Urban public space
design: unwise design
and social exclusion

Michail Galanakis

PREFACE
The discussion that follows is part of my Doctor of Arts research project and is complimentary to the multimedia presentation for the 5th TECHNE design conference.

The aim is to familiarize the reader with this particular field of study and to my main line of thought, which then will prepare the viewer for the final multimedia presentation that will take place at the conference.

The actual presentation will consist of a filmic production, using Multimedia Director software, to visualize ideas and problems addressed in this paper; and a short oral introduction in reference to the links between the visual and the written productions and the reasoning of such an attempt.

ABSTRACT
What this paper builds on is a cognitive and epistemic understanding of the preconceived notions the experts of design have, concerning equality in and of public space.

We tend to think of the Western urban milieus as multicultural, this is inevitably accepted, not planned or accounted for, when designing the common ground where people carry out functional and ritual activities that give a sense of community.

As an architect, I feel the necessity to investigate and reason for the involuntary or voluntary absence of various groups of urbans from public space. I call urbans the residents, the homeless, the tourists and all these categories of people who use and/or abuse a city.

For my chosen line of thought, scholars like Lefebvre and Sennett present an intriguing framework for study.

During the conference, I intend to use a Multimedia Director digital presentation (filmic) to communicate my ideas of public living in multicultural urban environments in cities of the North and South of Europe. The aim is to address critical questions based on ethno-methodological observation of the claims various urbans make for public space.

INTRODUCTION
In this paper I will address issues and develop a discussion on the design of urban public spaces in western cities. I will elaborate on the problem of social exclusion in the multicultural city and designers’ abilities to correspond to the challenges of re-conceptualizing urban public spaces.
The problem at hand and the approach are characterized by a multidisciplinarity and a weakness in this sense to capture all relevant parameters and aspects. The reference to sociology is evident and, as it may be clear to the reader, it is where I turn to for inspiration, analytical tools and resources. I investigate, borrow and rest at this stage a lot on social ecology, visual sociology, ethnography, and anthropology and less on design disciplines. My ontological position takes me out of the framework of design per se, helping me re-frame the role of design. This may sound unwise coming from an architect, but as I hope the reader will understand, I am in favour of various interdisciplinary displacements.

Public space in the urban context is the common ground where people carry out functional and ritual activities, giving a sense of community. My urban context consists of metropolitan areas of the West.

My starting point is the question: What is meaningful public space? I have framed that question by concentrating on aspects of segregation – of inclusion and exclusion of people. My future research aims to further investigate how these social issues translate themselves into design issues.

Scholars like Gallagher, Sennett, Harvey, Baeten, Fraser, Lefebvre present an intriguing framework for study. Consequently, I also choose to build my line of thought on some of their ideas. My choice is partly conscious and partly instinctive, the reasons will become evident later on. The influences of Henri Lefebvre and Richard Sennett will be visible.

My working hypothesis is: Can public space be understood as the meeting place of the unexpected - in contemporary multicultural democracies a place for all users? Furthermore, is segregation at issue not for its existence, but for its positive and/or negative outcomes?

BACKGROUND

MULTICULTURAL CITIES. HELSINKI PARADIGM

In his article on unequal cities, Guy Baeten speaks of city’s segregation seen as something not necessarily bad. It has been evident that isolating groups of city inhabitants, divides the physical as well as the social structure of a city, since it does not encourage people to understand each other. This explains the anti-segregating policies of some cities (like Helsinki) concerning ethnic minorities and immigrants.

On the other hand, there are groups that in their effort to preserve cultural cohesion and a sense of identity segregate voluntarily. (Guy Baeten 2001, p.65)

I refer to all the groups of people that live segregated lives in disaggregated environments close together, and the social classes and minorities who mix but don’t socialize. All the groups of people include us all, since most of us may feel, have felt or will feel like a minority sometime, somewhere.

Nowadays it’s becoming more and more of a reality that urban societies attain multicultural qualities; it also seems inevitable. It is this multicultural city that designers have been trying to shape according to values and stereotypes. Richard Sennett, when talking about NY’s Battery Park City and Roosevelt Island, makes a point on this unifying and homogenizing process for urban civility. Communities like these have been planned on integrating uses, in order to include difference within a logical fashion, thus tidying up urban life. The visionaries of these solutions have not left space enough for the urbans to lead their lives and arrange their environments according to a mutual understanding of each other. (Sennett 1991, p.193) Communities like these show how the intentions of the planners blind them to a truth Sennett likes to attribute to novelists, ‘...you cannot begin something significant by creating immediate fullness.’ (Sennett 1991, p.196)
In other words, instead of designing stereotypes and “closed ended” spaces, one may do better by providing the tools and the freedom for groups to unroll their own stories and live their lives to the fullest unfolding their selves. The common planning approach is one of avoiding potential clashes, but it is also one that bases itself on those clashes as self-embedded and unquestionable. According to this way of thinking, aggregating diverse groups of urbans together does not guarantee the necessary bonds to eliminate the social gaps that might be the source for troubles, and create a sense of community. This idea of community, which rests on shared values and solidarity, is more difficult to realize within ethnically and economically mixed groups. (Gallagher 1993) Accepting the above as an inherent reality, instead of a questionable construction, leads us among others, into designing according to selective models of including and excluding groups of urbans.

PARADIGM (A) HELSINKI
Segregation is at issue not for its existence but for its positive and negative outcomes. The city experts and politicians develop mechanisms of excluding diversity from the urban realm.

In Finland, where I conduct my doctoral studies, participatory policies on urban development have been legislated in order to avoid clashes with the public, while segregation has been diminished by state's policy to scatter immigrants of various ethnic groups all around the country; however, as soon as they can they often try to move to areas where there are at least some compatriots. As a result there are no obvious dense ethnic communities spatially present in Helsinki. This anti-segregation strategy produces safe homogenized urban milieus. In Helsinki according to Anne Haila (1999: 13) ‘Previously, city planning was left for democratically elected representatives. The new Building Act improves city residents’ opportunities to exercise influence. In fact, residents are very interested in what is going on in their environment. Increasing residents’ influence may, however, lead to a situation where the real decision-makers are strong lobbies and elites, not the man in the street.’ At this point we face the problem of actors’ interests in the urban public realm. Does this acclaimed mass democracy give the right for equal voice to all city residents; who should have this right and who has been a resident in Finland long enough, or acquired enough Finnish cultural identity, to deserve this right?
In Helsinki one of the most obvious ethnic minorities are the Somalis.

Hearing about ‘Little Mogadishu’ in Helsinki I visited the area on few occasions during which the name turned out to be an euphemism, for the seekers of traditional Finnishness, or an epithet for the seekers of multiculturalism, simply because there is nothing even close to a revival of the ethnic Somalian character. This idea of a ‘dense’ ethnic group in Helsinki is still very vague, also because of the relatively low number of immigrants. It would be interesting to find out what would make the Somalis more accepted as a group with a distinct cultural identity, and whether the Somalis themselves feel the need for this to occur.

In a relatively small European capital like Helsinki, one would expect that the diverse groups of people would have a public face and would be spatially present.
This happens in most capitals and it is considered as a sign of open-minded policies and a welcome spirit. My experience with Helsinki is that this does not happen. Either the city does not allow it or the groups themselves are quite satisfied being “faceless”.

In this context Sennett draws our attention to an important point.

Sennett says: ‘Our society is subject to enormously varied and complex stimuli in economic, political, and erotic life. Yet both the codes of inwardness and unity, which have shaped our culture, make it difficult to cope with the facts of diversity. We have troubles understanding the experience of difference as a positive human value.’ (Sennett 1991: 97)

**EXPERTS AND UNWISE DESIGN**

It seems to me, that human diversity in a way is beyond the repertoire of human design, the visual designer has problems in exactly that, visualising how different or not so different races could be mixed in public spaces, and how to support this mixing in order for it to work well.

Interpreting the ideas of most of the above scholars, it becomes evident how complex most urban design is, no matter how hard we try to simplify, categorize and “dissect” urban fabric. It becomes more and more evident that issues of urban public space design need to be thought through, or better rediscovered.

It means interpreting the public space as “open ended”, perhaps like Nancy Fraser suggests, “as complex and varied public spheres of activity that indeed include some groups, but exclude others.” (Fraser 1990, as cited in Understanding Cities 1999: 113)

Her “subaltern counter-publics” are real but also figurative spaces in which excluded groups could express their needs. It would be challenging to discover such spaces in our cities and research their qualities, in order to conceptualize and offer them as alternatives for public use and urban culture.

Often, in order to make sense when talking about urban conditions, most of us use dystopian metaphors like poverty, polarization, exclusion or underclass. (Baeten 2001, p.56) It is my hope, concerning equality in and of public space, that we could understand the conventions, prejudices, the experts of design architecture, urban planning and city management have, in a cognitive and epistemic way.

A narrative shift has been taking place, from the cause of a problematic situation to the effects of this situation. This phenomenon is not new and by mere observation indeed it seems well established in the political history, so’ “for instance instead of focusing on poverty we focus more and more on the poor“ ’ (Mignione 1996, p. 58 cited in Baeten 2001)

There is a need to explore public space design and managing alternatives for preventing urbans’ individual and common
suffering. In advanced societies one would expect that the equilibrium between relations of alliance would do well under control, while in less advanced societies one would expect that the balance between the relations of power would prevail thus creating clashes difficult to control. However, these associations of power are more fragile than we would like to think and mostly at stake; it only takes a good reason and regardless of where, when and how, a deregulation can occur (ex: urban riots even wars). Whenever relations of power take over relations of alliance, when what I believe is more important than what you believe, when the rhythms of the other make impossible the rhythms of the individual, then a crisis is building up, and consequently individual and common suffering is likely to occur. (Lefebvre & Regulier 1986, p. 239 cited in Kofman & Lebas 1996)

Usually differences among people are perceived as something threatening, rather than stimulating and consequently we try to wall them off. Instead, differences should be regarded as means to navigate our life within a discoursive context.
DISCUSSION

CITY, EXPERTS AND UNWISE DESIGN
Some of today’s designers seem to plan “peaceful” settings without contradiction or conflict. Holston argues that they presume a rational future where the imagined and the existing society, share no conflict or violence, since their final plan dissolves any contradiction as well as any potential for any conflict to occur. This is a scenario far from the social life and its characteristics of conflict, ambiguity and indeterminacy, as planners fail to consider the unintended and the unexpected as part of the whole model. (Holston 1995, p. 57 cited in Baeten 2001)

Because of their fear of differences among urbans as a cause for conflicts (maybe even violent ones), designers plan with hardly any understanding as to how these confrontations can be expressed without violence, in the urban public realm. I believe that this causes the creation of frustrating hard borderlines, we all have to negotiate in our cities.

One might argue that I involve a lot of negative criticism concerning experts’ role. On the contrary this is an effort to call upon the planners/experts’ abilities to contribute to the well-being of urbans, and accordingly understand how they could introduce rather than reproduce urban settings for all urbans to coexist in.

Sennett writes ‘You build neutrality in order to legitimize withdrawal.’(1991, p. 65)

As seen before, the widespread policy concerning city experts, is to create public spaces neutral, “free” of strong design gestures, so that the urbans can appropriate “their” righteous space. The intention of this approach seems to be good and worth praising. Nevertheless, what became clear to me from a few interviews I conducted with experts in Athens, Barcelona and Helsinki, was that city experts often have conflicting feelings as to what degree they should allow urbans to appropriate public space? What kind of involvement should the urbans be entitled to have concerning the decision making for the fate of urban public spaces?

PARADIGM A: HELSINKI
In Finland, my experience of civic involvement in a culturally diverse urban setting is instead, that of institutionalisation and homogeneity. On the societal level I see a pursuit of safety that indeed works. Safe, conflict free urban environments of a welfare state, based on contractual rather than ritual form of associations, as Lefebvre has said. The legacy of the welfare state, where the common good is of primary significance, is historically recent and although it is fading away due to public-private partnerships in city development projects, it still has a strong impact on Finnish cultural identity. Since 1917 the newly established Finnish state strived for welfare and high conditions of living. Today with less belief in the state, Finns are facing the challenges of globalization and ethnic minorities consist a potential fiscal strain, as well as a cultural stain.
PARADIGM B: ATHENS
The Olympic games of 2004 will take place in Athens. Massive development projects are on the way. The urban conditions of the city of Athens will be largely altered. Urban planning that doesn’t involve people may create clashes and may discriminate urbans.

Unfortunately xenophobia can bring discrimination into the foreground as well as vice versa. The milieu in Athens is and is going to be more and more xenophobic, although there are voices of concern about a nation whose majority is uneasy with its foreign residents. The EU spring 2000 Euro barometer survey showed that 38% of Greeks are disturbed by the presence of foreigners in Greece (the highest rate in EU countries). Also a spring 1999 survey carried out by the state National Centre for Social Research showed that the parents and the teachers of 47%-54% of junior high and senior high school pupils, were xenophobic. (IHF Report 2001)

PARADIGM A+B
It is Nordic societies that we people of the South often look up to, in these, communities were guaranteed as such by oaths, pacts, charters and reciprocal good faith, so that every man’s action was at the same time civic and political. In the North, these contractual forms of alliances, according to Lefebvre, tend to be more restrictive, disembodied and abstract.

In Southern Europe social relations tend to be based on unspoken as well as on explicit alliances even such as clans, mafias, clientelism. (Lefebvre and Régulier1986, p. 233-234 cited in Koffman & Lebas 1996)

Probably more in the South than in the North, public spaces take a life of their own, through urbans’ actions and interactions and through time, not to mention for climatic circumstances. Some public spaces become our favourites, some we associate ourselves with, and this creating of spatial history seems to be far from the designers’ reach.
WISE DESIGN

The public space issue is, according to Sennett, an issue of weak boundaries. Places get character by time, when the places are used not as they were meant to be. (Sennett 1991, p.196) The people who engage in this anticipated use have psychological, emotional and even physical associations with the place. For them space begins to “tell” stories, it becomes narrative. Narrative spaces are mainly designless, or can be designed spaces with unpredictable potential. This could be possible as long as the planners design loose borders rather than hard limits. In other words, flexible places that allow for multiple uses, not places of inertia.

We experts can provide spatial flexibility not necessarily by scraping off complexity, re-editing is another concept we might borrow and appropriate, in order to re-edit new stages for new complexities to evolve.

In order to humanize cities, Sennett believes in ‘overlaying differences rather than segmenting them’, while an ‘acceptance of impermanence, chance and incompleteness’ might prove handy. (Sennett 1991, p. 202)

These ideas transcend a frustration. At the same time as being exposed in the city can cause frustration; this very same feeling planners strive to substitute with urban comfort. Pragmatists and most experts would probably find such a discourse futile, as it only evokes questions and doubts and theorizes on issues with fundamental, practical impact on our everyday life. I hope we at least agree that there is more to be discovered and debated concerning our living environments. I also hope that interdisciplinary approaches of analysis and problem solution will be established more by practitioners and not only by theoreticians. I will only refer to the potential role of social ecology in a discourse like the one I am attempting. The problem analysis of public space design and social exclusion could benefit from the empirical knowledge and analysis that social ecology provides concerning the competition of different groups for living space.

In addition to social ecology, I would like to bring in the potential role of visual sociology with the redefinition of photography as a principal research tool.

I hope expert designers, architects, planners can build upon our comprehension of urban confrontations, as being exposed in public space challenges our limits and causes confrontation that could serve the purpose of stimulating awareness and inquiry. We would eventually have to become good storytellers, train and practice our narrative skills, concerning the space we live in and the spaces we design for all in order to unfold our public face.
Narrative space seems to permit and resist, and this element I find as intriguing and challenging, as it seems in practice forever accidental and circumstantial.

“...the productive experience of complexity doesn’t just happen in a city but needs to be organized as an unfolding experience, much as the complexities of a novel are unfolded. There must be a displacement across a border for the exposure to difference to begin, as in a compelling narrative, and then there must be blockage and frustration to give the movement meaning...” (Sennett 1991, p. 213)

Designers probably need to encounter their shortcomings as professionals, they need to destabilize their authority in order to reedit the meaning of their contribution to societies in general and to the well-being of urbans in particular. We might need a displacement in order to become wiser.

Antwerp, 1997

Helsinki, 2002 summer event “reclaim the streets”
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ARTICLE WITHIN A JOURNAL

INTERNET SOURCES

ON LINE PAPERS
SHORT BIOGRAPHY
Date of birth: 12th November 1969
Place: Chania, Crete, Greece

STUDIES OF ACADEMIC AND UNIVERSITY LEVEL:
August 2001:
Registered DA student at the Dep. of Furniture and Spatial Design at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, Finland
1996-1998:
Master of Arts in the field of Applied Industrial Design Research, The Design Academy Eindhoven, The Netherlands
1989-1995:
Bachelor in Architecture at Aristotle's University Thessaloniki, Greece

SIGNIFICANT ACADEMIC AND UNIVERSITY PROJECTS
* Diploma project in Architecture Linked Images. Design of a prototype underground metro station, within an imaginary urban landscape.
* Two Erasmus programs for Urban Design, in Porto Portugal and in Barcelona Spain.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS
July 2002-April 2003:
CIMO Fellowship grant, FI
August 2001-May 2002:
Scholarship by Basil and Eliza Goulandry Foundation, GR
1996-1998:
Full scholarship by the Foundation of Greek State's Scholarships, GR
1997:
Grant by IKEA Foundation, NL

WORK EXPERIENCE
2002:
Tutor at an interdisciplinary intensive course for Master students of UIAH
1989-2001:
Free-lance Architect in Thessaloniki and Chania, Greece
1997:
Guest lecturer at conference organised by Arnhem School of Art, NL
1996:
Participant in the redesign of Thessaloniki (GR) International Trade Fair area (realized project-published)

CONTACT INFORMATION
Address Kaskilaaksontie 3B, 31, 02360, Espoo, Finland
Tel. +00 40 555 0 168 FIN (GSM)
E-mail: mgalanak@uiah.com