

The right to move freely in the urban environment

David Kullock. Buenos Aires

In as far as the city is the setting for social life, so the possibility of moving freely within that setting is a vital condition for knowledge, participation, integration and enjoyment of the spectacle offered by urban society as a whole.

The street is the urban element that allows said movement, qualifying it and giving it its characteristic features.

THE STREET, PUBLIC SPACE PAR EXCELLENCE

The street as a single unit and the network of streets and roads as the system which brings them together, form intrinsic elements of the city. Without them the act of urban sociability is not possible.

The interaction between built-up areas and public roads represents the interface between public and private worlds, at the disposal of all users of the city's streets.

In this sense public roads constitute common property, a community heritage which was born out of and developed in order to satisfy social needs.

Said characteristic is far from being a norm instituted at particular time, given that the streets were not devised to solve a specific problem, but rather are the product of continuous historical and intergenerational development.

On the other hand, besides being born for the use of all a city's inhabitants, the use and maintenance of the streets is and has been paid for out of the public purse, made up of the different contributions made by the community itself, thus making the streets public in both origin and destination.

Beyond being the means to satisfy the constantly changing functional needs of a community, the streets are also the living expression of each city in each moment of history.

Seeing as they are open to all inhabitants regardless of social class, age or sex, the streets make up the democratic setting par excellence; they allow for freedom of expression, the recognition of cultural and social diversity, the communication and the formation of a collective point of view.

Their functions form part of urban man's experience and they transmit a certain style of use and valuation of that use. In this sense they are bearers of cultural identity and display a symbolic character that goes beyond questions of circumstance or sectorial suitability.

THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL NATURE OF THE PUBLIC HIGHWAY

Movement is the main function of public highways, given that this is the basis for urban mobility: it allows means of transport of all kinds to flow from one place to another, and from this principal function, others extend (economic exchange, social interaction, etc.) that together structure the city and condition its development.

At the same time, movement is a prime factor in the placement of facilities and induces how to value areas of land within cities from an economic point of view by promoting access to the city.

The most important physical attribute of streets in this respect is clear spatial segregation and directional separation of movement flows: transport flows, generally linked to economic exchange, move along the roads; pedestrian flows, linked more to social interaction, move along the pavements.

This separation is not desirable in all kinds of urban areas, nor at all times of day. At the same time, the width of road surfaces and pavements do not always correspond to their respective volumes of flow.

This separation is not always so strict, either. There is interference and imposition between different types of flow: the possibility of accidents due to great differences in speed between vehicles and people is ever-present. The battle for space is unequal, with the automotive vehicle generally predominating.

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Traffic has become a problem as it involves conflicts which are difficult to deal with, such as pedestrian versus vehicle, and social life versus traffic. When automotive hegemony is such that the other functions of the streets are subordinated to it, leaving them without the attributes which make life pleasant, public space is simplified and impoverished.

If urban and transport policies cannot find a way to harmonise, contemporary cities will continue to reflect the increasingly illegal, chaotic behaviour of motor vehicles' movement and parking, and will reach limits of saturation that cause lack of safety, motor accidents and atmospheric, noise and visual pollution.

The state of traffic flow on public highways, in turn, allows the streets to achieve another set of functions, which we will look at next.

Structuring the urban environment

Covering the entire city with a regular, recognisable and unchangeable geometry, public highways play a structural role in the urban environment, and are a motor for communication and exchange.

Their global morphology means that they constitute a hierarchical system that crosses all spatial scales, conditioning the accessibility or confinement, the closeness or distance of each and every part of the city.

These functions transcend jurisdictional and sector limitations of city management, given that their main attributes are their inter-relational character, determining the structural capacity of the city on multiple levels - metropolitan, urban, suburban, etc.). These levels are then linked to the dynamics of their flows of traffic.

Economic exchange

On public highways, economic exchange is linked to the opportunities presented in each location. It depends on traffic and the times at which this traffic prevails. In particularly central locations, or places with special visual interest, it is complemented by recreational and interactive social functions.

When this function reaches an extreme, the street is used in improper ways: street stalls are set up, goods are displayed on the pavements, advertisements are stuck to columns, trees and walkways, flyers are handed out, etc.

We must draw attention to the new habits of urban consumption that have worked against the commercial function of public highways. Reduced personal security in the streets has caused the gradual decline of traditional commercial outlets that used to convert the pavements into markets to browse. First the stalls moved into commercial arcades that extended the streets into the interior of blocks; nowadays they have been completely confined to separate, controlled buildings – shopping centres.

However, the “bunkering” of recreational and social activities paradoxically produces other uses of the streets. As direct delivery of almost everything necessary for the family environment has become so commonplace, this has led to a proliferation of delivery drivers and porters in the streets.

Social interaction and recreation

This function could be considered as the “soul” of the system of functions of public spaces. Community life, with freedom of movement and a diversity of settings available for social encounters and contact, increases understanding and solidarity.

On public highways, people's behaviour has a more disciplined expression than in other public spaces. Their actions are carried out with more social control (“for all to see and hear”). At the same time, they are particularly controlled and confined by the movement of automotive traffic.

Despite this, the street does offer recreational alternatives: just watching from inside or outside cafés and restaurants, people looking at shop windows, going about their business, shopping or walking the dog, allows us to enjoy the day-to-day or weekend spectacle of the street.

As far as pavements are concerned, their use for gastronomic activity is an important factor in community life, although it can represent an obstacle for pedestrian traffic.

New players and new habits exist nowadays that express a new kind of sociability. On one side there are the shopping centres, supermarkets, video games and bingo centres, all linked with commercial recreation, which are to be found closed off within special commercial spaces, segregating their use and their visitors by age. On the other side, street children, dog-walkers, street-sellers, people handing out flyers, people eating, retired folk, the unemployed, groups of teenagers, muggers, gym and aerobics

groups... All these also express, in one way or another, the current social, economic and cultural situation.

Recognition, identity and symbolic appropriation.

On public highways, the morphological elements of the block –profiles, heights of buildings, distances, designs and construction materials-, as well as its functional elements –the layout of buildings according to their uses, density and volume of traffic flow-, all constitute the basis for landmarks allowing people to get their bearings and know where they are. Information, graphic representations and city trees and buildings afford non-essential elements necessary to consolidate a place's image.

On the other side is visual pollution. This may be through either a lack of consistency or through excessive diversity in the visual and architectural make-up of a city and is a degrading factor, both in terms of the aesthetic quality of the urban landscape and in its function of providing identity.

The physical/functional physiognomy of a street, apart from serving to provide orientation, also has the task of assuring, psychologically and affectively, the endurance of these public spaces as the backdrop for individual and community life.

Political encounters, civic activities and annual celebrations associated symbolically with certain streets and avenues, along with the monuments and designs that commemorate historic events and eras all contribute to the stability of community life.

People's awareness of their links with the past, along with the value (social, cultural and aesthetic) attached to natural and man-made heritage, require a certain level of stability within that heritage. Rapid change overrides the capacity for adaptation and psychosocial perceptions are damaged, implying the loss of a great many cultural references.

Ecological regulation

Despite its diverse levels of artificial construction, the urban system still has to regulate the water cycle and protect its surface and vegetation, thus maintaining its natural ability to moderate the effects of the weather, atmospheric pollution, noise and floods.

Water drainage into what remains of permeable land beneath city streets, regulation of contaminants and noise reduction through the planting of trees with ample foliage, streets that form corridors for air-flow and ventilation – these are the most efficient and useful alternatives available for management of the urban environment.

Opposed to these are excessive vehicular traffic flow, which is the prime cause of atmospheric and sound pollution, the impermeability of the ground caused by asphalt and concrete which aggravates floods, and tree-reduction which reduces the beneficial effects of their foliage.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

As long as there is a balanced use of public spaces for different purposes and compatibility between these purposes, then it is the very diversity of functions of the public highway that make the streets attractive and, consequently, the urban sector which make use of them.

Nevertheless, when the predominance of one of these functions impedes or overrides the practice of others, the atmosphere of the streets deteriorates, as does that of the urban areas surrounding them.

As we have already mentioned, the streets and avenues that cross and converge at the most central points of our major cities are victims of overuse by motor vehicles at the cost of pedestrian mobility.

The difficulties and risks which affect pedestrian movement also have repercussions (both quantitatively and qualitatively) on functions of economic exchange, social interaction and recreation, orientation, identity and symbolic appropriation.

As a consequence there is deterioration, not only in the environmental quality of public city spaces, but also a decline in the community life linked to them.

HARMONISING FUNCTIONS AND INTERESTS

In order to prevent and resolve the problems outlined above, it is vital that we understand the close links which exist between questions of transport and traffic on the one hand, and urban and environmental issues on the other.

Cities need transport services that link both their different areas internally and communicate the city with the outside world, thus allowing for a broad range of urban activities.

However, just as transport services are necessary for these activities to happen, very often they are also the cause of many environmental problems faced by our cities.

In the same way, monetary and non-monetary costs implied by such problems are often caused by transport services which are not adequate for the levels of environmental quality desired by urban society.

Thus we could affirm that urban order and environmental quality are impossible without an appropriate transport system, and that an appropriate transport system is impossible in a city whose demands exceed reasonable expectations of transport coverage using feasible means and technologies.

Even if these concepts are broadly recognised and shared, when it comes to joint work between urban development and transport planners, questions often arise regarding which of the two fields has priority and which methods should be adopted to bring both tasks, and their respective criteria and methodologies, together.

It tends to be maintained that urban planning has priority as far as the definition of environmental characteristics and goals are concerned. It is in this field that one must define criteria regarding: nuclei, patterns and densities of residential layout; types and methods of productive activities; degree of mixture or exclusivity between different activities in the same area; levels of environmental quality desired for each urban area and for the city in general.

Ways of resolving the problem of transport and the conditions inherent in said resolution should fit into the definitions above. However, once this has happened, the transport systems chosen, along with their respective infrastructures, come to form structural attributes of the city. In this sense, the transport system, in turn, comes to form a significant factor within the urban environment.

The priority defined above, in reality, becomes a repeated process of adjustment and compromise between the most desirable situation and the options available in reality.

In any case, we must differentiate three basic concepts on the subject of transport, and also link them to the questions of urban development to which they relate closely and directly:

- The Transport System, as a range of services that responds to transport needs, both of the population and of urban activity, which constitutes both a condition and the expression of Urban Development.

- Transport Infrastructure, made up of support networks for its services, closely linked to Urban Layout Planning.

- The Movement itself, which, as the result of the working of the aforementioned services, is closely linked to levels of Environmental Quality.

FOR A CITY DESIGNED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ITS INHABITANTS

As we have seen, the main problem that impedes a freer flow of traffic and which therefore works against the environmental quality of our networks of streets, comes from an excess of vehicular movement.

An understanding of why this situation has come about is vital if we are to start tackling its more negative aspects.

A pair of relevant circumstances can be clearly shown. One of them is related to demand, and consists of the need for a large number of simultaneous journeys within the same areas.

This phenomenon is closely related to high levels of “centre-based” demand (for journeys related to work, business, etc.) or to high levels of “density-based” demand (residential journeys), which could and should be managed from an urban planning perspective.

The other circumstance is closely linked to the forms of transport available. It consists of the proliferation of private solutions to transport (using your own car), to the detriment of public transport-based solutions.

These circumstances require the simultaneous convergence of urban and transport planning.

Selection of the most adequate forms of transport for each area, promotion of public transport, simplification at a physical and financial level of public-public and private-public transport transfers, prioritisation and adaptation of the road network, regulation and control of traffic flow... These are some of the strategies which must be adopted if we are to regain control of the chaotic traffic in our cities.

In short, what is required is management that starts with levels of environmental quality and with the combinations of urban activities intended for the different streets of our cities, and which, as a function of these decisions, establishes the most compatible transport systems and traffic regulations.

In other words: at a basic level we should choose whether to preserve or recover the environmental quality of our streets and cities or whether to allow automotive traffic to continue growing to serve the interests of car manufacturers, fuel producers and the sectors of society who confuse private motoring with power and quality of life.

It is time to take political decisions on how to plan and manage our public spaces and city streets, considering them in terms of community heritage, not only for their functional attributes, but also for the cultural and symbolic significance they have for urban society as a whole.