

Face to Face with Fantasy: the City of Utopian Places

Lineu Castello

(Dr. in Architecture, Professor, UFRGS [Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul] / CNPq [Brazilian National Research Council, Rua Marquês de Pombal 1385 / 201 Porto Alegre 90540-001 Brazil, lincastello@terra.com.br)

1 ABSTRACT

Urban Happiness may not be just another utopia engendered by planners to lure citizens into the circuits of cities' real estate businesses. The Royal Institute of British Architects seem to look seriously at the topic, as suggested by the book edited by Jane Wernick on RIBA's behalf 'Building Happiness' (Black Dog Publishing, 2008). It brings the viewpoints of a varied number of authors about the pursuit of happiness as a meaningful political goal. On the other hand, recent developments in the theory of place, as I approach in my book called 'Rethinking the Meaning of Place' (Ashgate Publishing, 2010), seem to welcome the production of newly invented places (themed malls, revamped historic areas, etc) as important actors in the pursuit of happiness in today's cities. It is the intention of this paper to bring together the two lines of thought in order to achieve a better understanding of placemaking and placemarketing as techniques that promote the attractiveness of cities by producing new 'places of urbanity'.

2 THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF CITIES

You do not need to be an expert in urban studies to perceive that today's cities are experiencing a new trend in their concern with the offer of attractiveness, a trend increasingly observed in major global cities, all over the world and in all the five continents. There is nothing intrinsically new about this, however: people are used to flock to Lourdes, France, for example, simply for their happiness of being present in a place where a miracle has once been performed; similarly, in Ancient times, Romans crowded to Rome to watch Christians being shredded by hungry lions, just for the thrill of it. For them, this was a source of happiness. Both Lourdes and Rome were considered attractive cities, though by different standards. Herein lays an important first truism that helps to understand the slender difference between thrills and happiness, 'thrill not necessarily equaling happiness' (Schwartz, 2008:136). Cities' attractiveness though, either giving thrills or producing joy, has to do with the pursuit of happiness, a target frequently included within the consumption ethics that deeply permeates our twenty-first century society ideals. To be is to have, according to the principles of this society. But, to be happy, to have happiness, is often confounded with having (and being – which would be quite opposedly to the Heideggerian understanding, by the way). Accordingly, cities do compete among each other to become attractive both to visitors as well as to residents. This competitiveness is already acknowledged as an area of specific interest in urban studies, and some authors, such as Simon Anholt, for example, develop long elaborations on the topic (Anholt 2003; 2009), their basic arguments dealing, usually, with the branding that cities struggle to acquire in their competitiveness process. A sort of subdued competition seems to be in the order of the day among today's cities, that try to become known as, say, the City-light (Paris), or the World's Cultural Capital (New York), or the Carnival Paradise (Rio de Janeiro). This competition is often confounded with the supply of happiness, that is to say, cities attempt to allure people in terms of the amount of happiness they are supposedly able to provide them. As such, it is not surprising to find experts extensively discussing about this "pursuit of happiness" in actual urban environments. A good example of this is the recent publication named 'Building Happiness', encouraged by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), which approaches the subject with an unprecedented emphasis. The book is edited by Jane Wernick on RIBA's behalf, and presents a whole set of arguments focusing on the search for happiness as far as urban behaviours are concerned. Several authors and distinguished professionals bring about their opinions on what can be understood as happiness, insofar as living in urban environments is concerned. It is interesting to notice that, most of the times, attractiveness is understood as the power to produce happiness. So, in this context, providing happiness is often understood as a surrogate for cities achieving high attractiveness ranks in competitive grounds through the happy places they are able to produce. All in all though, a distinguishable point can be initially sorted out: more than ever before, happiness is actually for sale in contemporary cities. This is a first and important characteristic of these cities, especially for my area (Architecture-Urbanism), which is known for its crucial commitment to producing places for people – places designed for people being happy by using them. This search for happiness marked quite strongly the old heroic times of Modernist Urbanism in the early twentieth century,

as acknowledged in the above mentioned book. One of the authors quotes Le Corbusier saying that architecture produces happy people and that happy towns are those that have an architecture, an assertive that probably explains why ‘Architecture thus becomes one of the most powerful mechanisms in the delivery of the promise of happiness on which modernity is founded’ (Till, 2008:126, original emphasis).

2.1 The Production of Happiness

There are several tracks conducing to the production of happiness in present-day cities. Surprisingly, some of them are public and freely accessible, as some authors have more thoroughly examined (see, for example: Carmona et al. 2003; Carr et al. 1995; Kayden et al. 2000; PPS 2002; Whyte 1990). The majority of tracks, however, involve private and expensive businesses and it is on these grounds that the contributions of areas such as Urban Planning, Real Estate Development, and ICT Industry, can bring more practicable deeds. Fortunately, many of these areas’s agencies seem to have understood the importance they play for heightening the attractiveness of cities, and their contributions have shown progresses accordingly. Indeed, the self-awareness of urban planning, for instance, can be clearly acknowledged in a statement I have recently selected and reproduced in a publication. The statement is part of a publicity campaign for a new urbanization in the state of Florida (USA), and it runs as follows: ‘For those of us in the business of creating new places It’s been said that great sculptors have the ability to unlock the image held inside a block of stone. In a sense, that’s what great planners do as well. They strive to unlock the place held inside a piece of land’ (apud Castello, 2010, forthcoming). Such an argument seems quite adequate to herewith introduce the topic of place and the close interrelationships the topic has to the question of the production of happiness.

Places have a strong phenomenological connotation nowadays. Going to a place, enjoying the experience a place has to offer, may sometimes double with being happy, double with happiness. Traditionally closer to the Humanities, the concept of place has expanded its reach up to a point in which it now touches several disciplines simultaneously. One can say that the concept now acquires a supra-disciplinary status, that encompasses sociological, anthropological, geographical, tourist, cultural, philosophical, architectural, environmental and spatial themes, and, somewhat rather unexpectedly, also touches themes more closely related to administrative, managerial, economic and political grounds. Definitely, the concept of place can be said to have reached a transdisciplinary range nowadays. In fact, the importance of the concept for the goal of ‘liveable, healthy, prosperous cities for everyone’ cannot be sufficiently overemphasised, since it is its foundational aim to design spaces for people to live in and to enjoy living experiences in suitable civilized conditions: ‘Architectural psychology, environmental psychology, people/environment studies, human factors of design or psychostructural environics, call what you may, has been concerned explicitly in making better, happier and more humane environments’ (Mikellides, 2008:86). In other words, places are crucial for the production of happiness in urban surroundings. Architects, in their best knowledge and good will, diligently tried to design places, though they did so under the strict Modernist functionalist rules. Some way or another (and this is a long discussion), the places did not work. At the end of the day, architects became tired of assuming the blame of designing what became branded as placelessness (Relph 1976; 1996) or, even more pessimistically, non-places. This contributed to set up a contemporary rethinking of the concept of place: once one of the noblest principles in Architecture-Urbanism, the concept of place has now incorporated a double meaning in today’s practice of urban planning. On top of its traditional social meaning, a Place can now incorporate a strong economic meaning, thereby acquiring an additional urban function: the concept today also deals with urban economics. This is a second important characteristic of contemporary cities. The making of a place now comes together with the marketing of that place – Placemaking doubles with Placemarketing – and the newly formed duet assemble forces to jointly work towards the production of happiness, and, hence, rather unpredictably, to encourage the creation of a (sort of) market of happiness. This is an entire new aspect in the theory of place, and deserves a little more elaboration, insofar as the concept of place moves from the previous functional bias it used to have in Modernist Architecture-Urbanism, and favours a more phenomenological approach now, in post-modern times, reflecting the important existential role of the concept and its protagonism as an environmental nexus that registers the anthropical transformation of the human environment.

2.2 The Market of Happiness

Most actions involved in the making of a place call for the participation of an architect or a planner. As a matter of fact, in this respect, there are many complexities that end up in the hands of architects, who on top

of having to respond to intricate and unforeseen changes being constantly introduced into urban realms, ‘... still face the challenge of shaping public space – from piazza to Plaza.... Indeed, architects are actively searching for new forms in which to house contemporary public life’ (Avermaete et al., 2009: 19). This is a challenge considerably bedevilled by the fact that the public realm undergoes a continual change, starting by the startling change brought about by the new ways of perceiving what is public and what is private. This is a third important characteristic of contemporary cities. French philosopher François Ascher recognizes quite clearly these perceptual changes by stating that in certain situations, the social practices performed in a place are the real cause to confer to that place its public character (Ascher, 1995; 2008). In other words, the traditional prerogatives that used to establish the distinction between public and private seem to be no longer in force; at least, in the strict sense they used to have. The three pronged public-private distinction established long time ago (in fact, during the French Revolution, 1798), based on ownership, accessibility, and purpose (Avermaete et al., 2009:25), has experienced a thorough change, and, today, there is a kind of “democratization” in terms of what is considered as public domain, and a classic example is provided by the sociologist Sharon Zukin who points out to the fact that the access to the (semi)public spaces of shopping malls becomes de facto public spaces (Zukin, 1997).

In present times one can discern a factual typology of places distributed right through the whole extension of urban environments. In my research work I signal to three types (and to their specific variations): I call them places of aura, places of memory, and places of plurality (Castello, 2010, forthcoming). Places of Aura are those originated from spatial stimuli, material or abstract. Places leaning upon traditional or historical elements associated to temporal dimensions I term places of Memory. And places stimulated from the interaction among people due to their interpersonal relations in the environment are termed as places of Plurality. All types can be responsible for the production of happiness and to attribute quality to urban spaces. All types can deliver whatever utopias and fantasies people are daydreaming with. Moreover, all types can be also responsible for offering what is known as “urbanity”, an environmental quality inherent to urban areas. This quality can even be understood as a surrogate for happiness, that is to say, once you are in the presence of urbanity, it is likely that you may embark on a experience that will involve happiness.

The difficult point is that you must pay to use many of these places of urbanity (or of happiness). In contemporary times, it is as if a “market of happiness” became institutionalized in certain urban areas. Significantly, it is precisely here that the contributions of Urban Planning, Real Estate Development, and ICT Industry areas become substantially decisive: they can make this market more accessible and, hence, **THEY CAN MAKE CITIES MORE ATTRACTIVE!**

Though this contribution is sometimes quite explicit, like the celebrated case of the reurbanization of PotsdamerPlatz in Berlin, Germany, in many occasions it remains understated, like in the rehabilitation of neglected old central quarter’s areas, like the Bastakia zone in old Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

It follows some illustrations of places of urbanity in different cities and continents that include either implicit or explicit external contributions from various development agents.

3 HAPPY PLACES ARE HERE TO STAY

And which are those places?

Even if presented under very different configurations, mostly daily reality cases include illustrations that encompass shopping activities and services industries, such as entertainment, culture, leisure and tourism. In fact, the absolute majority of the newly invented places is constituted of commercial and services activities like shopping malls, recycled historical settings, restaurants, entertainment places, sports complexes, hybrid complexes, multiplex cinemas, museums, libraries – places which try to “clone” qualities found in consecrated other places, or which create what is believed to produce the urban attractiveness known as urbanity.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most renowned illustrations of newly invented places of urban attractivity comes from Europe. The reurbanization of the PotsdamerPlatz area in central Berlin, an area heavily destroyed by Second World War bombings is, undoubtedly one of the most expressive examples of the creation of public places by private agents. In this case, the initiative came from Daimler-Benz-Chrysler and from Sony Corporation, among others agents (FIGS. 1-2). One of the most interesting actions to highlight in this case is that the reurbanization involved both space and time determinants, as if illustrating one former

assertive by Zaha Hadid about her ‘...idea that one could return to a previous moment in time...to investigate the issues of that time and what they could imply in terms of change and newness.... Juxtaposing two “times” created a superimposition and, eventually, hybridization. Things that had occurred at different times could now happen simultaneously’ (Hadid, 2009:141). The space that located Potsdamer Platz before war times was a great central place. The space that locates Potsdamer Platz in today’s times is a great central place again.



Fig. 1: Berlin. Arrival to Potsdamer Platz Station, Fig.2: Berlin. Potsdamer Platz, Sony Area

Striking examples come from Asian countries, mainly from those once referred to as the Asian Tigers. Bangkok, Thailand, pioneered in shopping cutting-edge activities, by introducing the strategy of allocating a grouping of various shopping malls in a single key central area known as Siam (FIGS. 3-4). A similar situation is found in the island of Singapore, where there is an enormous succession of huge malls that parade along a single avenue, the busy Orchard Road (FIGS. 5-6). The United Arab Emirates, in turn, provide the legendary example of Dubai, perhaps the most fantastic private development in the whole world, with its palm-shaped islands, and the like. But that can also be renowned for a beautiful piece of heritage preservation, presented by the historic area known as Bastakia, a beautifully successful refurbishment in the city’s oldest area (FIG.7).



Fig. 3: Bangkok. Public areas shared by shopping malls, Fig. 4: Bangkok. Siam Area



Fig. 5: Singapore. New Ion Orchard Mall, Fig. 6: Singapore. Orchard Road

Cultural activities are prodigal for inducing the creation of attractive places, and one classic illustration of this trend comes from Africa, in Cairo, Egypt, with the creation of a genuine entertainment park in the Gizeh area of the pyramids, offering not only the expected historical emotions, but also the Sound-and-Light attractions that ultimately entice the establishment of lots and lots of retail outlets, services and leisure industries (FIG.8).



Fig. 7: Dubai. Bastakia Area, Fig. 8: Cairo. Gizeh Area

Oceania has excellent examples from down under, and probably the most distinguished ones are located in Australia. The Sydney Opera House, for instance, established itself as a celebrated place which soon earned the status of a national brand for the country as a whole. Today, it is a fêted place for Sydney inhabitants and for world tourists alike. Perhaps only the ensemble composed by the area named Darling Harbour can rival to the Opera House area as one of the legitimate places of urbanity in Sydney (FIGS. 9-10).

Finally, illustrations in North America are copious, since it was there that the highly successful practice of creating thematic places, like Disney's theme parks in Florida and California, festival places like South Street Seaport, in New York, and entertainment fantasies, like Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco (FIG.11), were actually born. New York excels in the practice of creating "public" places – though, at the end of the day, privately owned. The initiatives of William H. Whyte, who successfully negotiated and bargained with private investors for the insertion of public spaces in their developments, became worldwide celebrated. A detailed book organized by Jerold Kayden, the New York City Department of City Planning, and the Municipal Art Society of New York, suggestively titled "Privately Owned Public Space", registers with minutiae this New York City experience.



Fig. 9: Sydney. Opera House Area, Fig. 10: Sydney. Darling Harbour Area

But South America follows short, not only by emulating North American theme parks and fantasy places (Hannigan, 1998) as by introducing up-to-date technicalities like, for example, the creation of airports that double as hybrid complexes, intended for the generation of public places. This latter case is quite clearly illustrated by the airport of Porto Alegre, Brazil, my home city, to which I will grant some extended notes.

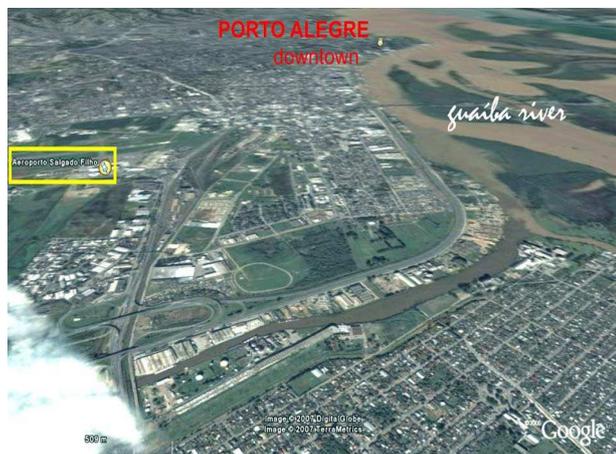


Fig. 11: San Francisco. Fishermans Wharf Area, Fig. 12: Porto Alegre. Central Location of Airport

In Brazilian terms, the refurbishing of the International Airport Salgado Filho, in Porto Alegre, has brought innovation to the airport national scene by creating a multifunctional mega-complex – a veritable city-building – as it is increasingly found in major airports across the world. Its programme combines very diverse activities, such as shopping mall, leisure and entertainment spaces, transport terminus, medical and clinic services, exhibition and museum spaces, hospitality and food services. It generated a concentration of hybrid buildings that seek to play a similar role to that found in urban commerce and service centres. The building's surroundings the airport also added further functions to the complex, with international hotel chains benefiting from direct links to the city's overground-metro system's Airport station, and new road axis into the city centre or to towns in the metropolitan region. Further to that, comes the unusual proximity to Porto Alegre's central area, easily accessible from the complex (FIG.12), collaborating to explain the quick success the complex achieved in becoming a place of attractiveness for the city's population. The variety of functions acts as a catalyst to generate an atmosphere of plurality. The architect Bernard Tschumi sees airports as an opportunity for the creation of places. In the project for Kansai, in Osaka (Japan), for example, he sought '... to enlarge the airport into an event, a spectacle, a new city of interchange and exchange, of business, commerce and culture (...)' (Tschumi 1994:105). In Porto Alegre, it can now be asserted that the plural space of the Airport Complex is also starting to be perceived as a place, attracting a good number of people, including inhabitants and tourists who visit it to enjoy the incipient 'urbanity' created there, frequenting the airport simply to have a coffee or read a newspaper in a comfortable and safe place – using the airport as a tertiary place, as Oldenburg (1999) teaches us. Or simply to go shopping, flirt in the food hall, show an attractive place to a friend, watch one of the new releases in the cinemas, since Porto Alegre's airport was the first to offer a cineplex in Brazil (FIG.13), or just for an enjoyable visit with family

or friends. Furthermore, it is now possible to talk of an expansion of ‘placeness’ at the airport: in April 2005 the space in front of the airport Complex was chosen to house the ‘Cidade Elétrica’, an especially assembled mobile structure for popular mega-events such as major pop concerts. On a 40,000-m² site in the Parque Condor, the Cidade Elétrica is equipped with food plazas, chemical toilets, and first aid and security systems. The opening event involved especially run public transport using the Airport metro station as transfer point, enabling access to one more event associated with the plurality connected with the airport place, indicating it as a source of an agglomeration economy. Confirming the trend, this space currently houses the ‘Pepsi on Stage’, a venue for popular rock shows, heavily attended by young people from all parts of the city, and organized by Pepsi-Cola.

It is also worthwhile registering that Porto Alegre has recently engaged on yet another production of a public attraction promoted by the private sector. As it happens in other parts of the world, the city’s cultural scene got enriched by the construction of a grand new art museum, sponsored by the “Fundação Iberê Camargo”, a private Foundation, dedicated to a local artist. One of the most exciting attractiveness factors presented by the museum is its design by one world-famous Portuguese architect, Alvaro Siza, winner of the 1992 Pritzker prize, who won, for his Porto Alegre project, the Lion d’Or from the Venice Architecture Biennial of 2002, while still in blueprint phase (FIG.14).

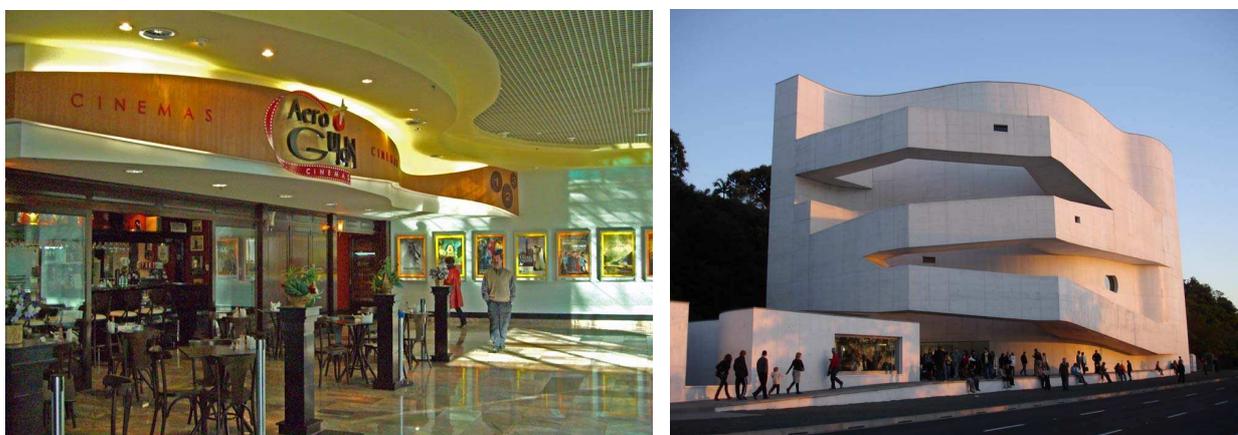


Fig. 13: Porto Alegre. Airport Cineplex, Fig. 14: Porto Alegre. Iberê Camargo Museum

4 CONCLUSION

But, ultimately, what is happiness? This, of course, is an extremely delicate question.

‘Happiness is a by-product of numerous human emotions triggered by the convergence of many things: a sense of security and belonging, an association of pleasant memories, a connection to the past and to the place, a ‘positive’ (of course, relative and subjective) aesthetic where one feels uplifted, a sense of possibility and openness, and an impression of choice’ (Scwhartz, 2008: 134). It goes without saying that the projects mentioned in this paper deal, one way or another, with at least one or many of the things included in this emotion known as happiness. Since the projects show clear engagements to entrepreneurial corporations, they clearly contain heavy arguments for understanding the crucial role played by entities such as Urban Planning, Real Estate Development, and ICT Industry areas in the creation of places of attractiveness in contemporary urban environments. They also represent a clear illustration of the role of a new economic urban component – the creative economy – as an important instrument of urban development (Florida 2004; 2005), which has been incorporated into the repertoire of strategies of urban planning and urbanism that seek new paradigms for meeting the growing concern with increasing the attractiveness of cities, to transform them into places people feel increasingly attracted to live in, work or visit.

Lastly, there are three arguments worth remembering, in order to better understanding the actual conclusions: (i) Architects have been constantly working for the pursuit of happiness, this pursuit being an explicit objective of the Modernist period, as observed by Le Corbusier. (ii) The Making of Places in Post-Modernist times received a crucial help by the newest area of Placemarketing; in Modernist times, traditional place design led to placelessness and non-places. (iii) The boundaries between private and public space have become very thin and seemingly, tend to become even thinner along the twenty-first century public-private initiatives in urban areas.

Whether acceptable or not, the three arguments do not represent more than just a single step towards the provision of better cities for people. 'Architects have a duty to respond to social changes, but they also have a leading role to play in redefining concepts like public and private' (Avermaete et al., 2009:49). To this matter, I conclude with some disquieting and thought-provoking arguments expressed by Juhani Pallasmaa, who remind us of the long way we still have to pursue towards our goal of better cities:

'Are the problems that guide the formation of the public sphere, perhaps, entirely beyond the grasp and control of architecture and the conscious intentions of the architect?...Are the reasons for the loss of the public dimension perhaps hiding in the invisible mechanisms and structures of modernization, globalisation, mass production and consumption, mobility, constant change, economic power structures and the processes of shrewd profit making?...Have we become servants of today's cultural processes instead of directing those processes ourselves?' (Pallasmaa 2009: 128).

All photographs shown in this paper are from the Author's Personal Collection.

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