What Does the Street Have? Dimensions of a Creative Habitat

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Abstract

This article identifies six defining approaches to the creative street: the urban, political, artistic, symbolic, technological and atmospheric dimensions, introduced through their motivations, their narratives and their examples, all of them linked to the performing arts.

Paraules clau: public space, street, creation, urban planning, policies, arts, new technologies

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The street: try to describe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for.

Georges Pérec

Creation in the public space responds to a language of its own, bare, essential and honest. This is what I have learnt over the years and what I will endeavour to develop here from a theoretical perspective.

I am referring to the consubstantial particularities of all those creative arts and expressions that are expressly developed in the public space. This article identifies six defining approaches to the creative street: the urban, political, artistic, symbolic, technological and atmospheric dimensions, introduced through their motivations, their narratives and their examples, all of them related to the performing arts, given my professional activity.

On the Urban Dimension

Brais Estévez (2010) is a geographer of the critical school of contemporary urban planning. His thesis may be a good starting point to introduce the urban dimension of the creative street: Estévez argues that the public space is a mechanism of multiple and complex relational couplings (also known as big thing), characterised as presenting itself as an agent that can influence towards one direction or conception. In other words, the tangible elements are understood as influencing agents because of their heterogeneous, subjective, complex and non-pacified nature, distanced from the idea of ascetic and abstract receptacle of classical conceptions.

In the same vein, Jordi Borja (2013) defines a vision of urban planning not only as a space of arrangement but mainly as an articulator of parts, an open zone of easy entrance and exit, which, at the same time, is accessible, visible and livened up in the experiential rather than artistic sense of the word. Along with its symbolic and political nature that I will mention later, it is worth noting another characteristic of the urban dimension emphasised by Borja: its physical, differentiated and non-uniform irregularity. Some

artists know it well when they complain about the slight slope of a square or the tree that prevails amidst the public space and that will finally be included in the performance.

These conceptions of urban architecture facilitate the presentation and understanding of some urban particularities of the creative street.

First, the creative street develops in a two-fold dimension; that of the horizontal, classical and radiant level, which can be represented frontally (reproducing the Italian layout of the stage), in semicircle (Greek layout) or in full circle (Roman layout). The horizontal level is not only static but can also be seen in a dynamic or moving state. In any case, its possibilities should be highlighted. However, this does not distance us enough from the physical possibilities of a show in a closed venue, because it is not difficult to have seen with more or fewer limitations an amalgam of productions like those presented in an interior physical venue. This is why it is important to value the dimension of the vertical physical level, more characteristic of the creative street. I am referring to fireworks, vertical dance from belfries, the use of balconies, high level travelling performing figures or cranes with screens that swing up and down with audiovisuals to be seen from the distance.

Second, creation in the public space also responds to the logic of assimilation, in the aforementioned sense of identifying and transforming given urban elements turning them into a scenography. Benches, ground barriers, ramps, streetlamps, walls and endless metal, wood and concrete elements present in the public space (but not obligatorily) can be physical presences that can participate in the creative act. Three clear examples illustrate this assimilation: the crochet guerrillas in the public space that weave trees and columns with wool; the *parkour* (the art of urban displacement) that develops a complex relationship with street furniture, challenging it while making it a necessary ally; or, more specifically, the wonderful show *La visite du sultan des Indes sur son éléphant à voyager dans le temps* (2005), by the French company Royal de Luxe, which began with the forced landing of a spatial vessel that literally scratched the roadway due to the friction between the device and the urban surface.

While the venue responds to logics of rejection of a part of the physical space with the aim of placing the spotlight only on the performing space, the street gives the space a multidimensional and assimilating role, turning it into the protagonist and multiplier of the research into the physical play and the surprise of the senses.

It is also very interesting to introduce the idea of volumes and intensities. In the first case, the creative street develops into an array of exhibition possibilities ranging from an audience of thousands of people to the most intimate closeness. There are street plays conceived for over 5,000 people, but there are also artistic experiences in the street that require maximum intimacy. Complementing the size, we could also speak of the intensity developed, which ranges from the totality of the fire and the noise to the softness of whisper. I am referring to the big differences in size and intensity between, for instance, *Dimonis* (1981), by the company Comediants, with its initiatory ecstasy that has made this show a legend of street arts; *Commandos*

poétiques, by Les Souffleurs, with its poems recited directly into the ear through long wooden pipes in parks of so many European cities; or *Whose are those eyes* (2013), by Macarena Recuerda Shepard, a travelling production in which the audience moves alone through the streets of a city wearing headphones and receiving instructions to discover who is the murderer in an original urban Cluedo.

On the Political Dimension

I would like to summarise the political dimension of the creative street with two verbs that involve direction and presence, such as *to reach* and *to be*. In the end, they are explanatory metaphors that might develop into political metaphors such as who the creation is aimed at in the public space or who the target is.

Creation in the public space is an ideal framework for cultural *reach*. There are probably two good examples to explain the concept of democratisation of culture, so widely used in cultural, political and academic management and so poorly understood by the rest of the population. I always use the same example to explain what a public policy focused on cultural reach is: the construction and implementation of a library to bring the books, love for reading, silence, study and calm knowledge closer to the largest number of people, regardless of their social and gender condition, their country of origin or age. And, moreover, I always use a second example: the holding of a street arts festival.

The creative street is a political (and hopefully non-partisan) tool that contributes to bringing culture closer to the people with a minimum filter. The creative street reaches whoever wants (*I'm interested in this show*), whoever cannot (*culture is expensive*), whoever is not aware but perhaps wants to know (*what are they doing here?*) or whoever does not know and does not want (*another silly thing in the street*). The creative street reaches everybody, from the apostle to the antagonist.

In relation to *being*, we enter the field of participation and feeling part of something. Social cohesion is another characteristic of the public space. Through its ritual strength it fosters an identity sense of physical and metaphysical presence, ensuring the same experience for the new and old citizenship, an experience that at the same time already forms a new extremely inclusive, bare and honest community. In this respect, Senet (2014) argues that the definition of the public space can be explained as the place where two strangers meet.

A way of understanding the need for unitary experience is through the words of Rowan (2016):

> It is important to continue defending the maintenance of a rich cultural system, which is capable of dialoguing and measuring heterogeneous communities, and giving a voice to different agents. A cultural system that can offer the necessary spaces and resources so that the different communities can produce collective narratives, thereby fostering the emergence of shared identities. An

open, traversable and overflowing cultural system, which is not excluding, accessible to young and old people, men, women, trans subjects, non-standardised genders. That it is capable of producing complex discourses but also contributing valuable and significant aesthetic experiences (Rowan, 2016: 37).

Socially speaking, *reaching* and *being* are necessary issues. In this respect, we should take into account the idea of *social intelligence as a function* developed by José Antonio Marina (2010): the author explains that, apart from the individual intelligences characteristic of the biographical brands, we also coexist, think, feel and act in an integrated way with other agents. And herein lies the question: does this integration increase or decrease individual intelligence? Interaction generates a wave of positive or negative dynamism, both in the cognitive field and in artistic creativity. In other words: intelligent societies awaken intelligent and creative thought while stupid societies awaken occurrences that are at least irrelevant.

On the Artistic Dimension

Establishing a parallelism with religion, the street spectators have something of the protestant, understanding this comparison as an approach to the artistic event without the existence of intermediation. The direct link between the individual and creation in the public space generates realities of veracity and authenticity. How does this communion take shape? Through decision-making, such as where, when and, above all, why (why it interests, why it entertains, and why there is no reason). Beyond religious metaphors, it is interesting to identify the fact that in the creative street people enjoy more freedom than in a closed venue, whether in the spatial or intellectual field. When the creative street does not interest me, I leave. When I get bored in a closed venue, I am trapped: I can only (sincere act of resistance) try to sleep in deep silence.

Another particularity in the artistic dimension is the diversity of languages of the creative street. Although I am bound to generalise, I consider that there is something in common in the plurality of creative languages in the public space, probably as a consequence of the idea of *reaching* the audience. The text rarely prevails in the street; in contrast, we are much more used to metaphorical, elementary, dreamful, symbolic, visual, pictorial or gestural languages. And despite not having the textual accompaniment of understanding of stories and plots, the creative street is close and understandable. This is probably due to the fact that we individuals are must more qualified than what the television factories — by way of a random example — might think to interiorise languages whose message directly contacts with our most complex and competent I. Everybody understands a slap better than its explanation, everybody understands a kiss better that its definition. And yet another example: I am convinced that my mum would not stand Pinter, Becket or Maeterlinck, but she usually turns up — never in the first row — and even stays, to see and listen to what the creative street sometimes offers her. And she later tells me. I am interested in knowing why. Why the street

languages can seem attractive to an uneducated woman aged over 65 and from the working class who does not usually consume culture. I think that the answers may be in the depth and strength of the language.

I introduce a final particularity of the creative street in the artistic field, although it also has something of the spatial. I am referring to the creative processes and their bareness and accessibility due to the fact of being in the street. The before, during and after of the artistic moment are diluted in the street. It is not the same in closed spaces, where the dichotomy prevails of lights up / lights down, prior and later noise / silence during the performance; scenographic absence / presence, and so on.

The bare street enables the spectator to relate with the processes. Today we are experiencing a clear will of the artistic world to open infrastructures of creation with the aim of sharing processes with the audience, something that in previous decades did not exist as a focus of interest. The street is an ideal space where, on many occasions, the bareness takes place naturally, whether in the creative field or in the organisational field: everyday life > setting up of infrastructures > rehearsal > performance > dismantling of infrastructures > everyday life.

From 1983 to 1985 the Street Sculpture Fair was held in Tàrrega, the town of my childhood. I will never forget the privilege of experiencing firsthand a sculptural creative process: at the age of six I became deeply obsessed with the fact of being able to see how a sculptor created from scratch a big wooden piece in a small square of the town. Every day, for two weeks, I enjoyed the process of creation of a weird and very tall totem. I spent those afternoons with attentive observations, establishing a friendly relationship with a solitary sculptor which whom I shared some bags of crisps. His name was Ignacio Basallo (1952); I do not know where that sculpture has ended up. I perfectly remember the smell of wood and the coarse and delicate gestures of the sculptor working with chisels and rasps.

On the Symbolic Dimension

A symbol is a representation that turns absence into presence. Culture is the invention of the symbolic capacity through the perception of possibility and impossibility, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, war and peace.

The public space is a subjective and mainly symbolic place. So asserts Bravo (2011) when he argues that the street is not a geometric, Cartesian and objective framework or a physical and tangible continent but it would rather be a political and fragile entity in which consciousness plays a major role. Hence the need to distinguish between the *urbs* as a physical continent and the *civitas* as that which occurs within it and manifests in a heterogeneous way. The public space is a dynamic and unstable flow that spreads out and contracts, gaining and losing strength intermittently. This is the starting point of the symbolic dimension of the street. Valle de los Caídos is not the same as Montserrat, the plaça del Sol in Barcelona as the plaza de las Cortes in Madrid, the plaza del Topete in Cadiz and the Foru Plaza in Guernica. All

these continents, their morphologies and, above all, their representations, have little to do with each other.

Whether the public spaces have personality and depth in everyday life itself, the artistic expression can still act as a multiplier of the symbolic dimension of the environment. In this respect, the creative street is a tool of discovery, rediscovery or rethinking of the public spaces. Creation in the street can generate symbolic marks that can range from the caress to the scratch, from the scar to the tattoo.

On the Technological Dimension

The public space is a truly encompassing context of the new communication technologies, from a perspective of reality present without value judgements or ethical disquisitions. It is interesting to envisage the debates on the use of new technologies in the venues while, in the open spaces, they simply have a rooted and unquestionable presence. The creative street naturally relates to the socio-technological character: immediacy, accessibility, choral narrative, default, opinion, ephemeral testimony, viral nature, hypertextuality, practicality, risk, and so on.

In 2013, the Barcelona Grec festival programmed, at the Teatre Lliure, William Shakespeare's *Roman Tragedies* directed by Ivo van Hove. The macroshow lasted 350 minutes without intervals. The performance allowed the audience avery particular licence: they could leave and enter the auditorium at any moment, they could eat, speak, tweet, take photographs, stream it live with any mobile device... An unusual act of freedom in a theatre, a common act of freedom in the street.

This socio-technological integration can be analysed based on the theses of Hill (2008) with a computational sense: the street is a system that facilitates the operation of other systems:

> Instead, this is all everyday technology — embedded in, propped up against, or moving through the street, carried by people and vehicles, and installed by private companies and public bodies. Each element of data causes waves of responses in other connected databases, sometimes interacting with each other physically through proximity, other times through semantic connections across complex databases, sometimes in real-time, sometimes causing ripples months later. Some data is proprietary, enclosed and privately managed, some is open, collaborative and public (Hill, 2008: 36).

Technology understood as an integrated, naturalised and dynamic element within the creative street ecosystem.

On the Atmospheric Dimension

Let's imagine an industrial estate on the outskirts of a provincial town, a rainy November Saturday. Now, let's imagine a village square closed to traffic and full of people sitting on wooden chairs during a sweet summer dusk. The

two contexts are ideal for creative development, although the environmental influences will probably be determining. It is in this respect that the atmospheric dimension meets the public space to influence the perception of the individual about what is happening; it is precisely here when what amalgamates a central element takes on a strength that not only accompanies but also marks and defines the action.

The atmospheric dimension means all the climate, lighting, acoustic intrusions and many factors that generate complicities or interferences in the creative street.

Again, it is interesting to analyse these influences setting the street and the closed venue against each other. If, in the public space, the atmosphere influences, transforms and interferes (sometimes negatively: rain, wind or cold), in the closed venue the phenomenon is precisely the opposite. Moreover, the idea of venue is a real challenge to atmospheric influences: we enjoy the show in a nice comfortable temperature, absolute silence and the full guarantee of the suppression of any climate risk (taking for granted the absence of leaks) that may disrupt the performance.

There is nothing more identifying than creation in the public space, accompanied by its original soundtrack — be it flies, seagulls or children shouting after a ball. There is nothing more melancholic than the thin layer of rain on a dance show in the street.

Yet another idea: the atmospheric influences in arts creation are particularly interesting because — as a militant environmentalist — this dimension is a challenge to the historical antagonism between the realm of the coarse causal and determinist need (nature) and the temple of will and freedom (culture). Nature and culture hand in hand, at least just for a moment.

On the Fact of Concluding

Having identified some of the features of the creative street from diverse perspectives, I think it appropriate to perform an act of invitation to multiply its voices from an analytical and theoretical viewpoint. Apart from being creative, the public space must be conceived with continuity in order to be able to keep asking ourselves, increasingly with more definition, what the street particularly possesses.

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