

The design of public spaces of exception in the contemporary city: The geography in the construction of public place (The case of the Porto seafront)

Introduction

The idea of a public space analyzed into explicit types and systems of continuous and well defined open spaces that, until the mid-twentieth century, used to constitute our main reference of public space, does not seem to be recognized in significant parts of the contemporary city.

Due to the expansion and fragmentation of cities, especially over the twentieth century, the relevant fact we consider important to note, is the progressive and unstoppable process of disaggregation (both physical and conceptual) between the concepts of city and public space that, until the nineteenth century, were permanently linked (if we consider the public space as the one that condensed organically the political, economical and social space).

On the other hand, due to the fragmented and discontinuous spread of urbanization (in different forms and in different degrees of intensity), the Portuguese and European cities have seen over the past four decades their urban condition profoundly changed, resulting in the standardization and disruption of public spaces and urban landscape around the main urban centers.

Taking into account this situation, the general question that this paper will seek to address (from the perspective of the urban design and urban culture) is the extent to which it becomes possible to give an exceptional character to urban public space in a time where urban societies seem to claim more individualized, more specialized and more enlarged forms of public space.

What can make a public space exceptional (from an urban and architectural point of view) “outside” the “traditional city”?

How can we design and build these exceptional public spaces in these parts of the city?

And to what extent are these singular public spaces relevant to the growth and consolidation of the city of the future, such as structuring components of possible systems of public space in more distended and enlarged urban contexts?