

**PUBLIC SPACE
AND NORMALIZATION OF SOCIETY**

Architectural Association, School of Architecture, Landscape Urbanism, Contemporary Landscapes, 2007/2008

Author: Tomaz Pipan

INDEX

1. LANGUAGE, REALITY, NORMS	3
2. CONSENSUS	4
3. DELEGATION	7
4. SCHIZOPHRENIA.....	10
5. DIVERSITY	12
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

1. LANGUAGE, REALITY, NORMS

“English is the largest human tongue; its variety, subtlety, and irrational idiomatic complexity make it possible to say things in English which cannot be said in any other language. It almost drove me crazy... until I learned to think in it – and that put a new ‘map’ of the world on top of the one I grew up with. A better one, perhaps – certainly a more detailed one.”

“But there are things that can be said in Arabic that cannot be said in English.”

Jubal nodded. “That’s why I’ve kept up my reading.”

“Yes. But Martian is so much more complex than is English – and so wildly different in how it abstracts its picture of the universe – that English and Arabic might as well be one language. An Englishman and an Arab can learn to think each other’s language. But I’m not certain that it will ever be possible for us to think in Martian (other than the way Mike learned it) – oh, we can learn ‘pidgin’ Martian – that is what I speak.”¹

*Robert A. Heinlein,
Stranger in a Strange Land*

* * *

Language is the one human trait that gives us the ability to communicate and to form our reality. On the basis of linguistic unity one is able to perceive and ‘communicate reality’ with others, thus enabling one-self to function in a collective. The organization of people into productive collectives is the basis for doing things in an organized manner. Without this predisposition our civilization would not exist. Working towards a common goal is what makes possible all that we have and are; cities, countries, art, philosophy, history.

However, organizing and achieving unity requires more than just a blunt instrument. It requires leadership; leadership that focuses the creative power and will of individuals, for there is no anarchic organization that would be able to facilitate the strife for a common goal. For this we need roles of engagement, ways of conduct and norms that define the boundaries of a collective’s common reality. The norms of a certain collective are transmitted from generation to generation through which cultural continuity is assured and the civilization continues. Normalization of individuals and their integration into a working society is achieved through interaction with already ‘normalized’ individuals by the leadership. Ways of doing this can be diverse but all of them have something in common – the physical space where these transmissions from leadership onto subjects take place; the realm of public space. We could argue that public space – space of interaction – is but one of such normalization devices, nevertheless its significance is even more evident as it represents a single physical space where the ruling regime has an opportunity to influence individuals directly, and in some cultures, vice versa.

¹ HEINLEIN, Robert, A.: *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 286, Ace Books, New York, 1961

If we return to arguments about perception of reality, we could stipulate that those who speak the same language and are of the same socio-cultural descendants, perceive reality within a field of similarity that is dissimilar from another socio-cultural reality. Therefore it stands to reason that there are also different approaches to how the norms and social frameworks are delivered and upheld. The more pervasive and greatly embraced 'reality' and norm diffusion is one set forward by Western society and cultural tradition. But who are we to say it is the only correct one? By being of this framework it is hard for us to understand and fathom the credibility of another. Who are we to say that our way is the final and indisputably right? If we would judge on the basis of recorded history, who is to say, for instance, that the Chinese way is not just as credible as ours? For to understand the Chinese usage of public space we must first embrace the fact that China is a great civilization with thousands of years of history and that history dictates a dense and thick cultural framework that cannot and should not be disregarded. By acknowledging this, we realize that delineation of reality perceived through Western eyes could be much different from Chinese reality which maybe impossible for a Westerner to comprehend all together. Nevertheless, in this short paper I will aim to present a comparison of these two very different ideologies, and through my Western eyes attempt to understand the ways in which both traditions approach the diffusion of norms into society and the ways they treat public space as a mechanism for doing so.

2. CONSENSUS

The inability to form one state is what made Western society so pervasive. Starting with polis organizations in ancient Greece, and continuing to medieval city-states of Europe, the idea of loosely connected rival political organizations perpetuated the ever present competition and progress. On the basis of that, a mutually beneficial instrument of some degree of tolerance had to be present in order for these city-states not to drive each other into oblivion. If we introduce the philosophical legacy of democracy that started with Plato and augment it with its descendant development and infusion of personal rights, we can understand that consensus is the operating principle that governed political decisions and social normalization. The aspect of social normalization supports the idea that there is a mechanism of 'educating' the common people so they conform to certain goals.

Public space is a place where social norms and ways of conduct are transmitted. The manner of transmission is of up most importance and is a central subject of this paper. Public space functions not just as space where norms and proper behaviours are delegated by the leadership, but also acts as a space of negotiation between the people and the state. The accepted behaviour is not something that is hierarchically asserted and imposed; rather it is a mediation between personal rights and normative demands of the leadership. Therefore, Western public space should be understood as a subtle machine where the state indirectly, through various instruments, 'entangles' an individual into a complex socio-cultural relationship that expects of him / her certain ways of conduct in order to function. Through this interwoven web the directness and imposing character of the leadership is obscured and diffused, giving room for consensus between the individual and the state. Western society is therefore based on a fragile relationship between the state and the individual through the public. This public is the sphere of choice, where the ruling principles are ones of agreement and

contract. Peter Rowe gives us an example from medieval Europe; the role of Piazza del Campo in Sienna.



Piazza del Campo, Sienna, Italy.

“The strong overall shape of the piazza, for instance, with its relatively plain surface, as well as historical and mythical references, formed a robust framework for all manners of use. [...] the self-same size, scope, grandeur, public iconography, and program of the Campo was and remains a constant reminder to future governments and societies of their civic responsibilities. [...]the program, form, and symbolism of Piazza del Campo embraces everyday life, provided an appropriately formal setting for government, projected a sense of civic well-being [...]. Further, the Piazza del Campo amply provided a place for collective practices and rituals, like the pugna of old, the palio, and the passegio, as well a place for individual habitation experience”²

The Piazza as a normative device embodies two very important notions. Firstly, as previously argued, normalization and the integration of individuals as productive members of society is here achieved through various instruments, for example, public events. This is a self-regulatory instrument used by society to remind individuals “of who they were and what was expected of them. In this last respect the Campo was more than public, more than a matter of access or of the right of expression and display. It produced an aura, recalled fine moments from the past, and provided palpable guidance about what form of public behaviour was not only acceptable but preferred.”³

On the other hand the Piazza also functioned as a reminder to the government that it is in fact serving the society and that it should achieve some level of consensus in order to rule. This aspect is very significant as it denotes the most basic principle of Western society, the principle of personal rights and freedom on one hand and duties of the state toward individual and society on the other. The relation between the state and the private rests upon the public accountability of institutions in a democratic society. This postulation accounts for the emergence of a third player, an intermediary element that enables the eligibility of democracy and consensus through institutions that are free from direct political influence and control.

The normalization mechanisms outlined above are not bound to a specific time in the history of Western society as they could be traced through every historical period and continent. At the same time, mechanisms of conformation become much more subtle and sophisticated over the course of history. Central Park in New York provides a

² ROWE, Peter, G.: Civic Realism, p.p. 37-38, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997

³ Ibid.: p. 7

suitable case study in this instance. Although the outlined function of the park is not the only reason for its existence, it can be seen as an important one.



Central Park, New York, USA.

Central Park was envisioned as a central body of ‘tamed’ nature that would give the local population a retreat from the noise and chaos of the city. Yet Central Park became more than just a retreat, it was a place where different social groups, rich and poor, immigrants and locals were able to interact and meet. With its distinguished refinement of nature it gave a sense of formality but it was an informal gathering space none the less. The combination of these factors could be seen as a device to ‘civilize’ the worker and immigrant class and make them more like the ruling elites in terms of conduct and behaviour, thus trying to lessen the social and cultural tensions between them.

“...antebellum elites could mingle with immigrants to the city away from the frightening confusion, strangeness, and uncertainty of densely packed streets.”⁴

In other words, Central Park provided a ‘common ground’ for people of different customs and social backgrounds to meet and learn to live with one another, thus enabling the individuals to normalize (and aggregate) into a productive society. Furthermore in the best spirit of personal freedom, democracy and consensus, going there was not an obligation but rather a ‘normative privilege’ enabled by the leadership with a subtle note that the “feeling of having fun but also being on good behaviour [should] often commingle in park users. It is not like playing in the block or hanging out on the roof. It is another place entirely, on a higher civic plane. Putting on one’s ‘Sunday best,’ to use the time-honoured phrase, usually implies a certain conformity with the modes and manners of day”⁵.

Along the described lines we can follow a line of enquiry that presents the reasons of organization of public space on the basis of particular historical spatio-political structures of Western society and its way of dealing with this fact. In this manner we can also trace the historical background of China in order to devise a relevant comparison model of usage of public spaces. Just as we start to think about this, we realize that the historical spatio-political organization of China took a completely different path, one of a consolidated nation-state as opposed to a meshwork organization of city-states in Europe. This fact alone allows us to speculate the fact

⁴ ROWE, Peter, G.: Civic Realism, p. 154, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997

⁵ Ibid.: p. 158

that the implementation of norm diffusion and usage of public space could be entirely different.

3. DELEGATION

Instead of rivalry and meshwork organization, Chinese history is one of consolidation and introversion. From ancient times of empires to the modern times, China managed to retain unity and some level of cohesion. The country's ability to do this comes from strict governance where leadership defuses the social norms much more assertively and openly than it is the case in Western society. An important factor that made this open delegation possible is the philosophical and sociological framework of Asian society in general and spawns from a Confucian ideology attached to a Meritocratic governmental system⁶. Although the Meritocracism can be disputed to some extent, the main ideological concept is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural history. Here we are referring to the importance of rights and obligations. In Western society rights come first, in Chinese it is just the opposite: obligation is a more important merit for individuals and this is the basis on which one's normalization and integration into society is judged.

“The belief that citizenship somehow confers individual rights (whatever they may be) is a distinct Western and more specifically American conception. Although political theorists remind us that rights must be balanced by duties, the roster of citizen duties in Western-style democracy is quite short: to live within the law, to pay taxes [...] In China, the emphasis is the reverse of this: in a society still permeated by a Confucian ethos, where one's identity, based on the patriarchal model of the family, is determined by one's relations to specific others, obligations always come first, and privileges (rights?) second.”⁷

In other words, the Confucianism, through emphasis of duty, constructs a reality in which individual personal well being and rights are consequential to one's execution of duties and obligations. At this point it should be mentioned that this modality of reality does not mean that it is tied directly to a ruling regime but should be viewed more broadly, as a pervasive aspect in all segments of one's life. Nevertheless, in terms of the diametric relationship: individual – leadership, the notion has significant repercussions. It enables the leadership to assert the norms more openly as the individuals are much more prone to accept their duties and responsibilities without questioning their rights as they are regarded rather as a consequence than as a fundamental given.

The repercussions of the outlined principle, on usage and construction of public space, are a diametrically opposing reality to that of the West. It delegates a strong centralistic authority and direct presence of leadership in public matters. The normalization of individuals is strictly guided and supervised. The centralistic ruling can be disputed. This is especially so in the face of China's immense size, where the

⁶ Wikipedia states: Meritocracy is a system of a government or another organization wherein appointments are made and responsibilities are given based on demonstrated ability (merit) and talent rather than by wealth (plutocracy), family connections (nepotism), class privilege, cronyism, popularity (as in democracy[dubious – discuss]) or other historical determinants of social position and political power.

⁷ FRIEDMANN, John: China's Urban Transition, p. 91, University of Minnesota Press, 2005

opposing argument postulates that it is not possible to govern such a large area centrally and that there actually were local, unofficial governing instruments in Chinese history. Nevertheless it has to be emphasized that these unofficial governing bodies had to strictly adhere to centralized wishes; as long as they did, they were valid. An example of this informal – formal relationship is the public space of *yamen*: “the most immediate and frequently encountered form of imperial authority”⁸ during Qing dynasty (the last ruling dynasty of China - 1644 to 1912).



County-level yamen in Qing dynasty.

*“The county yamen served also as the main center for negotiation between bureaucratic government and informal authority. This sub rosa activity was important function of the country yamen as its most visible public undertaking. In short, the country-level yamen served both as the leading instrument of public authority and as the primary arena of public exchange. Because of the diversity and significance of these functions, the county yamen was exceptionally busy institution, astir ‘from sunrise to sunset.’”*⁹

Yamen was the focal point of an administrative city and the presence of authority could be sensed in its formal and metaphysical attributes. One could tell an administrative city apart from others by its imposing walls, gates and towers all acting as symbols of imperial might. The layout of the city was hierarchical and ‘bureaucratic’ as well – with its orthogonal layout of streets and city gates. The yamen was further accentuated as a walled governmental compound and it was not just an office of a local magistrate but served as his living quarters as well.

Although the yamen was one of the most direct instruments of governing individuals, being so assertive and direct, it was disband. Subsequently in the beginning of the 20th century, the Qing dynasty instated a new police program. But the police as an entity was a completely different construct from that in Western society: hence it might just as well not be called police. Since we have no other term for it, police should suffice. The policeman had a broad range of responsibilities, from mediating disputes, controlling traffic and fighting crime, to the regulation of economic, cultural and political activities. The police were in essence a direct personification and embodiment of the ruling regime: implementing its norms and rules of conduct.

The public space described along these lines fundamentally differs from the one of Western society. We could name the two public spaces presented by their constitutive

⁸ FRIEDMANN, John: China's Urban Transition, p. 97, University of Minnesota Press, 2005

⁹ Ibid.: p. 97

differences as a 'space of consensus' for Western society and a 'space of power' for Chinese society. In the later, the normalization of the individual is much more direct and there is no necessity for an independent, intermediate element that would mediate between the state and individual. The norm dispersion happens one way hierarchically with no room for negotiation and feed back. The state is not in service to society and the individual, but rather the other way around; the individual has a duty to the state and by fulfilling that duty, one is granted rights and privileges.

Maybe the most complete and direct normalization of individuals can be seen in the communist era, where the government did not just control the individual's behaviour through the normalization of public space but became truly omnipresent by entering the private – personal sphere of home and family. The Confucian ideology was stretched to the limit by being employed as an instrument of the Communist Party; it was upgraded to what is today referred to as Maoism.

China's communist economic model relied on so called 'material balances' where basic needs were collectively provided thus inhibiting the role of currency as a mechanism of the capitalistic market. For this level of collectivism a completely new social structure was needed: one that the Chinese called 'socialist society'. To efficiently organize and manage society towards this goal, a commune system was introduced where cities were understood as machines of production and citizens were organized collectively into working units called *danweis*. A *Danwei* was an organization of individuals that substituted the family and lived inside a working compound. It was strictly delegated and organized, depending on the type and objective of the production. As Friedmann cites Gaubatz:



Danwei compound in communist era.

“The work-unit compound became a miniature city within its own walls, offering residents spaces for work and for play, for home life and for neighbourhood life. The highly controlled environment of the work-unit compound is entered through a gate. [...] Within the gate, the architecture is utilitarian and regimented. Production facilities and residential facilities are usually housed in separate structures. [...] Common areas between the buildings serve as bicycle parking lots, children's play areas, recreation places for volley ball [...]

[...] the ideas of social and spatial organization were creating distinctly undifferentiated social and functional spaces. ... Coupled with preferences for low-cost, low-rise structures, this resulted in the development of an urban environment

with three characteristics: generalized functional organization, low-rise standardized landscapes and the presence of 'walking-scale' of the city."¹⁰

As we can see, the civic public space as a place of negotiation got completely abolished, as the infusion of norms shifted from the public realm into personal, private space. We could say that the metaphysical civic and therefore public space, where the 'negotiations' (being one way delegated in China or bi-directionally consensual in Europe) between the public and the leadership, died out. All aspects of daily life became strictly delegated and organized by the Party.

The initial hypothesis that public space is the exclusive realm where the transmission of norms takes place seems to be challenged by the dissipation of the public civic realm as such. On the other hand, the previous passage could just as well indicate, that Chinese Communism made a step further and expanded the already pervasive assertion of norms from the public realm onto the private. This idea could be further substantiated by the fact that Communist public space is the most rational and proficient way of diffusing the social norms. Completely utilitarian space, geared toward one purpose only, to delegate the roles of conduct as efficiently as possible. Since there is no need to be mindful of how to disperse the norms, the palette of instruments is greatly enriched; "[...] the work unit (danwei) was the perfect institution of regimenting life during after-work hours. [...] Attendance at political study meetings was compulsory, team sports were favoured over individual forms of recreation, and propaganda movies were shown to groups regardless of personal preference."¹¹

Although Maoism was rather excessive and unmindful in its usage of instruments and was generally portrayed as inhumane (by Western standards), its 'Socialist Society' model and idea of socialist living had some positive consequences nonetheless. In favour of Maoism it should be mentioned, that although assertively, it taught individuals how to share and live collectively, not to think of one's individual and ego-centric self but rather of his or her collective. This notion enabled a very special industrial entrepreneurial business organization in the countryside called Town Village Enterprise (TVE). TVEs were one of the mechanisms that brought China out of its poverty and launched it as a formidable international player in a global economy.

4. SCHIZOPHRENIA

TVEs mark a significant change in Chinese culture, not so much as being a specific organization per se, but rather as the indication of a shift in thinking and direction of development. The 'material balance' concept of the communist era was not compatible with capitalistic model and therefore stipulated ever-bigger introversion and the autarkic nature of China. Consequently, Chinese economy required high internal rate of savings that relied heavily upon primary food production as the national economic base. This plunged China into decades of recession. Some most profound changes had to be made in order to restore economical standard, thus a shift from agricultural to industrial production was undertaken; a shift that required

¹⁰ FRIEDMANN, John: China's Urban Transition, p. 13, University of Minnesota Press, 2005

¹¹ Ibid.: p. 79

deviation from socialistic principles in order to tap into the ever growing global market. By opening up to international markets and the global economy, China's ruling elites had to significantly change their attitude. In short, a certain relaxation of the rigid and imposing ruling mechanisms had to be implemented, and more significantly, the permeation of a Western (liberal) way of the diffusion of norms, in order to comply with the globalized economic condition, was permitted. One is tempted to change the scale of thinking for a moment and look at the normalization of states as if being individuals in the public realm of the globalized world. By dwelling on this thought one can not resist to notice that the 'reality framework' that governs this globalized 'public' space is rather intrinsically Western.

Globalization has had severe repercussions on the organization and formulation of public space, especially the infiltration of Western society's ethos of rights; the 'egocentric' cult of an individual mashed with a Confucian ideology of duties. The new emerging schizophrenic space, stretched between two completely opposite ideologies, was now the new reality of Chinese public sphere.

Public space, although liberal on the surface, is still heavily influenced by the Communist Party. The rules and norms are still delegated and the spatial imagery and symbolism, although visually liberal and 'democratic' in appearance, stipulates the Confucian traditions of duties and responsibilities, infused with a strong Communist grip. The liberal and the civic sadly refer to the pursuit of material interests and personal hobbies, whereas the political sphere is another matter all together.

Western intrusion had a more significant consequence on the relaxation and liberalization of the private realm. The private sphere started to function as a buffer for the assertive nature of Maoist supervision of public realm.

*"The urban apartment with its new conveniences – TV, the Internet, refrigerator, air conditioning – is becoming a center of family life free from the snooping and constant supervision of party watchdogs under the danwei system, and the incessant struggle meetings and other collective activities that used to be thought of as the proper uses of leisure time under the Maoist regime."*¹²

Although the private sphere received a bigger share of Westernization, the duality of schizophrenia lingers on. Some might say it is just a transitional stage in rearranging the 'reality framework' but with a strong and deeply rooted history and culture it might just as well be a permanent condition.

*"In East Asia, the states are organizationally pervasive, without clear-cut boundaries. Their powers and functions are diffuse, and they pay little respect to due process. Consequently, the lines between public and private, political and personal, formal and informal, official and nonofficial, government and market, legal and customary, and between procedural and substantial, are blurred."*¹³

¹² FRIEDMANN, John: China's Urban Transition, p. 92, University of Minnesota Press, 2005

¹³ Ibid.: p. 108

5. DIVERSITY

The ideologies presented could not be more divergent in the ways they treat and inhabit the public space; the way of individual's rights of the West opposed to the way of individual's obligations of the Chinese. From this, two opposite realities, on a basis of distinct cultural history and linguistic material, are born. Two realities that now more than ever, are fighting for supremacy on the global stage.

The indoctrination with a specific reality is clearly inhibiting our capability of understanding the other; furthermore it perpetuates mistrust toward something that is not understandable. Clearly there has to be a fundamental shift that would enable us to see and acknowledge the difference in a way that does not paralyze us but work in everyone's advantage. The cultural differences and history upon which reality frameworks are constructed can not be easily dismantled, nor should they; maybe it is in the power of the language as such to bridge the gap between different realities. Maybe it is in our ability to communicate that we have to search for the possibility of acknowledging the differences and diversity.

Furthermore, the differences creating diversity, rather than being understood as deficiencies, should be acknowledged as opportunities to better ourselves. If nothing else, different modes of thinking give us unique opportunities to re-examine our reality and social framework and acknowledge its flaws and strengths. Therefore, difference is an important virtue, one that we have to uphold. As long as we stay critical, especially towards our reality, and try to understand that however perfect it may seem to us, it is not the only viable one.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

CARMONA, Matthew (ed.): *The Urban Design Reader*, Architectural Press, 2007

FRIEDMANN, John: *China's Urban Transition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005

LEFEBVRE, Henri: *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishing, 1991

ROWE, Peter, G.: *Civic Realism*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997