

# Passing or stopping by: Meeting points on the fly

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*ABSTRACT. In traditional nomadic societies, social life was created around mobile points rekindled in different places each time. After the settled urbanization period, where social life centred on fixed attractions, we are opening a new era, where thanks to technology, we are able to create meeting points on the fly. Contemporary public space for passer-by users will be again based on traces instead of lines, reflecting current reality far more accurately.*

*KEYWORDS. nomad/settlement/passers-by/virtuality/democracy/traces*

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According to the United Nations' International Migration Report 2010, that year about 214 million people lived outside their home country in our world. This amount continues to grow and is generally underestimated.

Although this is presented as a new situation, if we distance ourselves slightly and take a bird's eye view, we realize we are looking at five million years of movement compared to five millennia of settlement. In fact, inactivity is a brief interlude in the history of mankind. Man was born on the move.

The characteristic immobility of permanent settlement in a single place is dead, and it would be absurd to continue projecting based on it. The new nomad is no longer purely wandering through uniform spaces in cyclical periods. What will this mean for the contemporary public space?

If users come and go and even the environment changes, how should the city respond to the **passer-by**? The present city is torn between transient and permanent settlement, doubting whether to consider the floating population as part of the city or to continue conducting it as official censuses do, as visitors who stay in it for shorter or longer periods.

This is a transition moment that deserves reflection. Science writer Eduard Punset identifies the recent crisis atmosphere with the search for new mechanisms to replace, one by one, frameworks that were built ten thousand years ago, when transition from nomadism to agricultural settlement occurred.<sup>1</sup> Tensions created by the new nomadism that involves the global society we live in are convulsing our certainties at all scales.

We know that history is always written from the perspective of the sedentary, moreover, from the perspective of the sedentary and on behalf of a state apparatus, as Deleuze says. History has never understood nomadism. Even today we look with some suspicion current nomads, such as wanderers or gypsies, traditionally excluded from sedentary social life.

We want to clarify in this article the difference between the so called nomadic and the passer-by. Today the 'new nomadism' label is used indiscriminately to define the most diverse people: primitive peoples, collectors, hunters, shepherds, travelling farmers, gentlemen, sailors, pilgrims, minstrels, troubadours, workers, pirates, beggars, exiled, marginalized, merchants, explorers, temporary workers, homeless people, cowboys, migrant workers, political refugees, displaced persons, preachers, gypsies, artists, hippies, executives, and even tourists, gamers, mobile phone and the Internet users.<sup>2</sup>

Not all of them are nomads: not in every case their daily life involves a continuous journey carrying all their belongings. But they all share the ethical and cultural legacy of nomadism: movement is the essence of their existence.

So we do not see so easily that each of us has become a passer-by. The declining importance of the physical position compared to dematerialized communication networks, or transnational legal and economic formulas that determine the creation of a city are just two examples of the profound changes that are taking place in our cities. Citizens do not settle for life in a city, so parameters to choose a fixed place for the construction of a public space and the prediction of future use of that space might not always be effective.

Let's have a look at what has happened to the public space that has accompanied man throughout the **nomad>sedentary>passer-by** process.

Nomads measure space in days of travel. For them distance only means time. The first sedentary were the dead, who cannot continue the journey. Creations are valued according to their portability. The **nomads** provided the basis for all

civilizations, discovering fire, hunting, cattle breeding, language, letter, tool, art, religion, market, and even democracy.

**Public space** was created around the **fire**. These mobile points were rekindled in different locations every day, providing a place for social gathering and transmission of knowledge.

In 8000-5000 BC the Neolithic revolution carried a wide-scale transition of many human cultures from a lifestyle of hunting and gathering to one of agriculture and **settlement** which supported an increasingly large population. Small and mobile groups of hunter-gatherers that had hitherto dominated human history were transformed into sedentary societies. Settlers invented nation, tax, jail, saving and gun.

They chose certain exceptional places in the territory for edification. The city was based on lines instead of traces, and public spaces were built around social, religious or political points of interest. Social life centred on these **fixed attractions**.

That is how public space was created during the next millennia. Points of interest, which structured community spaces, swung from the social in the Greek agora to the religious around cathedrals, covering economical in the medieval, market squares and also politics, whose core buildings were representative of power. Architects worked hand in hand complying with the custom design of these locations to represent sedentary social life.

Nevertheless little by little deep changes were introduced in the way people communicated. Transmission structures transformed man's relationship with space and how they communicate with others. As we will see this eventually led to the **obsolescence of designed public space** as a stage for social life in the city.

Regarding the technique it evolved from linear structures dependent on a specialized receiver to interpret the message, such as telegraph, to the current dematerialized networks, in which the receiver itself becomes very easily to a new issuer. Walter Benjamin showed the change that the transportable image, the 'mirror in motion', meant for the actor. Comparing it to the man's romantic surprise facing his own view in the mirror, the German author claims that the mirror image of the actor goes further, breaks off and is transportable.<sup>3</sup> The self-alienation that carries the representation of man turns him through unlimited reproduction into a permanent exiled.

Permanent exile, a feeling as disturbing as familiar. Thanks to e-mail, addresses are not postal anymore, associated to a particular location. The phone number is no longer tied to a fixed point. If someone wants to contact us does not depend on our return to home.

Which impact has this made on the public space? At first it seemed that society was aware of the value of these **new forms of social interaction**, and the natural sites for post or telegraph offices were the intersections of the streets or squares. Some time later public phone booths were located in the same common places.

There came a time when public space was unable to absorb media's huge change and right now we see empty public spaces in our cities, where the only thing we can do is to remain seated. Meanwhile call shops are, due to their long opening hours, converted into new **community spaces** where simultaneous realities converge through a simple call.

These advanced urban models go beyond the limits of physical distance, bringing individuals nearer and making them more intimate with their daily lives, which happen simultaneously on two different places. The term proximity takes on a new

meaning; it has nothing to do with distance. The individual feels like a stranger in public spaces that city offers to him and he goes to these places in order to meet and share experiences with people in the same situation. Nicolas Bourriaud aptly explains this behaviour, comparing the experience of the actor in the early era of technical reproducibility with the contemporary passer-by,<sup>4</sup> forced both to establish their **identity in an unstable environment**; a lack that encourages us to join an identity provider community or to the opposite, a pure constructivism. Architects' work reveals unnecessary in places where urgent needs are others.

It would be a great loss if public space is not able to respond to passer-by contemporary users' demands. If we want to avoid it we must get rid of disciplinary prejudices and work with the same dynamics that the environment we live in does.

It is essential to give up central morphology as the code to explain the reality of contemporary territory. Marshall McLuhan wrote his last book, *The Global Village*, talking with his friend and collaborator Bruce Powers during the decade of 1970. It presents the dichotomy between Visual Space and Acoustic Space. The true nature is acoustic and has no centre, consists of unlimited accidental resonances.

According to the Canadian author **print media** encourages and preserves the **visual perception of space**; however, like television does, database technology, satellite communications and **global media networks** are leading their users towards a more dynamic, **multifocal Acoustic Space**. With great acuity he predicted that by 2020, the United States will acquire a distinctive psychological change from a dependency on visual thinking, uniform and homogeneous variety of the left hemisphere, to a mentality defined as multifaceted configurative thinking, defined as right hemisphere's audio-tactile way of thinking.<sup>5</sup>

And definitely new forms of public space will be created. Therefore it seems evident that what has worked for settled agrarian societies is not useful anymore in nowadays' globalized context. But we do not want to sing the praises of the possibilities of the technique to suggest that the role of public space's **corporeity** shifts to the background. We have just detected through a historical search some hopeful clues in public space. The natural sites for post or telegraph offices were the intersections of the streets or squares; later public phone booths were located in the same places, and after a brief period in which interaction with others moved into Internet cafes and call shops, it now appears that the public space returns to action as the backbone of the city scene.

As noted above each of us is a passer-by. We move from one city to another because of work, the products we consume travel across many borders, our savings are invested in business located in remote countries and meeting with our relatives often occurs virtually. And thanks to our **mobile communication devices**, we do not need to use a square as a fixed meeting point, but that same public space becomes something that takes on a completely different meaning.

Sociologist Saskia Sassen uses extreme cases as a base for analytic tactics. Stating an example is always an easier way to illustrate what is meant, so we will rely on the controversial and recent case of **Tahrir Square** in Egypt.

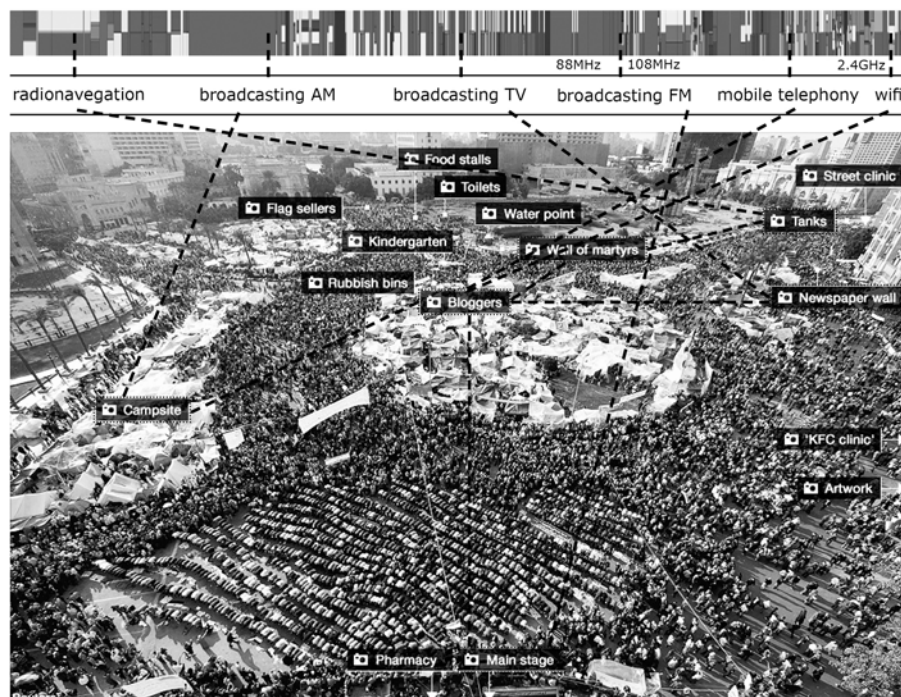
In this case we will see how the conjunction of **democracy** willingness and **technique** allowed a place to become a real passer-by public space. From the 70's Tahrir Square in Cairo was merely a busy traffic circle. The power organs of the Mubarak government were aware of what a place where citizens could meet to share ideas involved. They fenced the site using political design to discourage democracy. Until January 25, 2011 when, inspired by the Tunisian revolution, thousands of people began to demonstrate through the streets of Cairo. The role of social networks was critical. It allowed to cross the wall of fear: knowing in advance

that thousands of people are going to appear in D-Day and H-Hour guarantees that you are not going to protest alone exposed to the repression of the system. The successful creation of **meeting points on the fly** was about to convulse the entire Arab world.

15000 people marched that day in Tahrir Square. Protesters kept in touch with the rest of the world to report what was happening in real time, increasing the impact of the physical action through social networks. The regime quickly realized the consequences this could have and for the first time in history a government cut off all access to the Internet.

French philosopher Alain Badiou argues that the earliest forms of a change in the world or an 'awakening of history' are those that are visible in the event but whose future is not yet predetermined. These three indicators are **intensifying**, -as the source of all is the distribution of the different intensities of existence-, **contraction** -situation is contracted in a kind of representation of itself, a metonymy of the whole situation-, and **location** -the urgent need to build symbolically significant locations where the ability of people to determine their own destiny will be visible.

Tahrir Square was already designed as a public space of the city but had a completely different character. Suddenly in one physical location several **simultaneous realities overlapped**. The order was imposed by the moment of use. In the same physical space appeared radio navigation of military tanks, mobile phones, television broadcasts, the GPS, radio communications, spreading via the Internet and so on, each moving in its own frequency range (Fig.1).



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Badiou's assertion makes it clear that pure **virtuality** was not enough, since we know the country had no Internet access for six days and at the end of them reached one million demonstrators. But the importance of technology to create meeting points, to work as a communication platform and as a spreading tool that the government could not control was crucial.

Our discipline has traditionally been associated with a static sedentary society. Not only because of its fixed structures, but because their users and spaces also were. This has now changed but our programs, spaces, devices, in a word, our architecture, has not.

But as French economist Jacques Attali states "Trade globalization will continue accelerating the migration of people, businesses and things; it will create new categories of travellers, -such as executives, expatriates, urban nomads, 'road-movers', backpackers, electronic travellers-, and invent new tools for real or imaginary trips." More and more passer-by users, environments and constructions will demand a public space according to their nature.

A common place where our physical **position** will not be as important as our **disposition** to participate, which assumes common minimum codes that allow individual navigation and common encounter.

In traditional nomadic societies, social life was created around mobile points rekindled in different places each time. After the settled urbanization period, where social life centred on fixed attractions, we open a new era, where thanks to technology, we are able to create meeting points on the fly. The **public spaces** that are built in the city will again be **based on traces** instead of lines, reflecting current reality far more accurately.

## Note

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<sup>1</sup> PUNSET, E., 'Nómadas otra vez' in his *blog*, available in <http://www.eduardpunset.es/10678/general/nomadas-otra-vez>

<sup>2</sup> ATTALI, J., *L'homme nomade*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2003, p.12. (translation by article's author)

<sup>3</sup> BENJAMIN, W., 'La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica' in *Obras libro I/vol.2*, Madrid, Abada editores, 2008, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> BOURRIAUD, N., *Radicante*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo editora, 2009, p.46.

<sup>5</sup> MCLUHAN, M., *La aldea global*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1995, p.93.

<sup>6</sup> BADIOU, A., *El despertar de la historia*, Madrid, Clave Intelectual, 2012, p.94. [Le Réveil de l'Histoire, Paris, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2011.]

## Legends

(Fig.1) *Tahrir Square 2011-2012*. Photomontage made by author of the article.

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## Biography

**Arantzazu Luzarraga Iturrioz** holds a Master in Advanced Architectural Projects from Polytechnic University of Madrid (MSc 2011, La Caixa Foundation Scholarship), and a Professional Degree in Architecture from the School of Architecture of University of Navarra (MArch 2008). She has worked as a professional in Spain, Switzerland and Chile. Currently she is PhD Researcher with full dedication funded by the Basque Government in the Architecture School of Madrid ETSAM-UPM, where she develops her thesis entitled 'Transeúntes: dispositivos contemporáneos de lo nómada', within the Research Group 'ProLab. Laboratorio de Investigación del Proyecto Contemporáneo'.