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# Honors thesis

COURSE OF SUSTAINABILITY DESIGN

*Abstract*

**Social Movements, occupation and management of the  
public space. Three projects in Madrid**

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The research into public space represents a challenge, since it doesn't take on a specific conception and its interpretation is mixed, at times, with personal experiences due to the project itself. This research thesis extends this challenge to a totally different view from the Italian one. The Spanish context is still influenced by a policy scheme that has been changed, in the last thirty years, into an opposing feeling of protest and appropriation. Nowadays, the research into public space ends up in a debate discussed among not only architects but also other professions. The experiences of geographers, sociologists and urban planners meet in a general definition that can be assumed as a starting point for this study. The public space of the present and future isn't easy to identify: many think that it is all that isn't private, others don't go beyond its physical crossing. To define and locate public space is quite complex and is a matter of discussion: we have often come across debates relative to its actual use. Since its formation process is still being developed, further research had to be done on the field, pushing towards collaboration with the people; sure enough, through their perception of space we can have a better picture of it. Lacking certain elements and knowing that the concept is yet to be fully explained pushed us towards this method of investigation. The interesting aspect of the research is the modelling of the concept of public space throughout this itinerary, as it is studied in several shades as it can be seen through the chapters.

As the concept of public space is being developed, it will lead to the context in which the research was conducted: Madrid. Madrid is the final purpose through which we justify the motion of the population related to the features of the habitat and to the space that belongs to the community. At the start of this path, special attention had to be given to the social movements. Not knowing the reasons why the population protests in public spaces, research on these movements from their origin was made. The social movements in Spain (specifically the *Indignados* movement) show a very confident appropriation and management of public space even though there's a lack of architectural competences. This fact points out that certain organizations follow specific dynamics, conferring to public space the importance that makes it a symbolic place, belonging to the community, who owns it by right. This is why these movements organize public space as their own living room.

Once the importance of the social movements is understood, the next step of the itinerary is to investigate on the motivations that pushed the population to occupy certain spaces.

Madrid is full of squares and parks, areas of which are equal to the size of the urbanized city, if added up. The choice of occupying *Puerta del Sol* isn't accidental, this square represents a symbolical space in which the population's entire economy and social life can be paralyzed, creating a sort of stage to show the world the capacity of rebuilding and managing society with their own means. Its form of organization and management has, in fact, illustrated to the world the possibility of doing without all of those social classes that possess and administrate power unfairly. After the *Acampadas* of the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, the concept of space to the eyes of the *madrilenos* was changed: the chance to model and manage space gave to the citizens the knowledge that it is them that own it.

The importance of the perception of public space leads to the research of the theses of two geographers, Ji Fu Tuan and Hubert Beguin, whose theories have pointed out the difference between the concepts of space and place, the first intended as a geometrical entity, the second as the result of the interaction between the people and said space. This concept explains the motion of the movements mentioned above, pointing out how a space becomes a place thanks to the people that take possession of it and to what said place means to them, also in relation to the actions that take place in it.

Before dealing with Madrid, it is appropriate to confront this context with different urban habitats that represent extreme case studies in the definition of the concept of public space: Hong Kong and Mexico City. In these two cities, public space is shaped in relation to the private one: the Chinese metropolis is characterized by a majority of POPS (privately owned public spaces), which aren't exactly what we define as pure public space; the Mexican capital lacks of public space, since its urban area is completely regulated by a never-ending grid of streets scattered with residential blocks and hardly anything else.

After seeing a few practical examples that occur in these two other urban realities, we have a better view of what public space is, having compared two completely different contexts; this brings us to the main one, Madrid, in which public space is modelled and managed especially in relation to social motion, as mentioned above.

In this perspective, the final part of the work is presented: the analysis of the urban context, describing on one side how public space is organized in the Spanish capital, on the other side how the people of Madrid use their space, and the proposition of a plan of three different urban spaces in the heart of the city. This city is an environment that sticks out in the European scenery, not only for its different urban formation process, but also for

the policies that have influenced it throughout history, bringing to a whole different view of public space. Curiosity in finding out new notions from a different setting that isn't ours, can open up to new ideas regarding the plan of a space that has acquired a relevant importance within the urban landscape. Although public space isn't much considered when planning, it represents the key to the perception of well-being at the heart of society. It has an essential role that defines the identity of a city, region, country. The development of a new conception of public space when planning is fundamental in relation to the evolution of society, hence the main purpose of the thesis: defining a new method of planning based on several aspects, starting from the definition of a new conception of public space that moves away from the one of the past; social change that requires specific kinds of planning; conceiving a model that is adaptable to every social dynamic and change in the urban landscape; a new view in planning that connects different levels of society involving all participants; and the awareness of this topic and spreading of the debate.

The context of Madrid is a clear example that sees the passage of public space in a social environment, proposing the involvement of various local participants to increase its potential. Firstly analyzing the social movements, and secondly the new conception of public space, which is clearer thanks to the Tuan-Beguín debate on space and place and which has led the way to the rest of the research, including its application to the settings of Hong Kong and Mexico City. If these two concepts weren't explained and separated, we would analyze these contexts without the concept of place, classifying as public everything that isn't private.

The interest in social movements and in new ways of occupation of the public space put planners in a position of better awareness in relation to planning a public space. The observed notions show how a community can have a natural inclination towards planning, which can lead us to having some doubts on the architect's role. Having said this, although new methods are rising in the plan of public spaces in modern cities, methods that involve people more, putting planners in the shade, the architect's role is still the same: creativity, rationalization of space, knowledge of specific expedients regarding the site, morphology, climate, materials and building techniques are still the architect's points of strength. Even though the population shows the capacity of using a public space, the work points out how this factor needs support to last in time. This is why the architect becomes the director and guides the citizens towards a correct use of the space, after a deep analysis of the urban context in which he has to operate and of the population's motion processes, but most of all after opening up to new themes and debates on the view of public space, which is always changing.

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