New urban choreographies: cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic

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New Urban Choreographies

Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic

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Abstract

This research sits within the emerging debate - inside and outside academia - over the paradigm shift in public space and cities consequent to the current pandemic outbreak. A shared understanding of the nature of public space defines its core values in density, plurality, diversity, proximity, concentration, multiplicity, and sharing. Those values have now been questioned opening to a new interpretation and evaluation of them. The paper explores this shift in order to trigger reflections and insights that might help in formalising the correct questions and generating possible answers. The exploration sets off from the question: How has the everyday praxis of inhabiting public space changed under the pandemic predicaments? People’s movements in public space evoke a dance made of a combination of improvisation and choreography. This paper tries to interpret the new movements and behaviours in public space through the codes and patterns inherent in dance. Observing movements and behaviours in public space through the lens of dance can help in making sense of the new norms, practices, and rules. The undertaken observation shows how new practices, written and unwritten rules, and patterns have been developed as a result of emerging emotions and reactions to the presence of others in public space. In this unprecedented situation, we have to reconsider the interpretative tools we have used so far to read and decipher public space and its practices.
Introduction

Where people stand in relation to each other signals their relationship, or how they feel toward each other, or both (Hall, 1966, p. 120).

This research sits within the emerging debate - inside and outside academia - over the paradigm shift in public space and cities consequent to the current pandemic outbreak. The paper will present some insights on the impact that Covid-19 has had on public space and life, intending to offer an interpretation of the changes already detectable in public space. According to Hall (1966, p. 4), “the relationship between man and the cultural dimension is one in which both man and his environment participate in molding each other”. Drawing on this consideration, the paper will explore the physical transformation that public space is currently undergoing as well as how the relationship among bodies in space and the one between bodies and space is changing in the public environment. Such relationships - investigated by proxemics - are part of a larger subset of categories in the study of non-verbal communication (Moore, 2010).

The aspects of non-verbal communication explored in this paper span on two different levels: on the one hand, the authoritative signage apparatus prescribing new uses and practices in space and, on the other, how bodies perform differently in this new dimension and how they communicate with each other fear, care, and compliance with the norms and the authority, as a reaction to the new circumstances.

Pandemic: a rediscovered dread

2020 is looking quite unsettling for humankind: limitations of personal movements, challenges in everyday life, and various threats at the foundation of one's understanding of normality. This is particularly true for people in Western countries, who are not familiar with an epidemic of such intensity and proportions and perceive the situation as unprecedented although this does not correspond to reality. The history of humankind has always been linked to outbreaks, and the closer the proximity between people, the higher the odds for viruses to spread, this being the everlasting paradox of urban life.

The idea of an extraordinary situation is just a matter of perception: not so long ago, in 1918-1919, the Spanish flu infected more than 500 million people and killed over 50 million (CDC, 2019). Just closer to our time, humankind has also experienced AIDS, a disease that greatly impacted human life on a private and personal level. The consequences of the Coronavirus outbreak seem to have large repercussions both in our private life and our public behaviours.

2020 has also brought under the limelight a set of words: coronavirus, pandemic, epidemic, Covid-19, infodemic, community spread, contact tracing, quarantine, isolation, physical distancing, and social distancing (OED, 2020), among others. The latter is particularly interesting when discussing public space since it deconstructs many of our beliefs and realities revolving around proxemics and the role and values of public space in our cities.

Most of the governments of the countries affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and, above all, the World Health Organization, recommend maintaining social distance. Recommendations vary from 1 meter (3 feet) to 2 meters (6 feet). Social distancing is defined as a non-pharmaceutical set of rules to prevent the spread of a virus during an outbreak (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, n.d.). The WHO encourages the use of physical distancing as a term, rather than social distancing (WHO, 2020), to stress the need for bodies not to be in proximity rather than preventing social
interactions as a whole. Although the intent is clear, this language diatribe doesn't mitigate the fact that the introduction of this kind of norm greatly affects public life and the use of public space. In addition to social distancing, another device greatly recommended for preventing the spread of the virus has been the face mask. In light of what we will discuss below, it is particularly interesting that the mask seems to be effective not as much as a barrier to the virus per se, but rather as a visual signal reminding people to keep the physical distance (Marchiori, 2020). These new rules are producing a new reality and a transformed everyday life in which space between people is no longer a ‘hidden dimension’ (Hall, 1966) - as a culturally developed set of behaviours - but rather a very explicit and visible dimension, the one given by the norms for physical distancing.

This new dimension emerged during the pandemic, is the result of a mixture of both formal policies, informal reactions and practices, and a set of rules inscribed in public space. Government bodies are inscribing moves and distances directly onto space: signs on the floors, walls, benches, buses and so on, show which distance needs to be kept, where one is allowed to sit, stand, and walk, the directions one can keep in a street and so forth. The overall goal of the regulations is to keep people physically distant and eventually rarefying the concentration of humans in a given space. In this continuous swinging between desire and dread of social contacts, density and proximity are considered conditions to be avoided and forbidden. The ideas and values based on which public space has been designed so far, are currently under scrutiny.

**The pre-pandemic role and values of public space**

This paragraph presents an overview of the meanings and values of public spaces, as they have been intended and understood in urban studies, so far. This is a first step towards understanding how and to which extent those meanings and values have been questioned by the effect of the pandemic, opening to a new interpretation and evaluation of them. Public spaces play an important role in the urban experience: they are ‘our urban living room’ (Cobe, 2016), the place where public life unfolds, a shared resource for cities and their inhabitants, a ‘gymnasium of democracy’ (Charter of Public Space, 2013). All those definitions underline an idea of sharing and compromising among people. According to Sorkin (2011, p. 98), “cities are public reservoirs for the production of private experiences” and public space is the ground for everyday negotiation, sharing, cohabitation, exchange, and the unfolding of a modus convivendi (Bauman, 2003).

Even though the digital public space is expanding its dominance, the physical one is still of great importance as a tool for interpreting and understanding the city and a key factor for the definition of the city itself (Mela, 2006).

A key-value associated with public space is one of proximity, which relates to concepts such as concentration, density, and closeness. As a primary human need - to different extents in different cultures (Hall, 1966) - proximity is one of the most effective attractions for people in public space (Whyte, 1980).

Human concentration in the urban environment is, therefore, to be considered as a positive and desirable fact - in the belief that it is a source of vitality and generates a great and vibrant richness of differences and possibilities, many of which unique and unpredictable, therefore so valuable (Jacobs, 1961). Unpredictability is a value not of less significance since the active and passive engagement of people with the environment is prompted by the fortuitous encounter of strangers meeting in public space (Whyte, 1980).
Public space is, therefore, an indeterminate space where actors from many diverse worlds come together (Sassen, 1994), a place of encounter-confrontation, whose ambivalence determines its capacity of repulsion-attraction (Bauman, 2005). The constant exposure to strangers - we might share language, norms, and regulations with but not personally know - has been part of our evolution as humans for a comparatively short period of time (Appiah, 2007). Our ancestors would live in a small community based on familiarity with each other and it seems that - evolutionarily speaking - humans have not completely adjusted to the new situation and still perceive the stranger as a possible threat. In pre-modern towns or villages, strangers wouldn't stay strangers for long but in the modern city, strangers meet, remain in proximity, and possibly interact while still being strangers (Bauman, 2016). Connected with unpredictability, is the value of diversity in public space, including visual, social, and experiential diversity. Variety, richness, and chance are the elements that induce people to spend time in public space beyond the immediate need to use it for primary and necessary activities (Gehl, 1971).

Public space has, thus, an ambivalent nature, living at the edge of predictable and unpredictable, at the loose borderline between the safe and the possible. In this ambivalence - swinging between the necessity of proximity and the innate tendency to avoid contact with strangers - public space has evolved and transformed, representing a valid litmus paper for the health of urban aggregations.

A shared understanding of the nature of public space defines those above-mentioned factors as core values. As such, they have currently been questioned by the pandemic, which is rapidly changing the way we use, perceive, and make sense of public space, what we consider values and what risks instead.

Drawing on those reflections, the paper presents a snapshot of the shift happening in public space, interpreting new dynamics and practices.

The exploration sets off with the question: How has the everyday praxis of inhabiting public space changed under the current pandemic conditions?

**Research Methods**

*Dance: insights for the research.* To respond to the above question, the paper interprets the new movements and behaviours in public space through the modus operandi, codes, and language inherent in dance.

The paper kicked off from an intuition that the authors had, experiencing public space during the current pandemic, sharing observations and impressions. The insight being that people's movements in public space evoke a dance made of a combination of improvisation and choreography. Due to its inherent kinaesthetic non-verbal communication component, dance has been taken as an evocative inspiration for the research to interpret and speculate on the new practices in public space.

Observing movements and behaviours in public space through the lens of dance can help make sense of the new norms, practices, and rules - due to the response to the pandemic - and how they are affecting the everyday practices in public space. Proxemics recognises the movements of bodies in space as a form of non-verbal communication, identifying a hidden dimension to measure distances and identify a lived spatiality - not geometric but acted and perceived (Olivetti, Lambertini, Metta, 2013).

Dance is, therefore, a form of non-verbal communication: it could be read as a silent...
language, whose ‘grammar’ is found in its positions, moves, steps, patterns, figures, and variations.

Individual dance is a dialogue between body and space while collective dance is a more complex conversation among bodies and between bodies and space.

Dance can be described by its repertoire of movements. It can be rhythmic, following choreographies or improvising, it can be an expression of emotions or aesthetic qualities or an investigation into the physics of moving bodies, it can be a social or an individual activity, a ritual or a spiritual practice.

What unites all types of dance is that it is an essentially embodied activity: a human act of presence and movement of the body in space. What differentiates dancing from other human activities is, therefore, its embodied nature. It is not just movement: it is a movement that relates the body to the world. The ability to acknowledge the body as a reality and ourselves as a body is something that, while dancing, it is not possible to avoid (Pastorino, 2019).

The dance position is the starting point: the position is how the body takes a posture in space, a posture in relation to the world. It is an attitude, a declaration of intents, revealing the state of mind that is present (Pastorino, 2019).

Dancing, similar to walking, is also a way of knowing the world. It is a form of perception - not a passive observation but rather a way of perceiving things through movement. As a form of active bodily engagement, it opens up the world in a new way. The world becomes present to the individual in a particular way through dancing. In this process of thinking and knowing through the body, the mind is essentially extended, enacted and embodied. The body is not only a means to translate ideas from the mind to the physical world but also an entity capable of imagination (Pallasmaa, 2009; Bachelard, 1957). The body is a thinking entity, in a direct interplay with the mental space and the physical action, both allowing and prompting the thinking flow.

Therefore, dance is one of the possible ways through which the body thinks and knows. Those aspects above led the observation and interpretation of new practices in public space, using dance as an inspiration.

Fieldwork observations. Since solutions or final resolutions to the pandemic are still under discussions and - as we write - we are still very much in the midst of this crisis, the best way to contribute to the discourse about public space is to give a snapshot about the current situation drawing on information, data, and reflections from a different array of resources. On the one hand, a literature review is conducted collecting data from all over the world through articles in newspapers, journals, and social media. On the other, research on the authors’ everyday experiences has been led through a collection of impressions about formal restrictions and signage used by authorities to constrain the use of space and spatial relations between people in public space.

Moreover, a reflection on visual representation has been undertaken drawing both on internet common sources (i.e. Wikimedia Commons) and a call to contribution through social media pages.

The authors acted as curators in selecting among the multiple inputs coming from different areas of the world to create a possible visual narrative of the new relation between body, space, and norms. The selection provides a visual account of the new conditions in public space, tracing a collective narrative through images.
A new concerted dance: storytelling about body, space, and norms. The pandemic has transformed our customs in public space and generated new practices, rules, and hidden codes. Results of this research are evident in the interpretation of new movements in space as a dance, responding to the norms and regulations applied in public. The authors envisioned this new situation as a ‘new concerted dance’, wherein the individual is subordinated to the wider and variegated rhythm of the group (Copeland & Cohen, 1983). The following sections present several aspects identified as the main changes in behaviour ongoing in public space.

Awareness of bodies in space. Dance involves an ability to acknowledge ourselves as a body, and the presence of our body and the body of others in space. Increased awareness of our body in public space is one of the consequences of the pandemic. One cannot be indifferent anymore nor can look beyond others and pretend to be alone in space. There is a new need to be aware of the position of our body in space in relation to other bodies, to decide how to move to keep a safe distance. We now have to look at others and carefully observe where they stand or move. Numerous non-verbal conversations among strangers are happening to agree on the next step to take, we now acknowledge the presence of strangers more than before, but with more fear.

Fear and/or care. In the pre-pandemic condition, fear in public space was identified with concepts such as diversity, unknown, not-belonging. The fear of strangers was considered one of the challenges of public space, being the stranger an unknown variable to consider in deciding how to behave. The presence of strangers inside the field of action is discomforting and “sharing space with strangers, living in the uninvited yet obtrusive proximity of strangers, is the condition that the city residents find difficult, perhaps impossible to escape” (Bauman, 2003, p. 28).

In this new reality, fear overcomes the idea of the ‘stranger’ spreading into the idea of the ‘other’ as a possible vector for the virus. Everyone becomes a potential threat, bringing the dread of the other beyond bias and cultural specifications in an ironically equalitarian way. At the same time, looking at others to make sure a safe distance is maintained is not only driven by fear but also by care for others and the community of belonging; physical distancing has become an act of care, compassion, and responsibility. Fear and care are now associated and intertwined.

Predictability: more choreography, less improvisation. As discussed in section three, unpredictability has been so far considered as a positive value for public space. The ambivalent nature of public space is what made it attractive in the pre-pandemic, leaving space for improvisation, spontaneous and unplanned events, behaviours, and activities. This seems to have shifted completely: control is taking over; spontaneity is now dangerous for it is a challenge to health and safety. People have to follow specific rules and space needs to be predictable to be safe and controllable (fig. 01). People in public space are playing a ‘choreography’ dictated by the application of rules, regulations and hidden agreements. Space needs to be planned and designed to communicate how to behave and to use it and there is no space left for ambiguity, which would bring anxiety rather than excitement and curiosity. In such circumstances, there are, therefore, fewer opportunities for creative acts of appropriation of space.
Prescribed policies remove randomness and unpredictability inducing movements and times controlled to make sure everyone is aware of the presence of the other and can physically avoid them.

Choreography: induced actions and codes. A ‘choreography’ of movements and practices have been designed by the regulations and policies applied to public space. Signs on the floor and walls dictate how to behave, move, and stand in public space (fig. 02) and signs on public transport, benches, and stairs dictate how to position one to the other. The distance rule is applied anywhere people might stand and gather; signs on the floor dictate people where to stand in the street to enter shops (fig. 03, 04).

Public space now communicates its rules through a display of symbols: straight lines, circles, grids are visible anywhere (fig. 05).

An interesting example of induced choreography design by codes and rules is the new layout design for public parks in different parts of the world: perimeters have been drawn on the grass to suggest people where they might stay to keep safe (fig. 06, 07). Information and policies are translated into different forms, colours, and signs. As shown in the picture, white circles are smaller (3 m diameter) and allow the gathering of maximum 2 people, whereas the blue circles are larger (5 m diameter) and allow for more people to fit in, offering different possibilities of social interactions. Within the confined and constrained safety of the perimeters, people can behave freely, performing a variety of unplanned and spontaneous activities.

Other rules applied in some countries relate to the maximum number of people allowed to gather in public space: for instance, at the time of writing this paper, in the state of Victoria in Australian the limit is defined at five people in one group, waiting to move to the next step of ten people in one group when the number of active Coronavirus cases will decrease, while in the UK the limit is currently six people in one group.

Normed gatherings generate interesting variable dynamics and patterns of movement in public space depending on the temporary state of rules and changing in time.

Improvisation: action-reaction. Inhabiting public space requires now a newly discovered level of improvisation, in reaction to the presence of other bodies in space. Movements are performed in reaction to what is happening in our surroundings. Stepping back, deviating, stopping, rushing forward, turning away, are improvised actions in reaction to the presence of others.

An improvised and erratic dance is generated by multiple bodies in space: a non-verbal collective conversation, made of an action/reaction dynamic.

The use of face mask, compulsory at different levels in numerous countries, influences the dynamic of such a dance; people perceive the mask as a sign of potential danger and the reaction of distancing is faster and more effective.

The presence of the mask seems to be a positive device in responding to the pandemic, not only because of the object properties but also because of the perception of it.

Conclusions

Similar to a stage, public space has become the place for new configurations dictated by health regulations and policies which ‘choreograph’ public space by applying new forced distances among people. An interplay of orchestrated choreography and improvisation is shaping people dynamics in public space like a ‘new concerted dance’.
02. Signage for social distancing and regulated behaviours. Sigrid Ehrmann, Cubelles Beach, Cubelles (Spain), 2020, limited use licence copyright (2020) by Sigrid Ehrmann. Printed with permission.

03. Signs on the floor for social distancing. Cecilia De Marinis, Melbourne (Australia), 2020, property of the author.
04. The Long line to enter Trader Joe’s while social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Rhododendrites, New York, 2020, Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.


07. Signage for social distancing in Casale della Cervelletta. Angela Miceli, Rome (Italy), 2020, limited use licence Copyright (2020) by Angela Miceli. Printed with permission.
Observation of bodies in space during the outbreak evidences a new required awareness of one’s own and others’ bodies in space. A shift is also visible in the increase of personal space required by the human body to perform its public life. Furthermore, proximity has now become codified: distance among bodies is no longer a ‘hidden dimension’, culturally developed, but rather a regulated and worldly-shared dimension. What emerges from the investigation is a new dimension for personal space: more conscious, regulated, and wider.

It is extremely hard to predict how the future of cities will unfold since we happen to live in an era of constant revolutions (Bauman, 2003) and the Covid-19 outbreak, although a very scary one, could be just another deep transformation that will impact cities and their public space. Nevertheless, an inquiry and subsequently an understanding of how the perception of bodies in space is changing will be a tool to navigate predictions and expectations. Insights coming from this research can inform further investigation on how cities and public space will continue to creatively adapt and transform in the service of individual and collective health.

Reflections and questions emerge on what role public space will play in the future, what its values will be, how people will adjust to the situation, and how they will mould their spaces accordingly.

The growing collision between the two opposite forces acting in public space - the urge of connection and the fear of proximity - will drive the research on public spaces towards a new direction that is yet to be completely understood.

Some questions arise from these reflections on public space and the relationship with the physical body: is the very role of public space changing or will it continue to be intended as a place for connection, encounter, and interaction with others? And if its role is changing, will the values at its core convert and shift?

Conversely, if the role of public space is not questioned or challenged, what values will need to be maintained and which will be discharged to keep public space well alive in its role of connector between people in the urban settlements? Namely, to keep the same role, will we need to change the rules of the game? All these questions derive from the most compelling and appalling of all these inquiries: what will the role of public space be if the current situation will become the new normality?

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