimensions... are very important - not, as the functionalists thought, because they (accommodate) a determined function, but because they permit other functions. Finally because they permit everything that is unforeseeable in life."

This interdependence of city stage and life as seen by Rossi becomes even more acute in Macheth's bitter vision:


"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour
upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

[Shakespeare 'Macheth' Act V, Scene 5, II 19-28]

Such despair, indeed indeed most of all...

Such despair, indeed, although contemporaneous of life, ambitions and ideals, in no way detracts from the crucial importance of the stage - indeed it even seems that Shakespeare's "world stage" might be the more significant and substantial part of the vision. - a blais discernible too in de Chirico's "urban stage" paintings.

Furthermore, in again likening theatre and city, Rossi addresses the interdependence of that which is public and that which is private - especially public aspects of privacy:

"That the theatre publicly exposes private fantasies, transforming them into
civilizing forces which are the individual through aesthetic means where the real
borders of identification have to be drawn."

To the extent that identification and expression of our public and private states and roles is continually fluctuating in the city (as in the theatre) so too should physical settings and borders match and represent such fluctuation.

One such responsive and pervasive element of a city fabric is the ubiquitous colonnade (arched or unarched) bordering public places - an element readily conceived of and used theatrically;"

Gerrit Confunius' (1987) observations of this theatrical urban element are apt:
"Arcades (colonnades) underline the stage-like character of the squares and streets feeding into them by presenting themselves as backdrop and stage alike. The theatricality and irreality of the arcade (colonnade) contribute significantly to the full impact of its utility value. It proves its function not only for the simple execution of tasks, but also for the reflective amplification of these tasks in self-conscious play."

He further highlights the arcade as a discrete space

"...between the privacy of the apartment and the public, between the familiarity of the store and the arrangement of the piazza..."

and summarizes its effects thus:

"By imposing a precise rhythm to walking, natural principles of order take on social meaning, and not simply by external violation of the individual by geometrical rigor, but also as an external counterpart to the internal structure of the individual."

Invisible limits are created with arcades, he suggests, by

..."placing those barriers between people which allow them to get along with each other in the first place"... and, furthermore,

..."their exquisite architecture comprises not only a space of cohesion, but a space of separation - of the individual from others, from generality and from the rest of the individual's own life, its routine, its self-evident truths..." and, again,

..."arcades induce encounters with solemnity, meeting places with security, promenades with dignity; and they render the lonely individual with his aimlessness and anarchism, unapplicable".

Pur summarises his tribute to the arcade:

..."the arcade has many qualities which make an appropriate urban fabric motif, such as its 'protective' function, from climate and traffic, its 'unifying', harmonising function due to its regular repetitive qualities and propensity for ordering space, its 'civilising' potential by inviting discretion, solemnity and lowered tones (together with) the communalizing of the street edge as 'an extended common porch, leading from one significant spot to another, giving dignity to its town and claiming for it a recognized place in the broader world of classical society..."

However a literature of restraint about arcades exists alongside the fervent advocacy of the foregoing excerpts.

Pur cites Maurice Coles (1887): "For arcades have come to represent an evocation of an Arcadia, a never-never land," in observing that

..."the expectations with which arcades are burdened are many. In recent times, a certain romanticism surrounding the arcade motif has crept in to form the basis of
its common usage. It has become a symbol of that which is not, yet also that which is the object of desire of those suffering under the yoke of industrial domination.”

Notwithstanding such alerts, I think the arcade, as a concept and as an urban element is as free to be adapted in valid contemporary typologies and compositional themes as historic elements and settings have been in theatre design and productions.

So to more specific matters.

AUCKLAND’S QUEEN STREET

In recognition of its regional main street status, Queen Street’s role as paramount community facility and a prime public place needs to be manifested more tangibly. Its unique identity is certainly affirmed geographically, indicated by its quantum of investment and development, but only tenuously expressed in the narrow diversity and style of its recent retailing and architectural character.

Indeed, as a street of public enterprise (as distinct from the buildings of private enterprise which bound it), its three-dimensional character is wanting in the light of the foregoing review of city theatre relationships and metaphors. District Scheme encouragements and guidelines have so far not been successful enough in inducing appropriate urban form, architecture and useage of the main street. Many are resigned to its formerly dominant retail and social attractions becoming dispensable.

Within this development surge of the city’s central fabric, one observes that publically funded initiatives in the street are restricted to its paved floor surfaces, furniture and planting and, that it is the street walls - by-products of private development - which now need public attention.

Urban main street life is the city’s principal live performance, literally its ‘street theatre’. In Queen Street it is discouraged for want of a street theatre architecture and a fuller agenda of city life and behaviour to occupy it.

I believe there is a clear case for the public promotion of street walls which manifestly enliven this live performance, walls which people the ‘theatre’ with pedestrians, occupants and speculators, as well as affording new and more diverse ways of retailing and reintersecting in the city.

Evidently, this seems to involve more than what ordinances and guidelines alone can achieve.

The measure that suggests itself is that of the colonnade or arcade - a public device replacing the piecemeal verandah and blank bank traditions with two-storey throughfares bordering main streets and squares on public land. The upper storey would permit the building owners behind to promote or operate a second retail level, fanning out at ground level a block or so back from the Queen Street valley, or able to be sustained along the most level, developing cross-arms like Fort Street, Customs Street and Quay Street. Indeed the full extent of the city’s Quay Street front to the future small ships basin, extending between the once prominent flanks of the Hobson Street and Britomart Place ridges, calls for such grandstanding formality.

This two-storey colonnade or arcade could be topped also with one or two storeys of leasable commercial space (depending on street width and use), thus extending space in adjacent private buildings.

This strategy, acting together with planning ordinances and guidelines, would enable the formation of a designed street or square architecture capable of offering standards of ambience, amenity, cohesion and function superior to any being attained in existing urban precincts.
Internationalism in business, investment, land values, high-density office development as well as architectural style seems certain to consolidate and grow. I think this economic and cultural reality is unstoppable, exciting and, provided it is joined with a public streets strategy such as here proposed, is ultimately unthreatening, or at most, threatening in a healthy sense.

Accordingly, street character, recently showing the natures of these international forces, can and should be reformed by having our main streets and squares realise three-dimensional truly public settings, publicly defined and designed in ways which accommodate both the regional and global realities and possibilities in our culture.

**Principles and Procedures**

In support of this strategy, some policy matters arise. The public’s ownership and its responsibility for the character of public streets and places must be publicly upheld and executed through its Local Authority.

Designing (as distinct from just controlling) the modification, development and conservation, of these public domains must become an integral part of those executive responsibilities. (This is already the case in upgradings of road and footpath surfaces and furniture, but not of footpath verandas, let alone street facades).

Apparent conflicts between public and private interests in city places, provoked by the idea of colonnades and their superstructures, may be reconciled through the identification and negotiation of mutual benefits. Thus, single storey colonnades benefit primarily the public. Double storey colonnades do likewise, but, in addition, benefit the adjacent building owners by rendering first floor building space shopable from the upper colonnade level. Second or third floor accommodation, surrounding colonnades and constituting, in form and in usage, a dedicated street architecture, would serve both public and private interests; public interests by improving the aesthetic character, viability and liveliness of the street and, private interests by contributing long-term insidious commercial space (say as a bonus supplementary to the floor area limits pertaining to such adjacent sites).

While overall bulk, impact and design of city buildings can be expected to be more sensitively guided by the Renewed District Scheme together with the advice of the Building Appearance Review Committee, the additional, unifying element of the colonnade is I believe compositionally necessary in the Queen Street area, because the many recent buildings there seriously diminish opportunities and locations for realizing adequate street architecture by guideline and encouragement alone. The random, by-product results and prospects of guided private enterprise have not sufficiently matched public theoretical interests in the city.

As to liberties and conformities, continuities and discontinuities in colonnaded building additions, some compositional flexibility should be encouraged, for example in exposing listed historic facades. Otherwise, streets would reflect their nature as aggregates of street blocks - each block probably distinctive in character.

Unity of design in any block should be predominant at the level of the footpath colonnade (as it is for the footpath and roadway already), easing and diversifying as necessary at upper colonnade level to accommodate variations in floor levels, adjacent facade features or interruptions for exposure of conserved building fabric.

Public facades surrounding the two-storey colonnades might be encouraged to superimpose diversities and fragments of expression above the underlying colonnade order, keying off aspects of - rating and proposed building orders and materials - the beginning of a counternown theme which could be rejoined each time a building is modified or replaced.

Implementing such three-dimensional street embodiments of the public domain could be gradual - block by block, street side by street side. Indeed one may look even further ahead beyond our era of
graniteous enthusiasm for motorcar counting and watching in main shopping streets, in one in which cars are more - not less - esteemed than pedestrians and in which aesthetic, behavioural and environmental opportunities are reversed accordingly. Then, it is really conceivable that business associations and the City Council may recognise the further potential and merit inherent in this unifying, street theatre form - namely, that of ideally glazing it over in some restricted traffic blocks, to achieve "galactic" conditions of climate control, competitive retail management and spacious social activity which in these respects and in their spatial and "performance" excitement and scale, would be more than a match for those of the new generation suburban multi-centres.

Speaking of which, it seems a mine of special public concern in any reformulation of city attractions, that the restoration of basic consumer retail services, presently decanted into suburbs, be grappled with.

Bargain price city outlets for food and household consumables in market and supermarket forms are public rights - no less essential than public streets, carparking and other "essential" public amenities from libraries to sewers - and if necessary funded or assisted through the state logic that established such time-honoured public facilities.

Moreover, much of the decline in main street shopping turnover would reverse with the growth in variety and patronage that such large-scale staple commodity operations excite. Necessary parking buildings now exist in convenient CBD fringe positions - sufficiently to serve "shop-and-drive" habits. Eventually these habits should spread to those bus-borne thousands of office workers, senior citizens and students, only too willing to be wooed again by a city returned to a condition of complex theatricality and resourcefulness for all who would wish to be a part of it.

REFERENCES


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