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The impossible city: short reflections on urbanism, architecture and violence

Camillo Boano
The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL
London, UK
c.boano@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This contribution aims to offer some reflections around the notion of contested urbanism that characterize the contemporary process of making and inhabiting cities, discussing the intricate relation between architecture and violence at different scales. Grounding in previous international research and in the work of scholars like Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre and Eyal Weizman, the text wish to reposition contestation at the centre of an architectural and urban research, addressing the intersection of spatial and temporal aspects of conflicts in the production of the city, where intellectual and spatial categories are able to construct new epistemologies, cities and space in a paradoxical tension.

My intention is to stress that to trace generic and sketched reflections around the tensions between the notions of space and political in the urban dimension especially around contested urbanism that characterize the altermodernity condition of the contemporary process of making and inhabiting cities. Somehow, my aim is to reflect on the intricate relation between architecture and violence at different scales.

Massimo Cacciari, Italian philosopher and once Mayor of Venice, argued that "the city does not exist, what exists are different and distinct forms of urban lives" (2004, p. 4). With this, Cacciari is suggesting the impossibility of a common, universal definition of what a city, calling for an anti-essentialist acceptance of the multiple origins and futures of urban territories. Tracing the etymological origins of now very common words as ʿ*polis*ʾ and ʿ*civitas*ʾ, Cacciari suggests that the linguistic difference between them, the Greek and the Latin, is essential to the origin and the nature of the city itself. The *polis* is the place where determined people, *genos*, specific for traditions and uses, have its own *ethos*. On the other side the word ʿ*civitas*ʾ grounds its origin in the *cives*, a group of people that got together to form the city under the same law and norms. If few follow Cacciari, it seems that the *polis* resembles, fundamentally, the unity of people, the togetherness of citizens, the place and the site of the origins; however, in the *civitas*, the original founding myth is the convergence of a diversity of gens who agree on the power of a common law: *Ab urbe contitia*.[1]

The Roman constitution does not recognize in the *civitas* the origin, but the result, of a process of becoming, or as Cacciari suggests, "growth, development and complication" (2004, p. 16). What holds together all such differences is certainly not the roots, the *genos*, but rather the aim, the end, the goal: the expansion of the empire. On the contrary the issue with the polis is not excessive expansion in order to hold control over a 'manageable' territory within its borders and within which the

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[1] This refer to the monumental history of ancient Rome in Latin by the historian Titus Livius, known in English as Livy which title can be literally translated as "since the city's founding"

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genos is rooted – *civitas* grows and expands itself *de-lira*,[2] transgressing its borders,[1]its limits. The issue with the contemporary city, Cacciari is suggesting, is exactly this renewed tension between two ideas of cities. What emerges is a city that is *polemos*, conflict, the stage of great tensions between rootedness (*polis*) and pact; treaty (*civitas*), fixity and movement; dwelling/property and exchange/commerce; memory and future. The essence of the urban appears to be the capacity to hold such competing different qualities in a dynamic perennial conflict, in an irreducible tension. The city is *polemos*, is contestation par excellence. The city is growing and changing through the courageous attempt of recombining the elements of such tensions, despite the inability to resolve them. The city is *cumplexus*, what is embraced, weaved together, in a multiplicity of forms in an impossible final synthesis.

The present urban condition – globally – proves that Cacciari was right in pointing to the fact that no single definition of the city exists. One single city is impossible. The city is in a continuous mutation, reassembly, change and transformation, but it exists just because it is inhabited, perceived and lived: its consistency is the plot of the different desires, ambitions, hopes and projects it is able to arouse. If the city is not unique, then the knowledge of contemporary urbanisms is not homogeneous as well, and thus no single universalist claim on urban epistemology is possible. Rather, the city seems to emerge from a complex interaction between "cultural structures, social values, individual and collective actions and observations of the material arrangements" (Hou, Spencer, Way, & Yocom, 2015, p. 3). This notion of course is not new. Lefebvre suggested more than forty years ago in *The Urban Revolution* (1970/2003), advancing the thesis of complete urbanization, a general transformation of society, changing the living condition of habitable territories, a dissolution of the social and morphological structure and its dispersion in all sorts of fragments and the creation of an urban society as the result of contradictory

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2 Lira was originally the line that separates and divides the city from something else a non-city. De-lirare— which in Italian gives the origin to the delirium— create the urban experience of the civitas, the result of a process.

historical processes full of conflicts and struggles (Brenner, 2014; Stanek, Schmid, & Moravánszky, 2015).

Recognizing that there are a myriad of relationships between the built environment and how it structures and is structured by social life, understanding this multiplicity of urbanisms, reinforces the need to also understand the political, economic and social dynamics at play within the urban fabric when acting in the urban realm across time and space. The compositional, messy, uncontrollable and recombinant nature of the present urbanism, and the differential knowledge at play in the construction of the urban as object and subject is anything but straightforward. Rather it is energized and constructed in a continuous process of creation, legitimization and contestation. The basic and somehow banal assumption of this contribution is that the urban is a _de facto_ process oriented, contingent and contested condition. As I have argued elsewhere – inspired both by Cacciari and Lefebvre – the urban is embedded in a web of contested visions where the production of space is an inherently conflictive process, manifesting, producing and reproducing various forms of injustice; as well as alternative forces of transgression and social projects. I use the notion of 'contested urbanism' (Boano, Hunter, & Newton, 2013)(Boano *et al.*, 2010) to depict the inevitable impossibility of reconciling monolithic and unitary urban visions. The term, used as an intellectual framework, emerged in a study in Dharavi, Mumbai, where we depict the hegemonic and technocratic discourses that sit behind aggressive interventions, both state and market driven, focussing attention on the politics of urban transformations that systematically excluded many urban dwellers whose visions, aspirations and everyday lives were ignored and 'mastered' in conventional, transnational alien forms of urbanism (Watson, 2009, 2014). Since then, we have recognized that the notion of contestation, certainly appropriate for the confrontational, speculative and situated politic that emerged in the Dharavi Redevelopment Plan, was not unique. Contestations, if understood as oppositional confrontational, resistive and situated politics of spaces, are part of being urban. Certainly, discovering and researching urbanisms at a global scale, especially in and from southern and eastern perspectives, does seem to have its own

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advantage. In fact, problems often relate to multi-scalar processes in which many institutions intervene simultaneously, from the conventions that organize social life, to the formalised political processes that create state power and other forms of authority as well as multiple aspects, from socio-ecological interactions to the possibilities of drawing democratic forms of governance within a given political and spatial system. These are all dynamic processes, which make outcomes unpredictable, mutable, and not homogenous and where the current trend of urbanization is creating a variety of urban situations we actually lack the vocabulary to describe. Urbanism is certainly made and remade by encounters between different visions about what kind of future is desirable and, thus, conflict between different parties is often unavoidable, and may generate division and eventually new forms of negotiated collaboration.

Different kinds of contested cities, then, share and are developing growing similarities stemming from ethnic, racial and class conflicts revolving around issues of housing, infrastructure, participation representation, access and certainly identity. For Lefebrve, *abstract* space "negates all differences, those that come from nature and history as well as those that come from the body, ages, sexes, and ethnicities" (Lefebvre, 1979, p. 289), constructing what he called "absolute politics", where power was drained out of everyday sociality and situations and surrendered to both an increasingly abstract and authoritarian state as well as its knowledge institutions. In refusing this imposition of universal rationality over life, he recognized – instead – the autonomy of the practical and material constellations that constituted life and sow in the *everyday* the "'connective tissue' that [gave] the totality its structure and coherence" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 224) (Gardiner 2004:224). The *productive nature* and the continuous struggle over the production of urban space in Lefebvre's philosophy and politics, it is no surprisingly based on an understanding of the urban space infused with time and history. For Lefebvre, "the urban is dialectical in nature, as urban space is socially produced by three dimensional (material, ideological-institutional, and imaginary-affective) processes" (as cited in Kipfer, Saberi, & Wieditz, 2012, p. 119).

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Recent experiences of protest in the so called public spaces, from Gezi Park in Istanbul to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, or in Paris after the new jobs act, all represents the actual taking place in space of Lefebrve's idea of space: a product of a social *praxis* inscribed in the power-structure and of an urbanism that can become truly anti-urban as it is capable of fragmentations, borders, and exclusions that nullify the possibility of the urban experience. The recent movement, especially in Latin America, that reclaim and support Lefebvre's Right to the City are part of a resistance, played in the space of the city, against the progressive mercerization, privatization of contemporary urbanism globally calling for a reclaiming of the common: a multiplicity of practices that free saturated spaces and return them to the common, quotidian use of the citizen, create space of encounters and co-produced cultural and economic values. The public nature of such spaces is returned trough act of freedom.

They are enablers for the re-use of the cityscape, groups that, "involve not only the redesign of the spaces, but also the establishment of new communities of practice that represent, self-management and maintenance of projects" (Inti, 2014).

The multiplicity of such practices is a laboratory for imagining, testing and reflecting on new narratives, stories and ways of speaking. A laboratory "~~where boundaries and conflicts between past and future, between them and us and between inhabitants and institutions, become laboratories, the piazzas and the theaters~~ for the reinvention of the Commons" (Romito, 2014) (Romito, 2015).

Conflicts and political violence alike have not only direct spatial implication visible to all in the form of destruction, seclusion, control, but unfold at various interconnected scales: global, territorial, state, urban, human. Their geographical scopes stretch from the localized sites of citizen contestation and micro-struggles to the global networks of terror with different mode of visibility and intelligibility. Conflicts transform land uses, territorial arrangements, urban processes and human settlement patterns according to temporalities that range from short-lived states of

emergency to the *longue durée* of chronic violence, permanent occupations and predatory urbanisms.

In his foundational text *Politische Geographie*, written in 1897, Friedrich Ratzel writes that "War is the school of space [*Der Krieg als schule des Raumes*]" (1923, p. 264). Thought has always lagged behind the catastrophe of war, but most particularly it has lagged behind the ways in which war has taught us to think space. War generates a phenomenology and representation of space that since time immemorial have laid the foundations for our quotidian experience of space. The art of waging war was always about technologies of controlling territory, of surveying spaces, traversing topographies, and circumnavigating the world on the surfaces of the sea. As these arts and technologies become more elaborate, formalized, more entrenched, the strategists of wars came to realize that the theatres of war, the spaces of war, were not fixed, or given, but produced and determined by the interaction between speed, weapons, and superior knowledge of geography. War as the school of space, to follow Ratzel, has taught one fundamental lesson: space is produced by war.

What makes Ratzel's work singularly important for an understanding of the ways in which space has been determined by war is that for him life is a struggle for space, and war is the school of space and somehow is later reflected in Lefebvre's work. For Lefebvre, the study of the production of space has to be understood in terms of the tensions, interactions and co-determinations among: capitalism, as a form of accumulation of wealth that is linked to different forms of the production of wealth, what Lefebvre calls the urban explosion, and the colonization of the everyday life. The key words 'production' and 'space' characterize Lefebvre's analytic intentions; by 'production', Lefebvre means that humans create the space in which they make their lives; it is a project shaped by the interests of classes, experts, the grassroots and other contested forces. For Lefebvre ˈspaceˈ is not a mere container or milieu, as a kind of neutral setting in which life transpires, or a backdrop in that it is the obvious base upon which all activity must occur. Architecture, human densities and

locational relationships are forces in structuring what can be done in space itself. Walls and roads obviously privilege certain kinds of activities and inhibit others, support the projects of one type of actor and deter the goals of others. Beyond such material impediments are the symbols and styles that also influence behaviour: elements of monumental grandeur that disempower, varieties of endogenous architecture that falsely imply genuine choice, monotonous cubes and towers that stultify rewarding forms of sociability.

Thus, returning to the war metaphor, and the picture, space is produced either as a space of plenty and safety, or naught and dissolution, by the machines and industry of war, but it is also produced in the sense that imagining space as the space of war produces certain effects: "[C]ertain spaces are construed as spaces of safety or danger, of devastation or preservation" (Mendieta, 2006, p. 9).

Was Walter Benjamin right when he wrote that there is no document of civilisation that is not also a document of barbarism? If so, then ˹spatial violence˼ would offer itself as another name for ˹architecture˼, a name that would open onto the manifold forms of harm mediated through built environments. ˹Spatial violence˼, in this reading, may be understood not as something inflicted on architecture from the outside, but something that architecture inflicts even as it follows its own practices and protocols. Architecture as inherently violent. This claim may seem rather self-evident from the perspective of those who study geographies of inequality, histories of colonialism, or the politics of spatial injustice, but may we consider the concept of ˹spatial violence˼ as inherently architecture the game seems changing. Refusing the conventional trend in architecture and urban design that rendered spaces of violence positively and empirically, so that architectural and urban histories are periodised with respect to that form of spatial violence known as "war", with narratives situating the political condition of war as preceding or creating the conditions for architectural production (or its absence). Probably the best source of inspiration for an inversion, a resistance in architecture, is the work of Eyal

Weizman[3]. We thus pose spatial violence as a constitutive dimension of architecture, urbanism, and their epistemologies and thus it mobilise architecture as a site of research an inquiry in architectural and urban studies. Spatial violence, in this conception, may be understood as a force that has manifested systemically.

Working comparatively across spaces with contrasting histories and geographies, for me seems crucial to reposition contestation and at the centre of an architectural and urban research addresses the intersection of spatial and temporal aspects of conflicts and its afterlife, and investigates practices of transformation oriented towards imagined futures and the fluidity of the production of the city where intellectual and spatial categories are able to construct new epistemologies, cities and space in a paradoxical tension.

The violence of neoliberalism and the form of spaces that emerges from such ubiquitous forces, being secluded and privatised, being spectacular and consume-oriented, being made obsolete, ruinated or gentrified and renovated, have all made an attempt to delete from the city its capacity to function as a political machine, a hotbed for rights and new political and social form of living together. The current urbanisms are becoming some sort of anti-city dominated by fluxes rather than relation, by numbers rather than live. The sole antidote to the violence is a contra violence that reclaims the centrality of habitants and users. A thesis fully developed and articulated in _The Production of Space_ (Lefebvre, 1991). Habitants and users can

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[3] Weizman's recent work _Forensic Architecture_ is a research project and consultancy agency, based at Goldsmiths University in London, that undertakes advanced architectural and media research on behalf of human rights groups, those investigating or prosecuting crimes under International Humanitarian Law, as well as political and environmental justice groups. It refers to the production and presentation of architectural evidence – buildings and larger environments and their media representations. A prologue of the Forensic Architecture project can be found in his book _The Least of all Possible Evils_ (2011) where he explores architecture's twin role in modern warfare, both oppressor and potential liberator. At the heart of Eyal Weizman's new book is an engagement with the problem of violence, in particular of state violence and the calculations that manage it in the contemporary world. Weizman argues that humanitarianism, human rights and international humanitarian systems become crucial technologies in calculating what constitutes a just war, and that forensic analysis is frequently at the forefront of this _necro_-economy. Indirectly inspired with the notion of testimony and its shift from human testimony to objects of material evidence in the investigation of war crimes, he locates forensic architecture at the intersection of architecture, history and the laws of war. Forensic architecture is both an analytical method for reconstructing scenes of violence as they are inscribed in spatial artifacts, and the practice of interpreting and deliberating legally

challenge the social relations embedded in everyday life by appropriating urban space and participating in decisions determining the urban transformation of the city. In other words, a sort of a city of alterity ʿ*altercity*ʾ where new forms of life are emerging as reactions, as rebel strategies and new forms of what Vasquez Pizzi called "new form of ~~dwelling~~ (*abitare*) […] de facto minoritarian cultural logic as co-housing, cooperation, cohabitation and form of living together that manage the common as a resource, both material and immaterial" (2015, p. xx). If the dwelling and the community, the process of inhabiting and using the city will remain bifurcated, the city as common good will still remain impossible leaving space just to violence. The urban future still will be founded around the dialectics between universality and particularity. The right to the city will be the capacity to discern among different essentials and non essential violence.

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Bio

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Camillo Boano (Asti, Italy, 1973)
Architect, urbanist and theorist.

He is Senior Lecturer at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College of London (UCL), where he directs the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development. He is also co-director of the UCL Urban Laboratory. He is author, with William Hunter and Caroline Newton of *Contested Urbanism in Dharavi. Writings and Projects for the resilient city* (The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, 2013), and several journals' articles on Giorgio Agamben Philosophy related to desing and architecture. He is currently working on a book collecting such reflections titled *The Ethic of a Potential Urbanism. The encounters between Giorgio Agamben and Architecture*.

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