The Changes in Character of the City Center in Sofia

From Fragmentation to Opportunities for Recapturing the Social Significance of the Public Environment

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide insight into the repercussions of the recent changes in power structures and economic system in Bulgaria on the architectural features of public spaces in the city center. Within the general instability and confusion, increasing deterioration of the public domain is observed and this is interpreted as a field of opportunities through which the meaning of architectural environment as support of public life and its social significance could be regained. Whether and how this potential can turn into quality depends on a variety of factors, some of which are suggested as areas of inquiry. These include value systems of the society and the architectural practice respectively and their relationship.

The architectural environment cannot fully determine the public life of a city, rather it can support the attainment of the practical and spiritual needs of people, expanding experience while allowing for dwelling. In a general condition of confusion and deterioration observable in almost every aspect of life in Bulgaria resulting from the fragmentation of power, the change of the economic system and the instability of values, the weight of responsibility concerning the qualities of public space tends to shift. It is important to identify the changing features of public space in relation to the forces effecting them. Thus directions of inquiry into conditions promoting positive developments could be recognized in terms of aspects of cultural wealth of the society as well as in terms of reassessing the role of the architect-planner.

THE SOCIALIST PERIOD:
Centralized Power - Public Space - Citizen Relationship

Focusing upon the way in which the public space accommodates inhabitation seems important because it reveals various aspects of their relationship including intentions and meanings. Due to its control over function and space, architecture can be employed as a mechanism to construct power relations (Ingraham,1992) conceived in the organization of space (Kostof,1991; Markus,1993) and the treatment of its borders (Castillo,1992; Plummer,1991). Through the study of these aspects the principal deficiencies and contributions of centralized planning, design and execution can be pinpointed.

The features of civic and public spaces in Sofia and other larger or representative towns of Bulgaria show similarity with other 'grand' spaces produced by strongly centralized power. Scale is an important tool in achieving grandiosity. It can disperse life, as well as bear feelings of awe, asserting the image of the state power in a direct way. The vast scale superimposed on the existing city fabric is made effective both in terms of space and in terms of monofunctional governmental buildings, non-public in essence, stretching over whole quarters. A contrast to the cramped and frequently chaotic centers of capitalist cities is aimed at and achieved by an impressive spacious setting.

The monolithic unified image and the finality of the architectural statement, in cohesion with the straight wide streets and barren spaces, imply ceremonial and processional intentions, as well as promote order and control (Kostof,1991; Plummer,1991). A conscious application of the ideas of unity, clarity and monumentality to declare and maintain dominance can be identified especially in the radical interventions asserting the political / governmental kernel in the city center (Castillo,1992). Dominance is made still more tangible by employing the spatial symbolism of location - the new complex occupies the core of the oldest settlement, thus subordinating preexisting and future public buildings. Here public use other than organized performances is largely discouraged and individual interpretation is precluded.

The spaces providing for daily use show similar features of tight functional fit, as well as clear and firm boundaries. In contrast to the "urban slip over" program of the power center (Castillo,1992;p.278), the public services infrastructure was established over time in a cumulative manner. The attitude there was characterized by reuse of preexisting places, upgrading and additions. Since the existing street formations were retained, the scale factor is less overwhelming. The unification of existing variety and the intention of restraining individuality were accomplished through the monotonous color scheme and the integrative standard design of interventions.

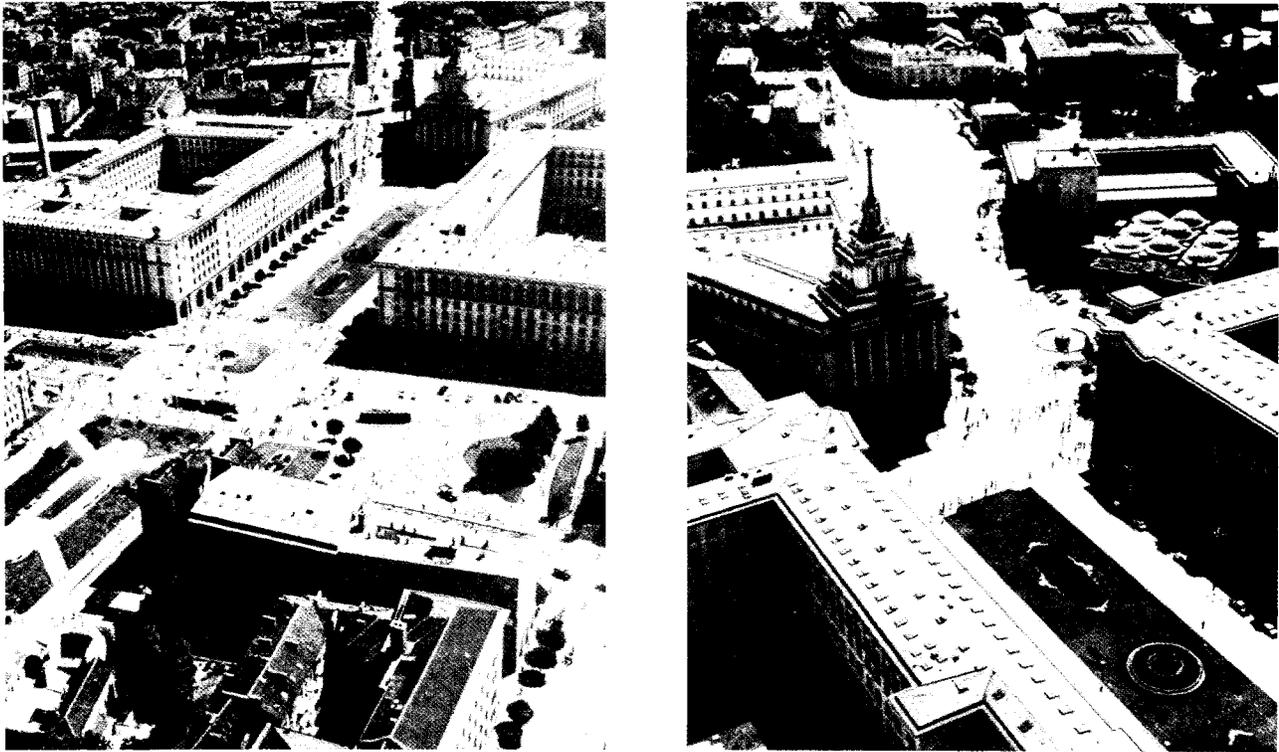It must be pointed out, on the other hand, that through

Fig. 1. The Ninth September Square and the 'Largo' with the Party Headquarters Building (1952-1957)

centralized planning, design and implementation, the economically weak functions and services, accessibility, safety and security were sustained and promoted. Facilities for health care, recreational, social and cultural activities were distributed and coordinated through normative bases, which on its turn corresponded considerably to needs of society. They were expressive of a certain scheme of priorities and have supported a sense of care - important in relation to the social significance of the urban environment.

The other aspect deserving attention is the quality of permanence. It could be identified in the preservation policies, acts of conservation and revitalization of historical monuments and fragments, programs of reuse and rehabilitation. The built environment was in a state of slow change. The perception of relative stability and lasting quality was supported by requirements of coherence in interventions and the application of mainly traditional construction techniques within the city center. A consistent attitude to the selection and use of materials was also observable. All of these maintained the social orientation of the city spaces.

The controversial characteristics of the built environment outlined above brought about various tensions between built environment and use. In order to interpret the conditions of standard behavior, lack of identification and finally, disinterestedness, several factors need to be further considered. It was the State which, through its policies, programs and implementation, was in charge of the assignment of roles, the selection of symbols and the interpretation of history (AlSayyad, 1992). Thus, formation and articulation of space

act as tools for asserting a certain social order and organization. In addition to the command of initiative and responsibility, extensive administrative mechanisms made power both distanced from people and inconceivable by them. The effect of space was emphasized through strict control over the public places, limitations of personal freedoms (Castillo, 1992) and the persistence of these over a considerable time span. This clear role distribution, conveyed both spatially and politically, leads to disinterestedness and lack of identification, where society is subordinate rather than participant.

THE CHANGES:

Consequences of the Fragmentation of Power and Deterioration of the Public Environment

Recent restructuring and fragmentation of the centralized power into smaller units - both economical and administrative, both governmental and private, transition to market economy and restitution of private ownership, are some of the factors with important consequences for the environment, society and life in general. All of these developments are proceeding and all of them occur within the general condition of economical and political crisis (Troeva, 1994).

In spite of the fact that the changes in the built environment in the city center are as yet limited to a small scale, and can be observed as minor interventions on facades or fillings, their impact on public spaces is considerable both in formal and in functional terms.

With the legislative system lagging behind, the decision making process has a haphazard character. The absence of formations representing the public interest and capable of opposing the private initiative tend to lead to functional impoverishment. The spectrum of facilities related to culture, health care, education and social services is observably reduced to commercial ones. The usurpation of public space by private owners and the rupture of continuity due to private power units seeking impact on the public scene also bear negative effects. To further their image, architecture is employed for its visual effect, its capacity to provide 'identities' - now as tool of fragmentation, asserting individual power identities. The 'democratic' implementations advance a rapid 'cosmetics' of colorful attacks on the 'consumer', revealing a changing value system. This process indicates an attitude towards architecture as temporary, disposable entity, its 'changing' status - this time subordinated to diverse powers, frequently aggressive.

Another aspect of the functional shift is the growing tendency of replacing residences with business units leading to destruction of established communities (Troeva,1994). Thus, the negative effect of the already existing functional segregation is being augmented into a government / business district.

Additionally, lack of security, safety and absence of control and maintenance of the public spaces discredit them further and lead to another type of tension between environ-

ment and inhabitation and another type of spatial segregation, which is social too.

DISCUSSION

Focusing upon image and functional aspects of the urban environment in relation to urban life does not comprise an encompassing analysis of the two urban situations indicated above. Nevertheless it provides grounds for the consideration of several aspects pertaining to the qualities of the city center. Furthermore a comparative analysis could prove fertile for developing both design and legislation guidelines. These can be based on urban values, some of which come to the fore in this initial survey.

Existing urban values, at risk:
1. condition of permanence and care, social character
2. correspondence of needs and facilities, provision of economically unprofitable ones
3. lasting quality resulting from the slow pace of change of the built environment
4. cumulative character, variety
5. selection and use of materials and construction methods,
6. accessibility
7. security, safety and maintenance

Emerging urban values, potentials:
1. democratization process, participation, responsibility
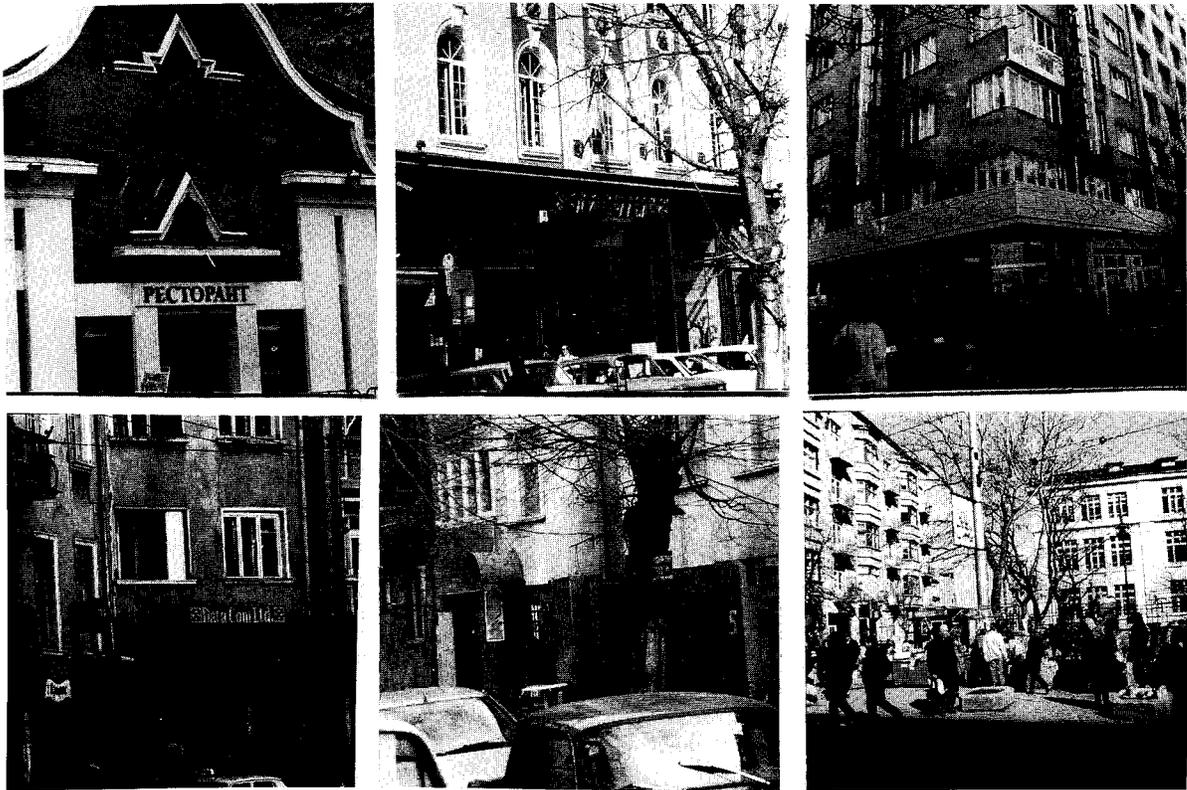2. social climate, freedoms

Fig. 2. Restaurant in place of a cinema; previous fast food shop transformed into a bank; cosmetics shop occupying sidewalk in place of a restaurant; new shops in a predominantly residential area; garages turned into shops; spontaneous food stands in an area of luxurious shopping

3. initiative from below
4. diversity, complexity
5. variety of choices in terms of form, activities
6. reduction of scale, relaxed boundaries

The inquiry into the features of the public environment established during the Socialist period in Sofia related to the circumstances and forces effective in its formation supports a disclosure of the condition of architecture as instrumental to the ruling power. Deficiencies such as the assertion of clear power relations by conscious manipulation of space in terms of structuring, scale, uniform and finished image and monumentality can be identified. These result in uniform experience, standard behavior, lack of individual identification, development and involvement, additionally reinforced by the policies of control of social behavior and limitations on individual freedoms. In alliance both are strongly affecting the social climate - an essential factor in the formation of public life.

On the other hand the centralized planning, implementation and maintenance has to be acknowledged as the mechanism making the urban values established during the same period possible.

Conversely, the release of centralized power and democratization processes open up possibilities to overcome some of the negatives and deficiencies of the Socialist period. Therefore it is crucial to realize and utilize the latent opportunities of the current radical changes. A state of awareness and alertness of the society generally and the professionals specifically could lead to their emancipation through the destruction of various myths instrumental to the state-power and through that to the possibility of recreating the social quality of the urban center.

The deterioration occurring can be seen as a condition which can lead the public - the citizens, to the realization of the fact that the common space, the urban setting, is not provided for or imposed by some distant and impersonal power, but has to be defended and negotiated. This awareness is one step towards a different consciousness and by extension - a different attitude, which can receive expression and support in the urban environment.

A fertile situation towards democratization can be utilized in the vacuum created by the lack of a distinguishable organization of the decision making and implementation processes. The fragmentation of power, its personification and conceivable scale and transparency before its institutionalization make the formation of corresponding communal and public forces possible. Thus, one of the important aspects of the social significance of architecture - a collective and also personal state of involvement, concern and identification might replace the conditions of indifference and alienation.

Diversity can be evaluated as the long overdue release of differences that can promote an awareness of the presence of others, an "understanding of the experience of difference as a positive human value" (Sennett,1991;p.97). Through raising the capacity for ever more complex experience, the city can develop its role as a humanizing and socializing factor (Berleant,1974).

Since the social center of space is its boundary, the process of taking possession of the street by private enterprises can turn into a contribution to public life in terms of richness of choices and events as well as images, while germinating transitional layers of space, relaxing firm, tight boundaries and reducing scale.

Society and architect

In addition to the urban values outlined above, society can be addressed in terms of values determining its concepts of quality as well as its attitudes towards achieving it. Essentially the extent of overlapping, differences and mutual influences of the divergent value systems - traditional, imposed Socialist and emerging - could highlight two levels of consideration concerning society, both of which could inform the planning and design processes:

1. Conceptions like collectivity in relation to the individual, involvement, responsibility and respect, social practices, attitudes to the public domain can be inquired into with the aid of social sciences and support a deeper interpretation of spiritual and societal expectations of the users.
2. Aesthetic concepts, choices, preferences, the art of building and the understanding of appropriate use of materials, which could be approached by studies of these different value systems, are also important considerations in relation to culture and can provide valid guidelines for design.

The unsettled, dynamic condition of conflicting values makes their transformation into discourses, practices and institutions a problematic and extensive process. Therefore, in contrast to the characteristic dependence of the profession on political and economical circumstances, its responsibility in the current situation in Bulgaria is of extreme importance. Being at the crossroads both in terms of ideas and in terms of models of built environment,
much depends on the design attitudes of this transitional period. The tendencies of functional impoverishment, fragmentation and chaos can be curbed by maintaining coherence and thus the continuous quality of the environment can be sustained. This means that the impact of new powers needs to be blended to the existing in order to enrich the environment rather than to dominate it. In relation to the functional aspect the import of the architect is limited, market values would be effective until policies and legislation become adjusted to the new circumstances. Nevertheless consumption of images, exchangeability, aggression and chaos of urban form are very much in the scope of control of the architect and can be opposed, as monotony can be, for they undermine the feeling of hope essential for the creative participation in the urban setting.

An awareness of the limitations of the determining 'powers' of the environment and a conscious opposition to being instrumental to ideologies or acting as aesthetic authority comes to the fore as morality of the profession. The profes-

sional needs to maintain a more democratic, less ambitious understanding, inviting an active, poetic and humane involvement. Lacking still and crucial to the quality of the public domain is the 'message' to the individual. An active relationship can be established only if the fact that meaning is completed through the dynamic human participation is acknowledged by the professional. Therefore, providing for the richness of form versus neutrality without determining the experience with final and single ended statements, organizing the productive perception of complexity in an unfolding process (Sennett,1991) can support the restoration of human dignity, the value of the individual who has been dwarfed and neglected for the wrong priorities like ideologies, functionality, efficiency, the car, the state, the economy. Addressing the individual, providing for comfort and development, for rich inspiring experience in the public realm seems to be one valid way of relaying the sense of care, respect and consideration. Inspiration of participation, imagination and action are some features along which a more humane environment can be differentiated.

The humanizing power of the urban environment can be activated by developing functional variety, accommodating a width of occupations and interpretations. Social services and functions that may be unprofitable relate a statement of priorities and values, as does continuity, attained by maintaining the cumulative attitude and character of the urban center, an aspect which cannot go unnoticed by the public and asserts the condition of responsibility.

The study of the environment in relation to public life offers clues to a more tangible formulation of aspects supporting its social significance. A purely 'architectural' - formal discourse proves insufficient to confront the fact of that the same physical environment can house the different urban life conditions implied above. A study and interpretation including sociology, politics, economy as well as design as factors may lead to a deeper understanding of their effects on the public realm, their relative weight and relationship in a specific situation and thus inform the formation of its conception in a concrete as well as open-ended context.

The power of architecture as urban setting is not only or necessarily in its ability to serve large or small powers, but its capacity to give room to and to support the unfolding of the essential dynamic party of the city - urban society.

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