

URBAN DYSTOPIAS: CITIES THAT EXCLUDE

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ABSTRACT

The theme of social exclusion is of pressing urgency to contemporary societies as the dynamics of the global market determine rapid and constant variations in local economic, demographic and, consequently, social factors: in a global system governed by the exclusive logic of profit, objectives of competitiveness and productivity appear to have substantially supplanted the growth and welfare of populations. These processes directly involve urban transformation: the configuration of the city, its spaces and its facilities appear to be increasingly less inspired by values of justice and social equity; it follows that possible categories of users, in relation to gender, age, social status and ethnic background, may face discrimination in relation to the free and full use of the city's buildings and spaces. By delineating limits and borders – whether material or symbolic – the city constitutes a powerful vehicle of social exclusion.

The configuration of the spaces and objects of the city, once the expression of local culture and identity and the fulfilment of historically referenced poetics, languages and technologies, is no neutral act when it involves the full participation of the city's inhabitants. Other than pursuing aesthetic and functional objectives it also determines the quality of the relationships that develop between urban space and its users, operating in terms of selectivity.

The essay attempts to reflect on the devices at work in the contemporary city as a tool of social exclusion. The assumption of the concept of public space as a common good presents itself as an unavoidable passage towards the construction of an urban reality home for the harmonious existence between all of its components, of an inclusive city, a city for everyone.

Keywords: city, gated communities, public space, slums and hyper-ghettos, social exclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Exclusion, an increasingly more consistent dimension in the societies of the so-called First World, is a critical problem whose resolution depends on the well-being not only of excluded individuals, but also of the communities to which they belong. The theme is of pressing urgency to contemporary societies given the dynamics of the global market that determine rapid and constant variations in local economic, demographic and, consequently, social factors: in a global system governed by the exclusive logic of profit, the objects of competitiveness and productivity appear to have substantially supplanted the growth and welfare of populations.

These processes directly involve those of urban transformation: the configuration of the city, its spaces and its facilities appear to be increasingly less inspired by values of justice and social equity; it follows that possible categories of users, in relation to gender, age, social status and ethnic background, may face discrimination in relation to the free and full use of the city's buildings and spaces.

In his analysis of the transformations of mechanisms of power in society, Michel Foucault emphasised the extraordinary efficacy of space as a device for the expression of power in regu-

lating the forms of social interaction. Architecture is described as one of the principal instruments of 'biopolitics': 'the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power'. According to Foucault, 'a whole history of spaces – which would be at the same time a history of powers – remains to be written, from the grand strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals.' [1]

The life of the individual in all of its aspects is involved in this 'micro-physics of power'.

The theme of the interconnection between space and the control over forms of social interaction in terms of exclusion is evident in the reality of the city: it is possible, in fact, to identify conditions in its organisation – also using different devices and methods than those conceived by Bentham – that determine forms of control and exclusion from full participation in the life of the community.

2 THE NEO-LIBERAL CITY

The internationalisation of labour markets, the dislocation of manufacturing activities, the erosion of systems of *welfare* and the implementation of neo-liberal policies nurture a rapidly changing framework. This has had enormous effects on the reorganisation of manufacturing systems in urban contexts; cities have become part of a complex set of power relations that tends to progressively pull away from the logic of territorial continuity and to be structured around urban nodes and flows of capital, goods, people and information.

The progressive emptying of institutional and social structures exasperates the processes of over-determination in choices and the difficulties in determining the sense of urban planning.

The *governance* of business and of the city increasingly resemble one another, ignoring the demands of the societies that inhabit them; globalised interests, extraneous to local citizens, determine transformations that are far from representing the expression of a society, of the contents and values shared by local residents. This causes the segmentation and capitalist hierarchisation of urban space, also in relation to the growing interest of the financial sector in the value of real estate; paradoxically, these processes employ public resources for real estate speculation under the false guise of urban requalification.

The affirmation of financial capitalism manifests new forms of power that reveal an increase in the inequalities of space. There appears to be a radicalisation in the city of power structures focused on the polarisation of society and space and the consequent generation of forms of exclusion; new structures are created and existing ones consolidated to organise and control forms of social interaction: the subdivision into districts, the delimitation of properties and the structuring of space generate physical barriers to the full use of the city by all of its citizens. This generates and consolidates *urban dystopias*, which have renewed and nurtured in recent years the debate on exclusion from the '*right to the city*'.

In the field of urban transformations over the past 30 years, neo-liberal policies have, in fact, accentuated differences in classes of the population. Urban space has progressively been marked by this trend: urban areas are progressively more divided and conflicting and our cities are increasingly more similar to a sum of different spatial fragments inhabited by homogenous social classes.

3 URBAN APARTHEID

Urban apartheid propagates in forms that while not unprecedented are certainly indelible: recent years have brought a return to urban conflicts around the globe, tied directly to urban issues (urban transformations, gentrification and deportation of low-income portions of the population, real estate investments, the cost of public services, etc.).

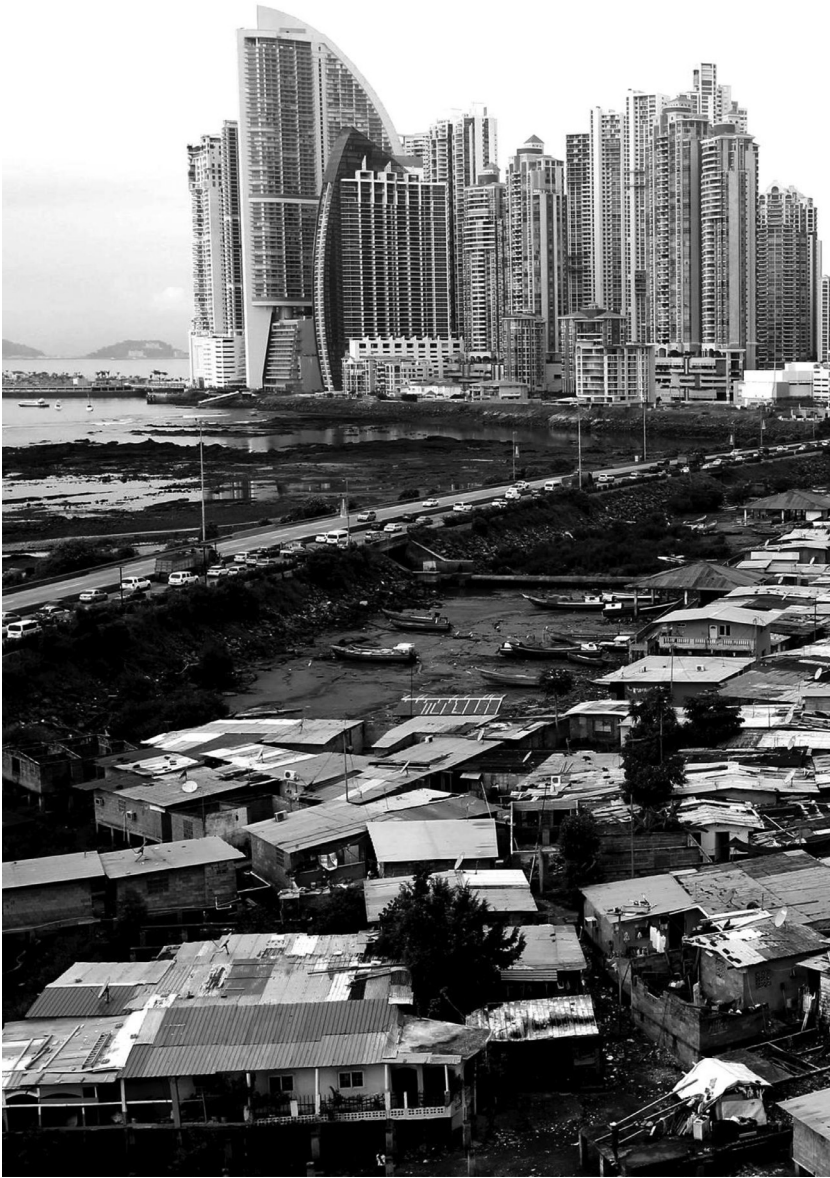


Figure 1: Contrasts in the city of Panama.

There has been an exponential growth in metropolitan *slums*. Shanty towns are no longer a marginal or waning phenomenon, but have become a distinctive characteristic of urbanisation during the third millennium, especially in the world's southern nations. In this area, cities are increasingly more akin to highly polarised realities in which small groups of power face off, connected to the circuits of the global economy actively involved in processes of accumulation, while the vast majority of the population lives in informal settlements under conditions of poverty and exploitation. In North America, instead, Wacquant has denounced the birth of so-called '*hyper-ghettos*'; spaces that are home to a humanity comprising weaker



Figure 2: Commercial street in a hyper-ghetto, Baltimore.

individuals left alone to face up to the current crisis. True ‘human landfills’, relegated to marginal areas where impoverished populations expelled by competition in the workplace constitute a ‘leftover’ humanity whose possibilities for integration or reintegration are close to zero.

The difference between the shanty towns of the past and those of today is due precisely to structural changes in the economy that have restricted access to regular employment, transforming the city into a true laboratory of uncertainty. The population of these settlements is excluded from the workplace and from the formal city. The hyper-ghetto is the new paradigm of urban social exclusion. ‘Whereas the ghetto in its classical form acted partly as a protective shield against the brutal racial exclusion, the hyper-ghetto has lost its positive role of collective buffer, making it a deadly machinery for naked social regulation and isolation’. [2]

These phenomena of marginalisation were accompanied by a particularly evident drift in safety, from the 1980s, in American society. According to Wacquant, across the ocean, the war on criminality consisted substantially of a war on citizens, in particular on members of so-called dangerous classes (labourers, the unemployed, ethnic minorities). A dominating sense of fear, the systematic mistrust in alterity perceived as a potential risk, had led to the development of a society that implements mechanisms of surveillance and control not so different from those fantasised in the political fiction of George Orwell. The eye of ‘big brother’ is ever-present in the form of video cameras that observe and record anomalies in behaviour in public spaces and commercial activities.

Back in 1990, Mike Davis, in his *City of Quartz*, described Los Angeles as a city obsessed with security. Naked façades redefine the urban landscape as a ‘fortified space’ supported by an army of security guards and private militias; the architecture of the city expresses, through its frontiers, a sense of defense/segregation, ‘(...) we live in “fortress cities” brutally divided between “fortified cells” of affluent society and “places of terror” where the police battle the criminalized poor’ [3].

Fortresses of reinforced concrete substantiate the geography of exclusion. The new power redesigns the city, its buildings, its spaces and even its urban furnishings and devices at the service of security, forever excluding the poorer classes. In the fight against the exclu-



Figure 3: Goldwyn Regional Branch Library in Los Angeles, for M. Davis the most menacing library ever built.



Figure 4: Anti-homeless bench, Los Angeles.

sion of the less fortunate, various deterrents have been adopted: ‘One of the most common, but mind-numbing, of these deterrents is the Rapid Transit District’s new barrel-shaped bus bench that offers a minimal surface for uncomfortable sitting, while making sleeping utterly impossible’ [3].

The neo-liberal ethic that exalts individualism and richness, the disengagement from any form of collective political action has become the cardinal element of any type of socialisation. The defence of the values of private property has acquired such a relevance in political terms that, in California, associations of home owners are increasingly more akin to reactionary groups, to the point that they raise issues of 'neighbourhood fascism'. What emerges in cities are elements that refute the heterogeneity expressed through the diffusion of hedonistic and exclusive lifestyles.

One phenomenon of urban apartheid is the planetary diffusion of communities physically separated from their context: the construction of urban zones – so-called 'Gated Communities' – or even 'walled cities' – defended by fences. The multiplication of these residential communities closed-off against the exterior, in the form of true enclaves, reveals in spatially tangible terms the problems related to nodes tied to all of society, with respect to the definition and value to be attributed to the concept of public spaces as a common good.

Perimeters divide the included from the confused and threatening heterogeneity of the mass of 'others'; this creates two distinct and formally opposed cities inside urban areas: gated communities and those of others; the inclusive city and the exclusive city.

The consequence of this approach is the erosion of public space, so long as it is accessible only to those who have acquired the right to use it; this comports that 'entire communities become, in this manner, commercial domains', ensuring that 'the rights to participation associated with the public realm are not simply eliminated, but that the very notion of public space is compromised.' [4]

These forms of settlement connoted by the privatisation of spaces are also referred to as '*Privatopias*' [5] precisely to emphasise their fundamentally exclusive nature. Zygmunt Bauman provides an effective description: 'As we all know, fences have to have two sides. Fences divide otherwise uniform spaces into an "inside" and an "outside", but what is "inside" for those on one side of the fence is "outside" for those on the other. The residents of condominiums fence themselves "out" of the off-putting, discomfiting, vaguely threatening, rough life of the city – and 'in' the oasis of calm and safety. By the same token, though, they fence all the others out of the decent and secure places whose standards they are prepared and



Figure 5: Gated community and favela Paraisópolis in São Paulo.



Figure 6: Outlet as urban environment at the small scale, Bari.

determined to keep up and defend tooth and nail, and into the self-same shabby and squalid streets which they try, no expense spared, to fence off.' [6]

The spread of this model of privatisation of the urban environment can be associated with a radicalisation of racial and/or social oppositions and tensions, raising questions about the city's ability to resist as a space of integration and democratic relations.

Mike Davis warned against the danger of the 'destruction of any truly democratic urban space' [3].

Richard Sennett emphasised how the fences erected in defense of the wealthier classes impoverish everything by standardising and diminishing the variety and quality of social relations [7].

The processes of urban transformation that have occurred in recent decades have produced, among other things, incredible transformations in lifestyles; the quality of life has become good, like the cities themselves.

The contemporary urban experience is permeated by the sensation of a limited freedom of choice, under the pact that one has the money to permit it. There is a proliferation of shopping centres, of multiplex cinemas and mega-stores, fast food chains and small markets. This phenomenon produces the inexorable atrophy of formal public space to the benefit of commercial space. Collective space is increasingly more often intended as the space of shopping: far from any relationship with the human dimension in all of its many facets and requirements.

Power is manifest in a form of tight control, 'that leads it to enclose and secure everything and to design small territorial systems of reference (shopping malls and outlets for example) that pretend to present themselves and legitimise themselves as new and small territorial entities to be respected and inside which new social relations are redefined' [8]. In some cases, they reproduce a true urban environment at the small scale, free of the inconveniences and unpleasant unpredictable events found in the city.

Collective space is here reduced to the space of exchange, of shopping, for exclusive use by subjects with purchasing power and money to spend to satisfy their desires.

The citizen is obliterated, and the sole admissible identity is that of the consumer.

There is a loss of the sense of places and urban spaces as ideally open to everyone, delimited and recognised by society as 'public'; in other words, spaces intended above all in their relational dimension, place of shared urban life, of encounters and exchanges and, in principle, accessible and useable by the entire community of citizens. Spaces that people can access and in which they can interact casually, experience a fortunate meeting and transform the unpredictable into an opportunity, into new relations.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The challenge to the design of the contemporary city would thus appear to be the construction of places, spaces and services accessible to all, and thus realistically be sustainable in the social dimension by creating conditions of liveability that take into account the complexity and fragility of the human race.

There is a need to recuperate the Lefebvrian theme of the '*right to the city*', actualising the recent reflections made by Harvey, who stated: 'to claim the right to the city [...] is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way' [9].

The 'right to the city', the realisation of an inclusive city – in opposition to the processes underway, witness to an increase in the expulsion of society from urban space, increasingly more the exclusive arena of a very restricted economic class – translates into the right to the 'production of space' as an arena of political action and a source of identity for local communities.

An inclusive city is possible only if we begin by guaranteeing urban communities a level of control over how and for whom urban space is created.

The city must be assumed to be for a common good; in other words, by aiming at the realisation of cities capable of accepting responsibility for the requirements and needs of all citizens, beginning with the weaker classes; ensuring everyone a home at a price commensurate with their means; guaranteeing everyone accessibility to the workplace and collective services.

Choosing this path means working towards social integration at different levels of co-operation, a capacity to establish associations and an internal reorganisation aimed at democratically constructing and managing the governance of all things *common*. Sennet also considered this ability to integrate, to reacquire the capacity to collaborate, in the near future [10].

Only through a renewed relationship between power and society is it possible to create a city intended as a common good; a space capable of providing responses to the requirements, needs and aspirations of all citizens. As part of this dialectic relationship, the culture and practice of architecture must accept an ethical role that overcomes the simple legal transcription of the dynamics unfolding; it must become an act of critical analysis, an ability to make useful proposals and attempt to bridge the gap between local and global, between the desirable and reality, between utopia and dystopia.

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