The horizontal of Times Square

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Abstract

The object of this paper is to publish an utopian project, for expanding the horizontal space of Times Square to a near primordial state, by visually bringing together sky and earth, as it would have been before architectural constructions occupied the space.

Considering the multiplicity of contemporary architectures, including global and regional architectures, it strikes me how today's build space deal with the contemporary production of images permanently integrated in architectural spaces[1]. Exceptions made for some rare cases on the production of images to be permanently embedded in architectural spaces[2], there is an absence

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[1]Frescos, mosaic, tile panels, etc.

[2]The tile panels of the Lisbon's' subway stations, the frescos by Rivera, etc.

on the contemporary uses of images that have a scale and an osmosis with the space's matter that make them in fact, within architectural environments. In this paper I propose to balance the qualities of images, materials and site, to produce a series of commentaries about the dwelling in a site called Times Square.

Keywords: Metropolisation & Environment; utopian project; primordial state; site specific; factual and the imaginary spaces; sensible dwelling.

1   Introduction

This is a metaphorical communication. I will do a description of Times Square bouncing between factual and imaginary spaces[3], to unveil issues related to a sensible dwelling.

To explain my dwelling experience, during the two years I lived in New York City, I can't find better metaphor than referring to the paintings of *Hieronymus Bosch*. In *Bosch's* paintings there are an infinite number of beings disputing for their own space. It is a painting where hell and heaven are brought into a space where borders are not always clear, and the most sublime and beautiful beings share the same earth and sky inhabited by the most abominable and mean beings. *Bosh's* paintings unveil an organic world where the lovers give light and the defeated feed it.

If we imagine ourselves as birds and we fly over Manhattan, we will see a grid on the south end of the island that is substantially different from the grid north of Houston Street. When comparing those grids it becomes clear what the "enlightenment project"is about (Pérez-Gómez 1983). The compartmentalizaton of space of Manhattan was on the seventeen century an "organic"net of rural and urban land, and thereafter in the nineteen century the

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[3]By factual space I mean the "location which cast" is defined by the architectural constructions. By imaginary space I mean the "location" in which the physicality of the factual space is understood as a referent embodying a metaphor that shapes the dwelling experience.

rural land north of Houston Street was urbanised according to a grid of streets and avenues strictly orthogonal, exception made to a long diagonal that crosses Manhattan longitudinally. Broadway[4].

Excluding Central Park, it is at the cross-roads of Broadway with streets and avenues that the majority of squares and public parks are. These squares and parks become unpredictable at the confluence of different blocks contrasting with the orthogonal prediction of the cross-roads between avenues and streets. When comparing with the City strictly orthogonal net of avenues and streets, the unpredictable space qualities of a cross-roads called Times Square, are used and overused to increase the visibility of the billboard adds covering the area.

2   Times Square

If we give away our topographic vision, and find ourselves walking in one of the most confusing cross-roads of Manhattan, Times Square (cross-roads of Broadway with 7th avenue between 42nd and 48th Streets) we will be in a square with theatres, commerce of electronic goods for tourists, hotels, newspapers, prostitution, restaurants, cross-roads of 10 subway lines, drugs and policemen of all sorts. In this square the buildings shift from the decadent and dirty to the shiny kitsch of corporations' headquarters. All this happens in the context of a diagonal that crosses a strictly orthogonal system. A diagonal (Broadway) added complexity

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[4]Manhattan island is constituted by a flat rock platform covered by sediments deposited by the Hudson river and East river. This island was once a sacred land for native Americans before European settlers "bought" it and during the seventeen century settled on the south end of Manhattan. The rural land north of the south end was divided according to existing trails. Two centuries later the city expanded north of Houston Street, and the rural land was then considered to be urban real estate divided in a grid that anticipated today's urban net. A set of avenues defined longitudinal axes oriented south/north, and a set of streets defined transversal axes oriented east/west. Broadway remains as an evidence of the broad trail that crossed the island northwest/southeast.

to a strictly orthogonal system assumed by notions as: east/west; uptown/downtown; above/under.

Comparing to other areas of the city that are ruled by the strict economy of the means serving the propose of flux/circulation, we will see that people generally speaking, will stay longer on the cross-roads with Broadway and on other parts of the city which grid is more complex.

Armed with our topographic vision, we will see that the cross-roads and squares are "knots of confusion"(koolhaas 1978) which become the most creative environments of the city. Times Square is one of these "knots of confusion"and to me the most Boschian space of New York City. Apparently confusing, everything in this square seems to be ruled by minims. Generally speaking it was using the minimum budget and effort that most of the buildings in Times Square where built. They were created with the minimum of variety of forms and the maximum of repetitions, generating modules that have the maximum of area with the use of the minimum of space. The standardisation generated spaces which correspond to the forms of orthogonal filing and storage.

The residues of the orthogonal efficiency are stated in the billboard adds that cover the buildings and in the shine of corporate buildings. Aseptic cleaning, parallelism and perpendicularlity, become a by-product of efficiency and an object of desire (Diller+Scofidio 1994). This object of desire is not indifferent to the decisive influences of the cultural, political and scientific hegemony of the land of the coloniser (whichever the coloniser is European, American or Asian). As always the hegemony absorbs within its multiplicity of contexts, the most diverse knowledges, introducing by a magic operation the alteration of the primordial meaning of the knowledges, contextualizing them not accordingly to their origins but introducing a "translation"that subverts the original meaning, and transforms it to be in tune with the objects of desire of the hegemony.

Times Square belongs to a *horizontal landscape*: Flat land, stone, rivers, swamps, lacuna, sea. Times Square for the ones

who miss a topographical understanding, today is a strictly vertical environment. Moving in Times Square on the street or in its offices, elevators, corridors, shops, theatres, sex shops, hotels, is like if we are jumping from a drawer to the other of an immense archive. The site and building's structure incorporates the "shift"produced by Broadway within its orthogonal hegemony. Hegemony that generated all involving structures and buildings perfectly aliened and repeated "ad infinitum"created to the image of the knowledge that legitimates prevalent common senses that go back to the Enlightenment. It is also interesting to notice that all the billboard adds covering large areas of the buildings, if not entirely the building façade, display images that are always clean shiny and aseptic.

Photomontage of Times Square, 180° view from south-west corner of 45th Street with Broadway, 5 p.m. January 25, 1995

Photomontage of Times Square with photocollage of clouds, 180° view from south-west corner of 45th Street with Broadway, March 1995

The shifts that Broadway introduces in the orthogonal structure of this area of the City, are used and overused to achieve with an increased visibility a more efficient display of the adds (The adds become visible several blocks away from Times Square) not only to the people walking or riding in the area, but also for the mediated images world-wide distributed of Times Square. The contents of the adds is one of the ways to understand the hegemony itself, by unveiling an coercive system, that makes more than suggesting to the community which are their objects of desire and their dreams.

The city of New York - The Times Square Business Improvement District (BID), in 1995 opened a competition for ideas for the commemoration of the new millennium at Times Square, entitled "The search for the big Idea". The "utopian"project that I proposed to the BID is based on the use of the billboard' space, which is a absolutely a corporate space to overlay on it color photographs of clouds. These images of clouds during day time, I believe, would visually expand the space closer to the evidence of the primordial horizontal of the Island before construction took place. During night time the same images of clouds on billboards with the background of a dark sky and the light and glare of Times Square area, I believe, would unveil not only a fictional character of the images of clouds but also a celebration of a common effort achieved not only between so many diverse corporations, but also a common effort achieved with the diversity of political wills that are concerned with the area of Times Square.

This idea was in consideration by (BID) for the commemorations of the millennium, but later decided on a idea proposed by Disney/Sony Corp.

3   Conclusions

The metropolis (see in Davidson 1992) or the knowledge are human fabrications that we tend to make to coincide with our wishes. I mean that our wishes, dreams and metropolis are evidences of

the prevalent hegemony. With the project *The horizontal of Times Square* my concern was to unveil that there is an *à priori* memory of the knowledge and metropolis that leads to evidences of the environment from which emerged. To be sensitive to the evidences of sites as well to evidences of the memory of sites, expands the concept *sensible dwelling* beyond architecture, sociology, economy, politics becoming of the responsibility of artists, designers, philosophers, planners and politicians to redefine public space.

After all that has been achieved in photography, particularly with photography in public spaces, it would be interesting to think of the possibilities of understanding photography in tune with the essences of a site specific architectural environment. Being in tune with the essences of a site specific architectural environment, and using the flexibility of photosensitive/photo-electronic printing processes integrated in the architectural mater, could became a contemporary contribution to push further the tradition of fresco in using the intrinsic qualities of images, materials and site to affect dwelling, while producing commentaries on the architectural space it self.

The legacy (see: *idea of tradition,* art. of Jacques Herzog "Poesis-Production"in Davidson 1994) of history of art and architecture, reveals endless examples of the elastic relations between the images and the spaces in which they are. Throughout history there are countless examples of build spaces in which there is an assumed flexibility on the relations between the factual and the imaginary spaces[5]. The recognition of this potential in urban planing, architecture, drawing and photography, is a possibility to make environments through the creation of specific places that embody the spirit of a sensible dwelling.

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[5]The traditions of fresco painting, mosaic and tile panels are good examples.

4   Acknowledgements

(by alphabetical order)

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[6] Art historian, Ph.D. Arthur Kingsley Porter Emeritus professor of Fine Arts, at Harvard University.

[7] Architect, Ph.D. professor auxiliar - Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal; professor colaborador - ISCTE, Lisboa, Portugal.

[8] Architect and architecture historian, Ph.D. Bauhaus - Universitat Weimar, Rome - program.

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