

# CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SHARED MEMORY: A COMPARISON OF SUPERKILEN AND PIAZZA D'ITALIA AS CASE-STUDIES OF CONTEMPORARY "PLACE"-MAKING

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**Resumo:** A sociedade de consumo contemporânea cria espaços estandardizados enquanto referências comuns à escala global. É um sistema de sinais condenado a celebrar eternamente um presente funcionalista. O Homem transforma-se no que se espera dele: um consumidor anónimo de um "Non-lieu" (Marc Augé). Um "Lieu", por contraste, medeia entre indivíduos e encoraja à emergência de uma vida e memórias coletivas, que vão para além do cumprimento das meras obrigações funcionais. Neste desejo de dar significado ao enquadramento arquitetónico, as alusões vernaculares podem ser potenciadas.

Tendo por base a Superkilen de Copenhaga e a Piazza d'Italia de Nova Orleães, este artigo aborda as questões do lugar, função, reciprocidade e apropriação, procurando a aproximação ao momento em que os sinais de cultura criam sentido e estimulam mudança.

**Palavras-passe:** Lugar; Identidade; «Supermodernity»; Cidade.

**Abstract:** The contemporary consumer society creates standardized spaces as common references throughout the world. It is a system of signals doomed to eternally celebrate a functionalist present. Man eventually transforms into what is expected of him: an anonymous consumer of a "Non-lieu" (Marc Augé). A "Lieu", by contrast, mediates between individuals and encourages the emergence of collective life and memory, beyond fulfilling its functional obligations. In this desire to give meaning to the architectural setting, vernacular allusions can be harnessed.

On the base of Copenhagen's Superkilen and New Orleans's Piazza d'Italia, the paper discusses questions of place, function, reciprocity and appropriation, trying to approximate the moment in which cultural signs create meaning and stimulate exchange.

**Keywords:** Place; Identity; Supermodernity; City.

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## INTRODUCTION

The link between spatial form and social behavior has been a constant question in the history of human sciences. It remains a vital one regarding issues of heritage, filiation and identity in today's "supermodernity", as defined by anthropologist Marc Augé, that is characterised by the acceleration of time and the erasure of spatial boundaries. As part of the consumer society phenomenon, standardized spaces are created as common references throughout the world, denying the *hidden dimension* described by Edward T. Hall. In reaction to this paradigm of a functionalist present emerges the quest for a "Place" (Lieu) that mediates between individuals and encourages collective life and memory, beyond fulfilling functional obligations.

In the history of architecture, the public square has often been seen as a manifestation of a localised culture. It is, according to the urbanist and academic Kevin Lynch, a node that acts as a memorable space in which the user's attention is particularly focused<sup>1</sup>. The node is a crossing as much as a concentration of urban life. For Hannah Arendt, this *agora* is the «central space of freedom of the polis»<sup>2</sup>. Yet in 1974 Richard Sennett was one of the first to denounce the death of public space as a consequence of functionalist urbanism and the evolution of western society<sup>3</sup>. And in a similar vein, Rem Koolhaas observed twenty years later how contemporary cities had become generic, having sacrificed their identity in favour of similarity<sup>4</sup>.

As a matter of fact, public space has been in the focus of academic research for the last three decades. But the impact of supermodernity on the design and use of public squares is to be studied, as it raises the question of "proxemic spaces", a concept theorized by Hall. Our aim is thus to compare two public squares that are emblematic of their era: Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans and Superkilen in Copenhagen. Both use an elaborate architectural language with cultural and historic references in order to engage and stimulate with and between target groups with an immigration background. They do so through the grafting of exogenous elements with partly similar visual effect (neon lights, strong colors).

The aim of this study is not to revive the controversial battle about architectural postmodernism. On the basis of two public squares that have been conceived as "Places", the comparison scrutinizes the concept of cultural quotation and endeavors to identify the moment in which vernacular signs create sense and stimulate exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> LYNCH, 1960: 48.

<sup>2</sup> ARENDT, 1995: 76.

<sup>3</sup> SENNETT, 1974: 12.

<sup>4</sup> KOOLHAAS, 1995: 1248-1264.

It does so on the base of Marc Augé's notions and Marcel Mauss's definition of the *gift*. Edward T. Hall's concept of "proxemics" defining the human use of space serves as a constant reference for the understanding of culture as a spatial parameter.

## 1. ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

### 1.1. Piazza d'Italia

The construction of Piazza d'Italia in 1978 is the result of two initiatives: the desire to commemorate the local Italian community – who co-financed the square – and the city's attempt to counteract the increasing decay of the Downtown area. The Mayor of New Orleans therefore organized an urban design competition for the development of a marginalised block that had recently fallen into public ownership. The winner was asked to collaborate with his competitor Charles Moore, who eventually took the lead of the design. Working with the Urban Innovation Group, Moore designed six major elements in what is reminiscent of a Serlian scene: a black-and-white circular flooring pattern, a cascading fountain in the shape of Italy with Sicily at the centre, five connected colonnades with partly invented orders which respect Vignola proportions, a central arch as the layout's focus, and two entrance pavilions. Flashy colours, neon lights and modern materials are Moore's signature. Even though meetings with the Italian community were held, the project's interpretation of cultural context remains on a somehow pictorial level, a fact that is exemplified by the allegedly spontaneous decision to use an Italian map in order to «represent» Italian culture (« What could be more Italian? »).

The scheme's centre piece around the fountain was meant to be hidden from the surrounding streets, to be discovered only in a north-south movement through the block with a scenographic play of controlled vistas. So, Moore took a stance opposing to the context's layout: the surprising, monumental and expressive architecture of the square contrasts with the grid streets and the anonymous buildings which tire pedestrians and diminish their sense of space<sup>5</sup>. In reality however, the urban renewal stopped so that the Piazza d'Italia has never received the building frame that it spatially requires. What was meant to become the magic centre of a closed building mass remained an ill-positioned object on its own, flattened by the adjacent tower and ignored by the surrounding parking lots.

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<sup>5</sup> HALL, 1996: 115 and 146.

## 1.2. Superkilen

Superkilen is the result of a limited competition organized in 2008 by the City of Copenhagen and Realdania, a Danish foundation. Situated in Nørrebro, a residential neighbourhood marred by several riots, the competition's program aims to provide the district with more functions through a project of «international standing» that addresses the specific demands of one of Denmark's biggest immigrant populations. It must, at the same time, become an attraction for the whole city. The competition was won by a team comprising BIG, Superflex and Topotek 1. Opened in 2012 on former railway wasteland, the outcome is a linear hybrid space that intersects several blocks and connects two major streets. Divided in three sections – the red square, the black market and the green park – the design integrates on its whole length a winding bike lane and fills the space with urban furniture, signs and exotic trees from the populations' countries of origin. Participative meetings were organized in order to identify the most appropriate objects, often on the base of photographs. These were afterwards purchased, imported, or copied, with the complication of adjusting them to Danish safety standards. Given the project's large scale, the items are just scattered on the pavement design, which is animated with topographic variations and grouping of trees. People have thus the possibility to walk, rest or play games and do sports in this fluid composition that mainly expresses movement and transience, almost as a supermodern space.

## 2. THE CULTURAL AND SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

### 2.1. Public squares as proxemic places

In 1962, Charles Moore wrote: «Our magazines are filled with handsome photographs of buildings. But our environment grows messier, more out-of-touch with the natural world and unfriendly to human life»<sup>6</sup>. According to Marc Augé, the corollary of globalization is the claim for individual: there is a «clamour of particularisms» according to which each person in Western societies sees himself as a world. This point of view has parallels in Richard Sennett's thought about the city experience, which, I quote, «puts at stake questions of identity»<sup>7</sup>. Finally, Edward Hall tells us that «People cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful

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<sup>6</sup> KEIM, 2001: 88.

<sup>7</sup> SENNETT, 1994: 82.

way except through the medium of culture»<sup>8</sup>. Hence the question of how to address, architecturally, the need for identity and “proxemic data”, which is exacerbated by “supermodernity”?

Despite two different approaches, Copenhagen and New Orleans public squares blend with a particular urban context while deducting from it their architectural features. Both squares build a new context on the basis of a hybrid language mixing items of both globalized and localised cultures, of history of architecture as of urban current trend. There is no question of great taste, aesthetic diktat, or even of preconception about the useful, sentimental or bizarre qualities of the elements used. Without any intention to educate people, it's a way of planning that piles up and interlocks various symbols. And these symbols call out to people's perception and are tuned in with their individual spatial culture, according to Edward Hall's theory. Cultural quotations in these public places cut off from car traffic – which, according to Hall, annihilates social contact – are a way to enrich the individual's psychic life and to strengthen their sense of belonging to a social group. This is what Edward Hall names the therapeutic use of space<sup>9</sup>, a principle according to which the Italian map and colonnade, the Japanese octopus or the Iraqi swing can be equated with “frames of references” in this world “overwhelmed with data”<sup>10</sup>.

In Copenhagen especially, the square's layout could go with a lack of composition but it seems to implement the principle of distances described by Hall, that each person, according to his or her culture, defines the relationship of the “Other” to him or herself (privacy, meeting, be visible or not...). Openness is the keyword that tends to desacralise this public square conceived as a sequence of places to discover over time. Besides, BIG's process to survey local residents, exemplifies two essential principles from *The hidden dimension*: to see man as an interlocutor with his environment and to base the rebuilding of cities upon the understanding of man's proxemic needs. Nonetheless, there is never any guarantee of unanimity since the colours – red, black and green – were condemned by some people as celebrating the Palestinian flag. On the other hand, if we can be sure that a Spaniard can identify the typical black cow, nobody is saying that he can recognize the Italian lantern: a certain percentage of illegibility and ambiguity remains, what Charles Moore deliberately sought in his work. Here is the union with postmodern architecture: to define another language without imposing a unique truth.

The intention of objectifying cultural dimension can fail to create a proxemic place. If Superkilen seems to be quite a success, Piazza d'Italia has been rapidly

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<sup>8</sup> HALL, 1996: 188.

<sup>9</sup> HALL, 1996: 188.

<sup>10</sup> HALL, 1996: 188: 7.

seen as a failure. Is it because the Italian community was quite excluded from the process so that the square is the result of an architect imagination? According to Charles Moore, cultural meaning belongs to architectural form: so, building a meaningful place equates with representing Italy in the heart of a baroque layout. Moore, who is cultivated and enthusiastic about Disneyland and fountains, likes complex layouts mixing order with surprises and ambiguity: spectators reflect on what they see and are thus involved in the architectural project. In his book *Intentions in architecture*, historian Christian Norberg-Schulz claims that in architecture, «a meaningful message presupposes the use of symbol-systems which are connected with systems of expectations. [...] The message has to contain a certain moment of surprise, without breaking completely with the expectation»<sup>11</sup>. Unlike Superkilen, the Piazza in an enclosed space with a very precise scenography, situating the body with great precision in its spatial context. Moore imagined people walking in it, discovering the details little by little, in a way completely opposed to what would be expected in a Euclidean urban schema.

But if we consider the persistent identity issues resulting from the difficult reunification of Italy, is it possible that the Italian community – mostly Sicilian – was indifferent to the allusions to Hadrian's Villa, the Trevi fountain or an “arc de triomphe”? How consistent is a project that, on one side, wishes to highlight community identity and on the other side, add a Latin inscription saying the Piazza is a gift for all people, without talking about Moore's fanciful transcript of Italy? In the end, the problematic of the situation, yet promising, is the spatially undefined relationship to the Italian community: the surroundings of Piazza d'Italia counted at the time very few residents, Italian or not. Some comments describe the community as being happy but repelled by the neon lights which evoke cheap spots. But there is an alternative reason to the square's desertification: five years after being unveiled, Charles Moore observed its disrepair. A space needs to be kept up in order to maintain its popularity otherwise what was intended to be a magical and memorable place becomes something empty and even dangerous. Despite a restoration in 2004, the square remains something curious but not a place of sociality. A few months ago, the City announced the completion of the plot, according to the first plan: will the Piazza be finally a Place? In any case, this underlines the absurdity of the project's setup – a square followed by enclosing buildings –, and the importance of architecture as a frame and condition for place-making.

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<sup>11</sup> NORBERG-SCHULZ, 1968: preface and 60.

## 2.2. The public square, a symbolic gift?

The intent to bring through the public square the sense of common adherence to one and only social totality evokes Marcel Mauss' concept of *gift*. *Gift* is a hybrid<sup>12</sup> gesture combining liberty, generosity and obligation, which has the power to set off, quoting Mauss, «that fleeting moment the society 'happens'»<sup>13</sup>, outside the market economy. Transposed within the scope of contemporary urbanism, *Gift* may be a public space gathering together what is separated and revealing, I quote, «a shared meaning for people accepting that symbol»<sup>14</sup>. Superkilen and Piazza d'Italia aspire to such a goal: the free enjoyment of something beneficial with, in the end, the revitalization of a city district. These places expose work on cultural individuality, citizenship but also on temporality: they crystallise past, present and future at a given location in order to "make society". This political decision is confirmed by the manufacture of the squares, since cultural elements are not just deterritorialized but locally translated: TOPOTEK 1 stresses that most of Superkilen's components were produced in Denmark, just as the Piazza's elements are *in situ* creations. BIG does not put the Moroccan fountain in the middle of a garden or a courtyard but in a free space. In this sense, Edward Hall claims that, I quote, «whenever there is cross-cultural borrowing, the borrowed items have to be adapted. Otherwise, the new and the old do not match, and in some cases, the two patterns are completely contradictory»<sup>15</sup>. So in light of both Mauss and Hall theories, Piazza d'Italia and Superkilen could be interpreted as symbolic productions and resources.

In Copenhagen, there was a great need to establish peaceful relations and to consolidate the existence of a common space, beyond symbolizing solidarity between the city and its inhabitants. Thus, Superkilen illustrates a break with segregationist urbanism focused on the fear of others that condemned philosopher Michel Foucault with his concept of *biopolitics*<sup>16</sup>. The hundreds of cultural objects, as an update of secular sculptures in public squares, and regardless of their artistic value, meaning and design, their utility or uselessness, involve some values of the *gift*: "put together" through aesthetic or playful connections. This could be compared to what Mauss calls the symbolic exchange<sup>17</sup>. Thus, Superkilen's creators (City, Realdania and designers) accept the quest for individual identity as long as it doesn't conflict with the common society. Seen from this perspective, the Danish case is quite a

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<sup>12</sup> MAUSS, 1997: 267.

<sup>13</sup> MAUSS, 1997: 275-276.

<sup>14</sup> MAUSS, 1969: 151.

<sup>15</sup> HALL, 1996: 107.

<sup>16</sup> FOUCAULT, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> MAUSS, 1997: 270.

typical example of public works project, dealing with integration issues through an experimental approach to place-making.

Nevertheless, if Superkilen faces some criticism (political correctness), Piazza d'Italia was and still is fiercely condemned for failing to convey adequate political ideas<sup>18</sup>. Proud, Charles Moore was satisfied that so many people have reacted to one of his favorite places. Here, we can understand Moore's specific perception of public space: the rise of a privatized urban culture and the leisure consumption that Disneyland embodies make public space, as it was converted so far, obsolete. This perspective would explain the spectacular Piazza in the heart of a commercial district: beyond the Italian references, it represents the values of society. In that way, the neon lighting alludes to the commercial "bad taste". Does this mean that the Piazza is a partly subverted *gift* or that it is just a donation without a donee? It is obvious that the place's program is exposed to the risk to a subjective interpretation that any architect makes of the symbolic dimension. But be that as it may, the political actors must be invested and reliable in order for the *gift* to "work".

### 3. PUBLIC SPACE AS A *READY-MADE*: DUCHAMP IN THE CITY?

With his urinal set in a museum, Marcel Duchamp asked us to change our established habits and to consider our life experiences as aesthetic marks. When we look at this Donut sign put up in the middle of a public square, it is legitimate to ask if this collage of heterogeneous objects is not to be connected to a *ready-made*. Can't we see in BIG's process a form of an aesthetic populism inherited from *pop culture*? Sometimes perceived as a culture of sham, *pop culture* is indeed characterised by a limitless extension of what is cultural. By comparison, although it is wrongly reduced to something ironical and flashy, Piazza d'Italia represents a real reflection on the emblematic forms of Italian heritage, associated with contemporary popular ingredients: the way architectural citations are used in the form of colonnades, arches and bell towers, expresses the belief that their sole existence signifies a common cultural reference and causes a reaction based on a shared sense of memory and beauty, comparable to a Greek ruin in an English park. But from the public's point of view, the gap between the history of architecture and the postmodern "ugly and ordinary architecture" – as Robert Venturi said<sup>19</sup> – seems unacceptable.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Moore: "I was surprised, therefore, when an article about the Piazza d'Italia, published in *Progressive Architecture* with a very supportive critique by Martin Filler, brought an avalanche of mail (architects' avalanches of mail are of a size that would depress a rock star), much of it criticizing the Piazza d'Italia for failing to produce adequate political insights." KEIM, 2001: 308.

<sup>19</sup> VENTURI *et al.*, 1987: 137-143.



Superkilen, for its part, reveals a formalistic process without any cultural elitism, a worldwide reproducible method because Nørrebro's social reality appears to be as singular as universal. In line with this, and as a paradoxical result, Superkilen would answer to our societies' injunction of communication, which inserts images everywhere. Yet, the excess of images and spatial references can transform the city into a palimpsest that is unreadable and disembodied. As Marc Augé explains, «supermodernity makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with exoticism»<sup>20</sup>. Both history and exoticism «play the same role in it as the 'quotations' in a written text»<sup>21</sup>. Besides, in the light of our consumerist time, the issue of urban art conceived as a *ready-made* is that of lassitude. In that way, Superkilen's objects could be read as an exhibition of isolated items that could at any time be substituted for more successful curiosities. What would count is not the meaning but the success of the objects as articles of daily use. This is underlined by the designer's selective process. As a consequence, does this collage mean the impossibility to reconcile so many identities and activities into one coherent *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a principle the Piazza illustrates? In the end, the long-term quality of Superkilen's space in terms of architectural composition relies essentially on the floor's design.

## CONCLUSION

Identifying what is a place and a non-place is not a straightforward process. Augé himself has retrospectively declared that such a differentiation depends on each user's relation to a specific space: somebody visiting the same spot frequently – meeting the same potential interlocutors – might finally acquire the relational, historical and identity-concerned relationship to it that Augé defined as a prerequisite for a "place". Eventually, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this study: the required sensations of surprise and familiarity might not be enough to generate meaningful places and the concept of "non-place" might have to be understood as a metaphor for globalization's impact on the built environment rather than a category of analysis. A fundamental distinction between Superkilen and Piazza d'Italia consists in the relationship between client, donor and addressee, despite their shared destinies as drivers for urban change. Beyond the location and the municipal maintenance, which are decisive factors in the "Place" process, both the activities and the community are substantive: they refer to the definition, content and frame of culture, in the sense given by Hall. In New Orleans and

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<sup>20</sup> AUGÉ, 1995: 110.

<sup>21</sup> AUGÉ, 1995: 110.

Copenhagen, the playful activities are conceived to act as complement or even substitute for symbolic meaning in a society with unclear points of reference. But if, with its signs, the Danish square is only verging on the supermodernity's pitfall, it surely highlights the reality of contemporary cities seeking to market themselves and gain competitive advantage over other cities through a spectacle-architecture that uses cultural and historical codes as a major ingredient of "exceptionality". In the short or medium term, we can thus imagine a *mise en abîme* of cultural signs in the public square that might mean the planned obsolescence of the "hidden dimension". Still, we have to acknowledge that Hall's theory is depending of his own context in the 1960's, which is characterized by ethnic and spatial segregation. There is nothing here in common with Norrebro and its mix of immigrant groups coexisting in the same district. In this contemporary situation, the aim of serving differing needs in terms of spatial culture turns hence into an ever more demanding task. As Superkilen and Piazza d'Italia show, physical movement and play might be a part of the answer.

As a final note, it shall be emphasized that the authors focused solely on the analysis of the program, the implemented design and the few published critiques. Building on the decisions taken by the designers, they did not survey the user experience. It thus would be a potentially revealing exercise to verify some of the here presented hypotheses on site. This finally raises the question to what extent "meaning" could differ from success.

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