

Reintroducing the Existential Dimension of the Public Square:
An attempt to design a place in relation to its natural environment

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Abstract

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A public square provides for a social cultural life to take place. The square ought to be located in the part of the city where human activities are the most intense. The edges of the square consist of the buildings that define its space. The architectural style of these buildings shapes the character of the square and embodies the social cultural circumstances of a society.

The experience of a public square goes beyond its structured aspects. In fact, each man-made place is located within a natural landscape that changes its appearances during the rhythm of the day and the seasons. It is the combination of the natural phenomena and the architecture that creates the atmosphere of a place. A total integration between these two elements constitutes the “spirit of place” or *genius loci*.

According to Heidegger, human settlement has an enclosure and any enclosure has a boundary. This is also true for the square, the boundary of which is formed by its surrounding buildings. However, this boundary is not continuous, as it is interrupted by pedestrian paths and streets that lead to the square. The quality of a square’s enclosure is related to the characteristic of the openings.

The aim of this design thesis is to conceive a public square for today’s social-cultural environment; a public square that is located within a cultural center at Shirlington, Arlington County, VA. The buildings of the center form an architectural unity that sets the stage for community events to take place. The articulation and the form of the buildings related to the natural environment make people feel that they were designed for them. This means a place where people can experience a strong feeling of location.

Preface

The motivation for this thesis is to design a meaningful public square. Today, most public squares are designed on leftover land away from human activities. As a result, these places no longer foster social life. In the past, public squares such as the *agora*, the Roman *forum*, and the Renaissance square were located in the center of a town where human activities were the most intense. The square was surrounded by the most beautiful buildings of the town, and the shape of the place received meaning by being designed particularly for celebrating a special event, mostly political or religious in nature. Besides the special event, the public square was an important place for everyday encounters; in fact it was the heart of the city.

Throughout history, we can see that the design characteristics of public squares reflect the period in which they were built. Each period is marked by its own social cultural circumstances, which are embodied in its architecture. The social cultural context of today is certainly different from those of the past, but people still enjoy social gatherings and to be seen in public. In fact, art and cultural centers are meaningful places that provide man with a sense of identity. Designing great public squares has always been a challenge for urban designers of the past, as well as for those of today.

During the design process, I realized that my design approach of a “meaningful” place mainly addressed the functional aspects of the public square, which were the enclosure, the oval floor shape to accommodate the Fourth of July parade, the historical components, and the openings to access the square. However, the cardinal directions, which provides a sense of orientation, the experience of a “meaningful” public square seemed to me somewhat incomplete.

Between the defense of my thesis and the writing of the book, I had the opportunity to spend the fall semester in Paris. It was there, when I was visiting and revisiting the historical parts of the city, that I observed that each place had its own unique atmosphere—but how to interpret the “atmosphere” of a place? Norberg-Schulz in his study of place, *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*, suggests that the “atmosphere” of a place is the combination of the man-made place and the natural place; the total integration of these two elements constitute the “*genius loci*”.

To complete my study on designing a “meaningful” public square, I included in the book a site analysis which identifies the local natural forces.

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