

REVITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE: FROM “NON-PLACES” TO CREATIVE PLAYGROUNDS

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The aim of this paper is to discuss a mechanism of revitalization of public spaces, focusing on creative tactics, which are used by groups of enthusiasts and public artists. The author argues that creative public actions, such as flash mobs and performances, take part in forming the identity of the place and could be considered as an act of place-making. Referring to the idea that a space is constituted through practices (Merleau-Ponty, de Certeau, Lefebvre, Augé), three components, crucial for “place making” are distinguished: actualization of bodily experience, shared emotional experience, and emerging new solidarities (temporal communities of citizens, who are involved in active reinterpretation of public space). Creative public actions reveal a potential of the place by establishing a distance from routine scenarios and by performing alternative use of spatial elements, and it is a periodicity of actions and reorganization of spatial elements that produces long-term impact on the public space. Although applying a distinction between “non-places” and “empty spaces”, which was proposed by Z. Bauman (2000), it could be found, that a short-term playful intervention into spaces, which are “public, but not civic” (such as supermarkets, airports and train stations), could be the most effective tool for initiating interaction among passers-by and reforming the “emotional scape” of the place.

Keywords: creative public actions, flash mobs, non-places, bodily and emotional experience.

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Introduction

A distinction between a place as a set of elements and a space as a dynamic field of everyday practices (Certeau 1988)¹, alongside with a thesis, that social and spatial relations are interconnected (Lefebvre 1991 ; Soja 1989) enabled a discussion on *non-places* (Augé 1995; Bauman 2000), as a product of the transformation of spatial practices and social relations, which are

defined by the logic of excess (excess of time, space and information). According to M. Augé, “if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 1995: 77–78). A problem of non-places, which produce an experience of loneliness, reducing social interactions in public spaces to a few scenarios, could be used as a starting point for examining emerging alternative forms of sociality in public spaces.

¹ And which originates from an opposition between “geometrical space” and “anthropological / existential space”, discussed by M. Merleau-Ponty (1962).

Although the authors, who discussed a phenomenon of *non-places*, developed different typologies of *non-places*, there is a common paradox: *non-places* seemingly are to be social, while social rituals, inscribed in spatial organization of *non-places*, “create solitary contractuality” (Augé 1995: 94):

As Z. Bauman notes, “the main feature of the ‘public, but not civic’ places [...] is the *redundancy of interaction*. If physical proximity – sharing a place – cannot be completely avoided, it can be perhaps stripped of the challenge of ‘togetherness’ it contains, with its standing invitation to meaningful encounter, dialogue or interaction. If meeting strangers cannot be averted, one can at least try to avoid the dealings” (Bauman 2000: 105).

Is it quite by chance, that creative actions in public space, such as flash mobs, performances and urban games, which are initiated by enthusiasts and public artists, as a rule are arranged in the places, that Z. Bauman marks as “*non-places*”? Train stations, public transport, especially metro, supermarkets become a stage for emerging temporal solidarities and an arena for creative experiments, which at first glance seem to be arranged “just for fun”, but in recent years have become a widespread tendency. Proposing a form of social interaction and breaking a taboo of “talking to strangers” (Bauman 2000), creative actions in public space encourage new solidarities.

While recent discussions on new identities of urban places (place branding), which are inspired by the concept of “creative city”, do not focus on the micro-processes of everyday sense-making, it could be agreed with G. J. Ashworth and B. Graham, who notice, that “the increasing interest of official government agencies at various levels in ‘sense of place’ [...] further increases the potential for contestation between such official representations and unofficial narratives of place” (Ashworth, Graham 2005: 221). It could be useful to examine the process of “place-making”, initiated by citizens, who deal with a problem of “*non-places*” on practical level, as active interpreters of urban space. In this paper we are going to consider, how citizens

deal with the problem of deactivated public spaces and how a new identity of *non-places* can be formed in conditions of limited resources. There are at least two tactics of making sense of a place, which can be used by activists and creative practitioners: 1) reinterpretation of the existing routine scenarios, proposing alternative ones, which draw attention to the potential of a certain place, 2) reorganization of spatial structures of a public space by installing new objects, which start attracting passers-by and provoke an active interpretation of it. Both tactics imply the idea of building a new experience of a place.

It was the Situationists who proposed to arrange “emotionally moving situations” for to activate citizens toward everyday urban settings and were looking to build a new kind of interactive and eventful urban environment in the late ‘50s. Nowadays it is various flash mobs, urban games and playful installations which reconfigure everyday urban experience by disturbing everyday routes and routine behaviour. Of course, there are much more tactics of place-making, which citizens can use, and which could be considered as creative ones, but by performing and encouraging an alternative behaviour in public places, the mentioned types of reinterpretation of public space reveal, how place identity is “created and recreated by the actions of people” (Ashworth, Graham 2005: 221).

Performing alternative “choreography” in public spaces

An increasing activity of creative practitioners, who initiate mass-actions in public spaces, deconstructing an everyday urban routine, evokes a series of questions: How do these actions affect public spaces? What are the main components of these actions and how do they “work” together, what effects do they produce? Such campaigns as “Free hugs”, flash mobs, dancing or singing performances, which are being arranged by groups of enthusiasts and sometimes by actors, presuppose an intensive bodily participation in the “action”. As a rule, a proposed scenario (hugging with strangers,

“freezing”, dancing, singing in public spaces) differs from routine behaviour in public places (train stations, malls, and squares), and brings a special attention to movements and trajectories of the participants of creative action.

These campaigns establish an alternative “choreography”, i.e. a specific use of spatial structures and characteristics of movement in *non-places*, which commonly are described as transitional spaces that are supposed to be crossed, passed for achievement of the ultimate goals. But even those *non-places*, which are created for a long being (as motels), “discourage the thought of ‘settling in’, making the colonization or domestication of the space more than impossible” (Bauman 2000: 102). In this context performance in public space can be considered as an act of “domestication” of *non-place*. It is not by chance that one of the popular flash-mobs, which takes place in shopping malls, is “sleeping in public”: participants bring pillows to a mall and imitate sleeping, laying on the floor and benches.

A metaphor of “choreography” could help to reveal the interconnection between bodily experience and spatial structures, which shape our experience of the place and in their turn, are being formed by citizens’ bodies and actions in public places. But it is also the conceptualization of a dance as a *spatial practice*, which “presents representations of bodies in spaces, their relations to the spaces and to other bodies” (Briginshaw 2001: 5–6). There is a mutual interconnection between spatial elements and everyday bodily (as well as emotional) experience of the place. The idea, that bodily experience is embedded in urban space and could be used as a “tool” for an active re-interpretation of public places by inventing an alternative way of using them, is rooted in the idea of M. Merleau-Ponty that bodily experience is embedded in space:

“By considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and moreover, time), because movement is not limited to submitting passively, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which

is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 102).

The idea was developed by the authors (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989), who analysed the interplay between social and spatial relations and who argued, that “it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived – and produced” (Lefebvre 1991: 162). Moreover, a metaphor of choreography (being understood as “interplay between body and everyday settings”) includes a dimension of intersubjective relations. “Choreography” of participants of creative campaigns differs from that of passers-by, and thus creates conditions for a conscious relationship with your own bodily experience. In this sense flash mob and various performances are a playful deconstruction of routine scenarios, which we use in public space avoiding contacts with strangers and behaving “as a normal passer-by”. On the other hand, participation in these actions implies synchronization with people around (taking part in event together with accidental strangers, making something together or even synchronizing each movement during a short period of time), and brings a rare experience of togetherness and proximity to other citizens. These playful acts of de-alienation reveal the potential of streets, squares and molls to be places for intensive interaction and joy. The initiators of creative actions use a potential of public spaces for establishing bodily and emotional contact with passers-by. In many cases passers-by are invited to take part in the event, but even when they remain just surprised viewers, a usual distance between passers-by is being overcome, as participants of creative campaign appear to be a person next to you.

Temporal solidarities and emotional experience

By initiating and participating in urban events, which set up an alternative model of behaviour and reshape routine routes and dynamics, new solidarities are being developed, some of which are temporal, and some become long-term ones.

After taking part in one or more playful actions some citizens become faithful participants of creative campaigns, and gather in a temporal group of enthusiasts for to spread the idea of the event in their hometowns. Creative public actions could be described in terms of social innovation, as they result in new configurations of meanings, connected to a certain public place (and in this sense, they re-invent “lost” places). Exploring the innovative action in community, N. Duxbury notes, that “innovation is relative to its context; what is usual practice in one community may be an entirely new idea in another. Thus, in situ, innovative action is doing something out of the norm, something new to that situation or context” (Duxbury 2004: 3).

A vivid example of spreading social action, which was primarily based on personal experience, is “Free Hugs Campaign”², which was initiated by Juan Mann in Sydney in 2006, and since that time has been repeatedly arranged in many countries around the world. According to the initiator of worldwide “Free Hugs” campaign, the inspiration for this campaign was the experience of loneliness he encountered when he arrived to Sydney after being absent for a long period of time: “Standing there in the arrivals terminal, watching other passengers meeting their waiting friends and family, with open arms and smiling faces, hugging and laughing together, I wanted someone out there to be waiting for me. To be happy to see me. To smile at me”. To hug me. (“Free Hugs Campaign”, official site).

Flash mobs and urban games are quite usually articulated by initiators and participants as a temporal solution to the problem of hunger for emotions and proximity. In many descriptions of playful urban acts, the most important place is reserved for describing emotional ingredients of the event. Moreover, a feeling of proximity and joy are normally considered as the aim of the whole event (e.g., as “ImprovEverywhere” collective announces on their official site, they cause “scenes of chaos and joy in public

places”³). Emotions as well as bodily experience are being actively discussed by initiators of urban campaigns, but what is more interesting, is that simple actions performed in public space reveal, that a private experience of loneliness and lack of community feeling is shared with other passers-by. They just seem to be waiting for the event, which would encourage citizens to share their experience. As the initiator of “Free Hugs Campaign” confesses, the idea to hug a stranger came to him spontaneously, it was inspired by a feeling of “being a tourist in his hometown”, and the beginning of the action was rather a private attempt to find human contact, while the campaign later became one of the most popular in the world: “I got some cardboard and a marker and made a sign. I found the busiest pedestrian intersection in the city and held that sign aloft, with the words “Free Hugs” on both sides” (“Free Hugs Campaign”, official site).

The initiators of flash mobs and creative campaigns in public spaces are quite similar to what Ch. Knight calls “outsider artists”, who “function outside of the art world’s conventions and constrictions” and have got an ability to translate “personal experiences into publicly resonant ones” (Knight 2009: 115). A vision of *non-places* as a playground for social interactions and as a place for shared experience is quite similar to a vision of urban space, which was developed by the Situationists in the late ‘50s. The important insight of this movement was the idea, that spatial structures produce certain type of behaviour as well as emotional experience and that certain constellations of urban elements are able to encourage citizens to participate actively in the reorganization of urban surrounding (Čhtčeglov 1958). According to the Situationist authors, a new architecture should be “detoured for the purpose of de-alienation” (Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961). Recognizing the importance of the emotions in urban experience, the Situationists developed a thesis of necessity of arranging “emotionally

² See <<http://www.freehugscampaign.org>>

³ See <http://improveverywhere.com>.

moving situations" (Debord 1957) through architecture and happenings. From this perspective creative public actions are quite productive methods of articulating urban experience and rearranging emotional landscape of the city. By disturbing usual scenario of being in *non-place* they establish a reflexive distance with usual choreography of the place. Therefore flash mob actions and various urban games can be considered as a tool for reconceptualization of spatial structures and social order, embedded in urban space. But it is no less important, that creative actions in public space establish temporal communities of passers-by, who share the interest of spending some time together, sharing emotions and taking part in something different than everyday routine.

Prolonging an event: platforms for shared experience

It should be mentioned about the role of media in prolonging the experience of urban events. Participation of photographers and film makers has become an essential ingredient of urban games, flash mobs and various campaigns. Being a form of participation in the event, photographing and filming provide participants of the event with the look of an external observer (and a witness of creative actions), and in some cases dictate the choice of a place for the event. In announcements of mass urban actions it is quite usual to invite photographers to take part in the event or to encourage participants to take photos during the event and post them at some sites in the Internet afterwards. Pictures and videos prolong the experience of the event, encouraging participants to search for familiar faces and to find the pictures of situations they have not noticed while taking part in it. Even if flash mobs take only several minutes they get their continuation on the Internet in social nets. Sharing impressions and (again) emotions is a crucial part of any social action, and participation of photographers guarantees, that the event will be lasting for some time in virtual

space. That is why the existence of functional platforms for communication within emerging citizen communities is important: Facebook groups, flicr-pools, You Tube channels, and all kinds of blogs are effective tools for community building, providing a virtual "place" for sharing an experience of an event.

Conclusions

Creative actions in public space may be considered as a form of an active reinterpretation of spatial and temporal urban structures and regulations, which shape everyday bodily and emotional experience of a city. They reveal the interconnections between spatial structures and everyday practices by proposing "choreography", which differs from routine behaviour: e.g. to stop in a crowded place of hurrying passers-by, to sing in a place where only official announcement sounds, to dance in a waiting room, etc. Alternative models of behaviour, which are performed by creative practitioners, use the potential of public places, but what is more important, they become a form of communication between passers-by, turning *non-places* into a space of shared experience.

Musicals in public, dancing flash mobs, hugging campaigns spread across the world and can be repeated in every *non-place*, which "accepts the inevitability of a protracted, sometimes very long sojourn of strangers, and so they do all they can to make their presence 'merely physical' while socially little different" (Bauman 2000: 102). Diffusion of playful scenarios is grounded in the same specificity of *non-places*: according to Z. Bauman, despite the variety of forms and design, they produce alienation in similar way. It could be, that a short-term effect creative actions produce is the most effective tactics of sense-making, which turn non-places into a place of shared experience and playful experiments. The question is, how this form of social (inter)action will develop and how new forms of creative reinterpretation of public space will change them.

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VIEŠŲJŲ ERDVIŲ GAIVINIMAS: NUO NE-VIETOS LINK KŪRYBINĖS SĄVEIKOS AIKŠTELĖS

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Miestelėnų inicijuojamos kūrybinės akcijos viešosiose erdvėse analizuojamos, pasitelkiant M. de Certeau pasiūlytą bei M. Augé ir Z. Baumano išplėtotą *ne-vietų* sampratą. *Ne-vietos* (oro uostai, prekybos centrai, traukinių stotys ir t. t.) yra erdvės, skirtos masėms cirkuliuoti ir palaikančios kiekvieno miestelėno atskirtumą. Neturėdamos savo istorijos, jos sukuria matomą atvirumą, tačiau priešinas pastangoms paversti jas intensyvaus patyrimo vieta. Tačiau kaip tik erdvės, kurias minėti autoriai priskiria prie *ne-vietų*, XXI a. pradžioje virto miestelėnų kūrybinių eksperimentų taikiniu: žaibiški sambūriai (*flashmob*) ir performansai demonstruoja, kad jos gali virsti intensyvios žmonių sąveikos vieta. Šios akcijos aktualizuoja kūnišką ir emocinį miesto patyrimą, o jų pagrindu atsiranda naujos solidarumo formos. Nors minėtų kūrybinių akcijų poveikis trumpalaikis, jos atskleidžia viešųjų erdvių potencialą ir gali daryti įtaką vietos tapatybei.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *ne-vietos*, kūniškas ir emocinis patyrimas, kūrybinis veiksmas, žaibiškas sambūris.

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