Designing public space for sustainability: lessons from historical perspectives

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Abstract

High standards of urban design are believed to be important for sustainable and lively environments. When urban areas fall into disrepair the amenity of such areas decline. Quality of life is eroded, which leads people to move out. In response, many countries produce design guidelines. However, how good urban design can be evaluated and how planning, politics and design of public spaces interface, is a not well investigated area.

Building on historical examples, this paper explores the interaction between politics, planning process and the design of public spaces from a designer’s perspective. The issues of sustainability and "good" urban design will be focused on and how spatial design influences human behaviour. Awareness of these relationships seems to have diminished during the last two centuries in design practice. For brevity, these relationships will be exemplified by discussing two historic examples of public squares - Piazza del Campo (Siena, Italy) and Place Vendome (Paris, France). Both squares are well known within the urban design community and are commonly regarded as being good urban design. The two plazas are chosen as they were built in different centuries under different political backgrounds. The connections between the political agenda and resulting spatial design of both squares will be discussed. It will be highlighted how people in historic times used the squares and how, until today, design determines how people use these squares, although the underlying political and social situations are different. Issues will be shown that need to be considered in the current urban design debate which is ongoing in political and professional circles.
1 Introduction

Designing public spaces has emerged as a major need in current planning directives. It seems that well designed environments play a major role in the process of delivering safe and well maintained neighbourhoods. To design public spaces of a high standard is widely accepted to be a major drive to achieve high quality places and as a result attract people to live and work in an area [1], [2]. This is important especially in regions with more neglected neighbourhoods. In such areas it will be essential to create lively places also to meet the criteria of sustainability. Nowadays it is widely accepted that well designed environments will help to achieve sustainable areas. Consequently, the importance of design for planning issues have been recognised. Good design is considered as a vehicle to transport and realises demands for sustainability and cultural identity. However, it is not always clear how good design, meeting the above mentioned criteria, is judged and can be formalised in as much as planning can benefit from general guidelines.

The objective of this paper is to highlight and discuss the design of public space at the interface of planning issues and design principles from the perspective of a designer. For brevity we can not review all the theory of design and must refer the reader to [3], [4]. The focus of the paper is to understand issues of sustainability and to take on a historical perspective of places which are well known in the design community and said to be beautiful. In particular we will look at the squares Campo di Siena, Italy, and Place Vendôme, Paris, France. The two squares originate from quite a different political background, a rather democratic perspective from the 13th century and an absolutist one four centuries later. The squares were taken from a larger sets of examples, but are chosen since they are instructive. Firstly the design will be described, secondly how planning was accomplished and impacted the design, We will compare the political demands and the impacts on the design and how the adaptability for future generations is implicated. Finally, the universality of the principles will be shown and suggested how we can delineate some general principles for the design and planning of public open space.

2 Achieving good urban design

People seem to be attracted by nicely designed environments. This fact is well known in the design and planning community, but also in governments in most European countries. For example, the current UK government sees urban design as one of the key issues to achieve the so called “Urban Renaissance” [5]. Bringing back life to urban areas plays the key-role in the aim of the government to achieve a sustainable and resource-saving environment: 4 million additional houses will be needed in the next decades, and some 60% should be built on brownlands rather than greenfields. It is believed that, if the mission fails, major ecological problems will occur, such as air pollution, increase of private transport, etc. [6]. Since there are so many derelict and under used spaces in English cities and towns, the major-
ity of the new households can be accommodated within existing urban fabric. People should be attracted and brought back to urban areas. Good design for both architecture and public open space is therefore one of the key issues of many guidelines and statements [7], [8].

Although high quality design is stated to be important, it is not so clear how to evaluate good design. Therefore many definitions are given: Urban Design is “... primarily concerned with the quality of the urban public realm – both social and physical – and the making of places for people to enjoy and respect” [9] or “... is the art of making places for people” [10]. Carefully designed spaces are necessary for a lively and safe environment. Good design is also stated to be important to bring run down and neglected places back to life [5]. In all documents and guidelines produced, design is viewed as very important in terms of delivering sustainable areas. But it is left open what good design can be and what government and city councils in the end want to achieve. Too often urban design is discussed in terms of aesthetic aspects. However, in history, there has been obviously a more direct impact of political issues on design.

One problem appears that the community of urban designers, populated by architects, designers, planners and politicians have little mutual appreciation about the direct input of political will and outcome of a particular design and vice versa. In historic times this appeared different: political leaders and their consultants, and as a result planners and architects, seemed to have been aware of the fact that a certain layout of public space influences people in their behaviour. Sometimes it was clearly the aim of governments to influence inferiors, often enough to underpin their own form of government. This knowledge was not limited to Europe, in many other civilisations and cultures people seemed to know about the relation between a particular layout of public open space on one hand and the resulting social pattern on the other. “Town planning” was therefore a delicate job and often it was the holy duty of priests and augurs to design new settlements. A successful layout design for a new settlement was believed to be the key issue for a future prosperous society [11].

Nowadays awareness of this relationship seems to have disappeared. Broadly speaking, urban designers try to deliver good quality design, but pay little attention to the interplay of the particular layout of a site and the resulting social constraints. In academic discourse of town planning and design theory these aspects are not highlighted either. Although many publications that deal with historical aspects of city and town planning [12], [13] describe the relationship, it is often only a side aspect in a wider perspective of the research. Ethnology has provided us with detailed knowledge about how and why non-European vernacular tribes designed village layouts [14], [15]. But the outcome of this research has not been applied to planning and design in European cities and towns. The knowledge about the relationship between spatial layout and political impact has probably been lost over the centuries. The reason for this development is discussed elsewhere [16]. Here we only can state that contemporary planning practice and current planning- and design guidelines pay little attention to this relationship, not only in UK but also in other European countries.
In current guidelines from city councils and government it is stated that designers shall create lively and attractive places that meet the demands of a sustainable environment. As mentioned above, good design is achieved when a place attracts people and helps in creating a sustainable environment. In this context sustainability has to be seen in the long term use of public open space by people for a wide range of activities. As a result, public realms mean that they are accessible to all citizens and designed for all groups [17]. Well designed public spaces will support the interaction of people from various origins with various backgrounds and cultures. A sustainable environment will meet these demands as long as possible. The latter point in particular is difficult, since demands and requirements of political issues change over time, i.e. with politics. (In this contribution we cannot discuss the term public in full depth, but resort to its usage in the above mentioned sense.)

One possibility to investigate in the connection between planning issues and design is historic planning input and design ideas. For brevity we can discuss only one aspect of this relationship. For a more comprehensive discussion we refer to other studies [16].

3 The squares

In the following we will discuss the design, planning and political background of two places. Place Vendôme in Paris and Piazza del Campo in Siena were chosen, since they represent two extremes of political background and resulting designs. In both examples it can be easily seen that there is a relationship between social interaction and design and layout of public space. By no means are these two squares the only examples that can be found. Many more examples can be given, but these two are particularly instructive.

3.1 The Piazza del Campo di Siena

In the 13th century, Siena was a flourishing and wealthy city. In this time it became a regional power; in 1260 even Florence and large parts of Tuscany were ruled from Siena. But Siena’s heyday was only short and from the 14th century onwards power faded. From 1557 onwards Siena fell under dominion of Florence.

Nevertheless, for a short period of time, Siena was powerful and flourishing. Therefore, in the 13th century it was decided to unite three adjacent settlements that were spread over the hills and some of the adjacent greenlands. Namely the three parts were Camollia in the north, Città with the Duomo and San Martino [18].

After unification the young city needed a new centre. This centre was to mark geographically its centre. Besides it would be on former greenfields, again to underpin the equality of each part. The new piazza would represent the newly formed city of Siena [19]. It would also be a counterpoint to the existing Piazza del Doumo, since the already existing Piazza was very attractive and widely
known, but represented only one part of the community. Form and design of the
new plaza should therefore represent the new Sienese unit as a whole.

The design of the space should demonstrate this. It was set out in a semi-circle
of approx. 150 x 100 m diameter. On the linear edge the Palazzo Publico, the town
hall and the Torre del Mangia are located. These two buildings are the highest on
the Piazza with a height of 35m. This is the lowest area of the square, compared
to the opposite side of the square, which is approx. 5 m higher. All other sides of
the piazza are enclosed by the private palazzi of the so called “nine noble fami-
lies” of Siena. The Palazzi are of various heights but the tallest are approximately
25m high. Between the palazzi there are narrow streets and paths leading from the
city. Some of the paths are covered with archways, so they appear only as small
gaps between the buildings. Several buildings have balconies and although there
were planning regulations for the outlook of the facades there is still variety.
Ground floors are on street level and set out to host cafes and restaurants. The cen-
tre of the square is a free open space with only the Fonte Gaia, a fountain, on the
highest point of the square. Bollards divide the place into an inner field and a sur-
rounding approx. 15 m wide outer ring. The pavement of the central remaining
area is divided into nine triangular parts, arranged in a star pattern, which again
stands for the nine noble families.

Figure 1: View and ground plan of Piazza del Campo, Siena

Looking at the space design of the Campo, it is obvious that this was designed
to symbolise the Sienese society [20]: the town hall facing the palazzi of the noble
families, the arrangement of the pavement, and finally the sloping situation are the
symbols that show what the new Siena was meant to be. To underpin the new uni-
fication, the Sienese people developed a certain festival: the palio, a horse race set
out annually. A festivity for Sienese people was not confined to Siena, since many
other cities at that time celebrated equal ones, like the Florentine game of football
or the bridge game in Pisa or even the Spanish bullfight have similar backgrounds
[21]. All these festivals were made to celebrate the unity of a certain community.
Obviously it was important to celebrate them on the main central square. It is
therefore not surprising that the Campo is also designed for the palio: the semi-
circular form of the square, the bollards that separate a circular road from an inner
area. Finally, the ground floor area of the palazzi are well prepared to attach stands
for audiences. So we can conclude that form follows function. The function at the Campo is to symbolise and represent Sienese citizens.

3.2 The Place Vendôme in Paris

Planning philosophy was totally different when Place Vendôme was being designed. In 1685, the height of the reign of Louis XIV, the king decided to build a new royal square in the capital. It should be more triumphal and magnificent in its appearance than all other squares in Paris, it should even be more magnificent than the Place Royale, better known as Place Vosges. The site is close to the king’s palace, the Louvre. Originally, the square should accommodate the royal library, the mint and the royal academicians. Furthermore, accommodation for high dignitaries should be provided. The original plan was to have a place to celebrate royal festivals. Work started shortly after and by 1691 a giant continuous facade with ionic order on the top of the arcades was finished on three sides. In the centre of the square a statue of Louis XIV was situated. In 1691 construction stopped since defeat in several wars diminished the king’s enthusiasm for big celebration squares. The statue had to be removed immediately and it was his wish to extinguish all memories that were associated with the square. Later, some supporters of the square would make the king change his mind and he finally agreed to continue the work. Even his statue could be displayed again, but only if the site was reconstructed totally. The new square should be a residential one which belonged to private investors and not any more to the crown [22].

Figure 2: View and ground plan of Place Vendôme, Paris

Shortly after, a scheme for the square was made by the new superintendent of Royal Building Works, Jules Hardous-Mansart. He and his collaborators designed the square and the adjacent buildings in order to attract investors. The plaza’s measurements were smaller than the original, and therefore freed more space for private housing. The place has a rectangular shape of approx. 140 x 125 m and with canted corners. A wide road of approx. 25 m divides the site into two halves. Since there are no other paths or gaps between the town houses they
appear as two major u-shaped fronts on either side of the street. Since all houses have the same façade and there is no division between them, they appear as two large buildings rather than a series of private houses. The façades are approximately 18 m high and have three levels. Additional floor space is provided under the roofs. The centres of each side as well as the corners are designed in the manner of Greek doric temples, all other parts repeat an array of doric columns on top of pseudo arcades. In the centre of the square originally the monument of the king was displayed, later on to be replaced by a statue of Napoleon and then by a Roman triumphal column.

The place was to be an enclosed semi-private area that no longer belonged to the urban fabric. Mansart wanted to create a space that retreated from the public realm and would serve a domestic use. Consequently the design follows these aims. The buildings appear as two major blocks that allow no interruption in a continuous repeat of Greek doric order [22].

4 Comparison of the design messages

The Campo de Siena was designed for people. It was designed to hold people in the space for some time. It should attract people. People should go there to see the symbol of their community. If they would not go there, the symbol of the new unity would not permanently demonstrate the structure of the society. To support this the Palio helps people in remembering their space. By celebrating this festivity, people at least once a year would come to the central space and find the symbol of their community. The campo was designed to act as a centre and a symbol for a community. It should show people by design what the social order of new Siena looked alike.

This was different to the design ideas of Place Vendôme. Public life should definitely be excluded from the area. Space was precious in Paris and therefore almost all houses of the bourgeoisie had shops or studios in the ground floor areas. This had basic economic reasons, but in the end helped to crowd the space during the day. Looking at the façades of Place Vendôme, it is seen that there are no shop fronts in this area. It was the planning will of Mansart not to include these. It was a sign of nobility and prosperity to "waste" so much space. Mansart therefore designed a space that withdrew the public life from the square to provide some quiet semi-private space for very rich and non-bourgeois people. Place Vendôme is therefore, by its concept, a space that was never meant to be a lively city square in our understanding. Place Vendôme should be a representative semi-private realm. It should be a quiet island in the overcrowded and loud medieval urban fabric of Paris. It should be exclusive [22].

Place Vendôme is still a very exclusive space and one of the first addresses in Paris. It appears even today as a quiet area that withdraws from the busy urban fabric. Until now active shop fronts, cafés of restaurants with some outdoor facilities could not be installed. Place Vendôme was never a lively plaza and probably will never be one.
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The design background of the Piazza del Campo is apparent today as well. It is still a lively square with lots of shops, restaurants and cafes. People still like to visit the square and like to stop there for a long time. The Palio is still celebrated every year and helps Siena’s inhabitants to identify with the place.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the original ideas behind the design cannot be ignored and influence people’s activities. Place Vendôme will probably never be a lively square that attracts people to spend some time there, and on the other hand, it might be hard to withdraw Piazza del Campo from the public realm.

5 Heritage and reusing historic places

If we are to understand sustainability not as conservation of existing structures of the public realm but as a logical adaptation to new ones we must learn to reflect upon the interplay of design and planning from a historical perspective. In that respect heritage can be understood as a way of adapting meaningful places to modern requirements rather than a folkloristic reflection on something we have little feeling of identity with. Here we may draw some conclusions, some of which appear quite intuitively clear while others seem to demand measures which are rather difficult to realise.

First of all we must become aware of that layout of public open space is long lasting, sometimes for centuries or even millennia. A once set-out street can be in its place for several hundred years. Some of the ancient Roman streets are still in use, or street patterns in cities and towns are still the same as they were once designed when the settlement was founded. Streets and public spaces in many cities, like Strasbourg and Rome, but also in Siena or Paris are still there and have not changed too much. This fact is probably well known. But too often we forget that public space is not only space, it is built in a certain way under certain planning strategies and political will. Therefore, not only open space is left from previous centuries, it is also a layout with a particular message that might be transported into our time. So public open space exists often longer than a political system under which the space was designed.

Secondly we have to understand that there is an interplay between the political situation and the layout of space. When the political situation changes public space often is unchanged and still represents a previous ideology. Public space may have a different meaning. There was a particular meaning when Place Vendôme was designed and a totally different one when the Campo was set out. Although in both cities a democratic system was established, the plazas still represent the particular social and political context of the time they were designed.

Next, pastiche reflections are not always useful when an old space needs to be adopted. We also have to understand the interplay between political will, planning backgrounds and resulting design if we have to build new open spaces that meet the criteria of sustainability.

Finally, the definition of public space needs to be reformulated. Both places, the Place Vendôme and the Piazza del Campo are public open spaces – at least at present – but their implications were quite different. Place Vendôme was a space
made only for a small group of rich financiers that wanted to withdraw the place from the urban fabric and use it as a buffer between the private realm and the outer urban fabric. Besides, the prosperity of the owners should be displayed. This was realised not only by using quality materials and displaying the king’s statue, but also by designing the ground floor area of the place in a way that withdrew from the public. This waste of space was seen as a sign of being very rich. The Piazza del Campo, on the other hand, was the meeting space for Sienese inhabitants to demonstrate that they had formed a new single corporate unit, despite of their long standing separation into three villages.

6 Lessons for designing public spaces

This work has focused on the design of public space in the context of planning under a certain political conditions. The aim of this work, which is embedded into a wider context of a research theme on public spaces at the interface of public and private lines, raises the following issues.

Firstly, that good design can contribute to sustainability and to the success of public open space, but awareness must be raised that designing public spaces can be a political statement in itself. Design is therefore more than the physical outlook of an environment. Accordingly, attempts to maintain established structures like a museum instead of adding a contemporary layer that is grounded on actual political statements reflect our social self apprehension and can be interpreted as a reluctance to deal with such reflections. In this respect heritage issues might clash with the needs of lively public spaces, and the way we use them nowadays. It might become difficult when the past political input to an open space is too different from our modern democratic view of what and how to use public open spaces. We have to be very sensitive when we deal with historic sites. The background seems to be as important to look at as the spatial layout itself.

Secondly, knowledge about the interplay between political structure, planning formulation and physical design is also important to look at when a new space is to be designed. Design can influence people’s behaviour and in turn seems to be one of the key factors in terms of how lively a proposed space will be. Consequently, design should be evaluated by its input to human behaviour.

References

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