Kyriaki Tsoukala's 'Activated (Public) Spaces' in the Contemporary City: Philosophical and Architectural Approaches

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Abstract

What kinds of spaces and places are needed today, in light of the radical social changes and new ecological problems that have emerged in contemporary cities? Can we design contemporary "activated" urban public spaces for youth and what could be their symbolic and material characteristics? The aim of the present text is to investigate the possible philosophical, conceptual, and architectural dimensions, approaches, and readings of the above spatial questions, based on the theoretical work and ideas of Emeritus Professor Kyriaki Tsoukala.

Keywords: *Espace Activisé*, *Life-Space*, Gestalt Psychology, Phenomenology, Mental Space, Symbolic Space

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary research in philosophy, human sciences, and architectural theory has shown that social relations have a spatial dimension and, inversely, space and place influence social and psychological behaviour. Moreover, urban public spaces communicate cultural values that have an impact on the mentality of citizens. As a result, architectural and urban design theories have taken on new significance in a variety of current debates in the social and human sciences. What kinds of spaces and places are needed today, in light of the radical social changes and new problems that have emerged in contemporary cities?

In her book "*Les Territoires Urbains de l'Enfant*," Kyriaki Tsoukala (2007) formulates two interrelated arguments that could provide answers to the above question. It is argued that the real public places of the city constitute a more appropriate means of education, evolution, and socialization of youth than the various "virtual spaces" of the Internet and "chat rooms." Related to the above argument is the importance Tsoukala ascribes to what she calls "activated space" (*espace activisé*), which, according to our interpretation, can function as an interdisciplinary concept for a new mental, psychological, and corporeal relationship of youth to the real public spaces in the contemporary city.

Can we design contemporary "activated" urban public spaces for youth and what could be their symbolic and material characteristics? The aim of the present article is to investigate the possible philosophical, conceptual, and architectural dimensions, approaches, and readings of the above spatial idea. This study constitutes the condensation of a scientific dialogue in progress between Professor Kyriaki Tsoukala's research on the social psychology of space and my research on the theory and philosophy of architecture (Terzoglou 2009), with a common aim: the conceptual enrichment of the architectural organization of public spaces in contemporary cities.

2. Youths and the Spaces of the City: Contemporary Problems and Perspectives

Kyriaki Tsoukala's research field focuses on the relationship between children and space, with the main objective being the strengthening of the anthropocentric design of cities. An anthropocentric design of the city tries to create familiar and friendly places for children, elevating the social and psychological qualities of built space and therefore contributing to the needs, education, and development of youths. A key notion for this interdisciplinary understanding of the design of space is the harmonization of material-social activities with the mental representations of the space of the city, namely the correlation between lived space and mental space (Tsoukala 2006: 13–23, 42; Tsoukala 2007: 11–23, 43).

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I believe that it is this harmonization and correlation that has been disturbed in most of the contemporary large cities. And this is where the theoretical and practical problems of architecture begin, if we consider architecture as a social science with the aim of conceiving and designing public spaces for the life and education of man. Seven basic reasons for this dissonance, which I classify below, are related to the rapid changes of contemporary social, economic, and cultural structures, as these have ensued from the so-called "globalization":

1. Excessive size, the loss of scale, urban diffusion, and the dominance of vehicles characterize most contemporary cities.
2. The declassification and the alienation of the spaces ofthe neighborhood.
3. The privatization and the devitalization of the public spaces of the city, in combination with the creation of 'non-places', according to the terminology of Marc Augé (1992: 68-134, 100-102).
4. The crisis of collective action in the Post-Modern times of extreme individualism and consumerism and the resulting falsification, spectacularization, and collapse of the public sphere.
5. The fact that the coincidence of the public sphere with the physical landscape and the real public space is no longer taken for granted, due to the electronic revolution and the expansion of the so-called 'virtual' or 'cyber' spaces.
6. The fear of intimacy and the removal of the natural proximity of people and youths, which are due, to a large extent, to the replacement of direct, human communication with the indirect, through digital mediation and exchange of informations.
7. The encirclement of the young into images and lonely events of the digital world and their deprivation of the real, lived, kinaesthetic and dialectic interrelation with the 'Other', with the richness of the social experience of a public and real collectivity (Tsoukala 2006: 31-38, 106-107, 221-222) (Tsoukala 2007: 30-38, 113-115, 231-232).

The most basic result of all of the above facts about the relationship between youths and space is the child's estrangement from the city environment (Tsoukala 2006: 34-39, 154-156, 220; Tsoukala 2007: 34-40, 163-164, 230).The city ceases to be lived as a spatial, psycho-social, and semiotic continuity (Tsoukala 2006: 16, 120–121; Tsoukala 2007: 15, 128–129) and becomes perceptually fragmented and functionally cut into "positive spaces," full of activities and social relations, and "negative spaces," devoid of activities and collective structures.

The disjunction between familiar and uncanny places, friendly and alienated environments, real and virtual spaces, spaces of places and spaces of flows, creates corresponding "wholes" and "voids" in their mental representations, in the meaning of the spaces of the city, as long as the ideal of a correspondence between material, psychological, and mental structure is valid (Tsoukala 2006: 15-16, 23, 35-36, 71-73, 86-90) (Tsoukala 2007: 13-15, 23, 35-36, 75-78, 91-95) (Tsoukala 2001: 91-93). The rupture between the lived space of actions and the space of mental representations renders the vision of an organic, anthropocentric design of the contemporary city problematic. How can this decisive relationship be restored?

From the point of view of my research, I believe that the basic consideration for the rehabilitation of the relationships between material, lived, and mental space should be the structure and organization of the *public space* of the city. Public space is the intermediary, all-embracing tissue of the material and notional cohesion of the city that expresses values and ideas of the collective, common history and creation, unifying the institutionalized places of education and culture (the school, the museum, the monument) with the private places of living and the open, public free spaces of social interaction for youths, children, and citizens (the street, the park, the square). How can we design those public spaces of the city for children, the young, and citizens in order to reinstate the continuity and coherence between the lived and the notional dimensions of the urban environment? Based on which conceptual tools, principles, and values?

3. The Concept of 'Activated Space'.

Tsoukala, in opposition to the advocates of enclosed virtual cities, of cities-screens, and of simulated cyber-cities, as they are analyzed by Edward Soja (2000: 150-151, 155, 323–348), lays emphasis on the importance of physical, real, public places for the socialization and orientation of youths: their history and graded scale, their freedom of access, and their role as condensers of collective memory, render the public spaces of a city more appropriate for the proper education of the young than the virtual non-places of the Internet (Tsoukala 2006: 16, 222) (Tsoukala 2007: 15, 232-233) (Tsoukala 2008: 152, n.8). Under a basic condition, those public spaces will be designed according to principles and concepts that emanate from the analysis of the psycho-social qualities of the environment and the true needs of youth and children.

Tsoukala, in order to describe the qualities of a public environment that will not be organized according to stylistic, aesthetic, or technocratic criteria as an object of consumption but as a field of use and socialization (Tsoukala 2006: 22) (Tsoukala 2007: 21), according to the deductions of the human sciences, introduces the concept of 'activated space' (*espace activisé*)(Tsoukala 2006: 9, 72-74, 236) (Tsoukala 2007: 7, 76-78, 248). According to my interpretation and schematization of this fundamental concept, five basic characteristics of an 'activated space' are:

1. An activated space does not function as the indifferent and passive material frame of man's activities.
2. On the contrary, an activated space is organically entangled with human activities, leading to transformations of its organization, function, and aesthetics.
3. This energetic dialectic between man and space is articulated on two levels, simultaneously: a material-practical level and a symbolic-mental level.
4. An activated space has a participating character, namely it is produced through collective design processes (Tsoukala 2006: 52) (Tsoukala 2007: 54).
5. The participating character of activated space, both in its lived assimilation through communicative actions and in the collective creation of the meaning of its recognizable identity on the level of mental-symbolic representation, plays a decisive role in the harmonization and correspondence between the social-material structure and the social-psychological structure (Tsoukala 2006: 72) (Tsoukala 2007: 76).

Schematizing and supporting Tsoukala's thought, I propose the following structure for the attributes of 'activated space':

1. This space is both real and mental, experienced in a wholistic way, familiar, signified and has a social meaning: it is an animate space, a place of life.
2. In contrast to 'activated space' we could oppose the concept of 'non-place', an 'inactive space', passive, indifferent, unfamiliar, unliveable, without meaning and without the active participation of the people in its moulding.

I claim that behind the above articulation of a conceptual duality between an 'activated'-signified space and an inactive-'void' space (Tsoukala 2006: 176-177, 225) (Tsoukala 2007: 183-185, 235) we can trace the influence of the theories of social interactionism of Leontiev and Vygotsky: the proximity of activated space with the type of an autonomous, socially interactive spatial-strategic activity is obvious. At the same time, inactive non-places seem to correspond to the type of dependent, heteronomous and passive activity, according to the scheme proposed (Tsoukala 2006: 134, 136-138, 160-161) (Tsoukala 2007: 141, 143-145, 169-170) (Tsoukala 2001: 57-60, 93). In other words, the kinds of spaces that emerge in the contemporary city tally with a typology of psychological behaviour and correspond to various types of activities of social subjects. When the users of urban space -in this case, children and youth- are actively engaged in the 'production of space', on Henri Lefebvre's terms (2000[4]: 7-81) or in the 'production of public space', on Light and Smith's terms (1998: 1-16), based on autonomous goals that they set for themselves, then an 'activated space' emerges.

Extending Tsoukala's thinking, I maintain that the concept of 'activated space' can function as an interdisciplinary matrix between philosophy, the human sciences, and architecture, constituting a new research tool for the design of the public spaces of the contemporary city. This concept is able to articulate a dynamic relationship between youths and the real, true spaces of a participating public realm in the contemporary era. Nevertheless, the beginning of the proposed interdisciplinary dialogue presupposes a preliminary investigation regarding the possible philosophical and theoretical texture and origin of the concept of 'activated space'.

4. Philosophical Dimensions of the Concept of 'Activated Space'.

According to my reading, the crucial point is the emerging 'double' nature and structure of 'activated space'. On the one hand, as a space of communicative participating actions and as a lived-appropriated place, the 'activated space' has a material-social dimension which involves *bodily space* in its formation. On the other hand, as a meaningful space of inter-subjective representations and symbolic significance, it has a mental dimension which refers to the conceptual space of intentional ideas, aims, and values. The complex nature of activated space, simultaneously material-corporeal and psychological-conceptual, enables it to bridge lived space and mental space and to achieve the correspondence between material and psychological structure, namely the goal of a contemporary anthropocentric design. The possible springs or the philosophical affinities of those two dimensions of 'activated space' are the following.

In relation to the dimension of a lived-material and bodily space, we could ascertain the proximity of 'activated space' with analogous ideas of Gestalt psychology and Phenomenological philosophy. Besides, we are familiar with the frequent influence of Phenomenology on post-war psychological thinking, as the work of Moles and Rohmer demonstrates (1972: 7-62, 157-158) or, inversely, with the psychological roots of Phenomenology (Husserl 1997: xxv, 42) (Moran and Mooney 2002: 59-61) and the interweaving of Gestalt psychology and Phenomenology. The 'activated space' brings to mind the 'space of behaviour' of Koffka, a lived space of symbolic qualities and meanings (Tsoukala 2006: 50) (Tsoukala 2007: 52). Moreover, it is reminiscent of the 'life-space' of Lewin, the introducer of topological field-psychology and a collaborator of Köhler. The 'life-space' of Lewin resembles Tsoukala's 'activated space' to the degree that both express a dialectical conception concerning the equivalent interdependence of the subject and the environment in the creation of a lived representation of space (Tsoukala 2006: 50-51) (Tsoukala 2007: 52-53) (Tsoukala 2001: 23).

 Maybe those two spatial ideas can be reduced to a common philosophical root, according to my hermeneutical approach: namely to the concept of 'Lebenswelt' or 'Life-world', as it was elaborated by Husserl in his text *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* of 1936. The everyday surrounding life-world, as it is expounded by Husserl, is a world of lived experience of space which acquires forms of meaning (Husserl 2002: 152-157, 163-165).The participation of the individual in this alive environment of meaning is produced through the organic living body (Leib), which Husserl distinguishes from the physical body (Körper) (Husserl 2002: 153-154). The living body, through actions, activities, and intuitions, structures a common, inter-subjective world of meaning, an 'environment' (Umgebung), to recall the lectures on '*Thing and Space*' delivered by Husserl in 1907 (Husserl 1997: 1-4).

This is where the ideological and mental dimension of the activated "life-space" are distinguished from its lived-corporeal texture: as an appropriated place, life-space has acquired symbolic characteristics and meaning stemming from an activated consciousness. At this point, one can ascertain the possible origin of this conceptual dimension of activated space: it is the ruling idea of the Neo-Kantian Piaget that knowledge is an active construction of reality, which presupposes, in opposition to behaviourism and its passive reception of environmental stimuli, an "energetic organism," a living involvement in the structure of the meaning of space (Piaget and Inhelder 1967: 447-449, 454) (Tsoukala 2006: 40-42, 49-50) (Tsoukala 2007: 40-43, 51-52) (Tsoukala 2001: 41).

According to my research into the ideas of space in the 20th century, the equivalent, active participation of the subject in the creation of the meaning of a graded sequence of types of spatial experiences supports the philosophy of the Neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, as it is expounded in his work "*An Essay on Man*", written in 1944. The conceptual dimension of "activated space" does not really correspond to the "organic space" of action, but rather to the "perceptual space" and to what Cassirer names "symbolic," "theoretical," or "abstract space": namely, the potentiality of man to transcend the sensory data of the empirical world and construct a pure space of universal ideal relations and meanings that reveals the active nature of the human intellect (Cassirer 1944: 42–49). Cassirer's symbolic space guarantees the foundation of an inter-subjective field of publicity and allows for the co-ordination of the various mental representations of lived 'activated space' into a common conceptual space of thought.

5.   Architectural Structures of the Concept of 'Activated Space'.

Can we design 'activated spaces' in the contemporary city? What could be their architectural characteristics, their architectural structure? Tsoukala maintains that in order to transform the subject from a mere spectator to a producer of activated places (Tsoukala 2006: 229) (Tsoukala 2007: 240) the architectural space should allow alterations in its use, organization and symbolic meaning, namely it should be malleable and convertible. That conception, which transcends the analogous proposals by Lynch, Rapoport and Ulvund, entails free access to space, therefore its public character, and its not-planned use and function (Tsoukala 2006: 85, 226-228) (Tsoukala 2007: 90, 236-239).

Through this indirect criticism of deterministic functionalism, we can observe an apparent endeavour to avoid the standardized and static formation of those familiar spaces of play for children, which puts an emphasis on the mechanistic sensory-kinetic functions of youths without broader social and conceptual references (Tsoukala 2001: 61-62). Thus, instead of the "use" of space, Tsoukala places before the concept of "activity," which expresses the dynamic relationship of children to an "activated space" in the evolutionary course of time (Tsoukala 2006: 226-233) (Tsoukala 2007: 224-245). According to my interpretation, an activated public space should be designed as an environment rich in meanings, full of social experiences, philosophical symbolisms, memories, and history, incorporating the concepts of *time* and *context* into architectural design.

The notion of "activity" enables the bridging of the two philosophical dimensions of activated space, namely its *material-lived* aspect and its *psychic-mental* side, in the passage of time. It enables the convergence of psychology and space sociology (Tsoukala 2001: 62). I claim that the transformation of "activated space" from a concept in the human sciences to a design tool presupposes the development of a Phenomenological Sociology and the meeting of the Critical Neo-Kantian philosophical tradition with the thought of Piaget. In other words, I believe that a basic prerequisite for the design of an "activated space" on the level of its architectural materialization is the constitution of a *conceptual "active space" of values and ideas* in the minds and perceptions of youths and children. That constitution requires a philosophical theory of knowledge, education, and learning, an epistemology of the active human subject, and a graded logic of types of space that will be able to bridge the symbolic space of Cassirer with the "life-world" of Husserl (Cassirer 1944: 43) (Husserl 2002: 151–158).

The scientific dialogue is in progress between the social-psychological approach of "activated space" by Kyriaki Tsoukala and the philosophical-symbolic approach of "conceptual space."According to my research (Terzoglou 2009: 379–383), I believe we should allow for the emergence of an objective space of publicity into the mental sphere of reason. Thereupon, an activated, physical, real public space of collective life and communication could be materialized into the social sphere of the city. The dialectical co-existence of those two spaces could acquire the structure of an open network that will be conditioned by human scale, centrality, and continuity.

An activated and conceptual public space could possibly be characterized by the co-existence of multiple, graded geometrical structures of organization, an abstract minimalism, the layout of transformable elements, and the presence of ephemeral structures that express a richness and complexity of needs and messages. A proposal for the formation of public spaces for children could be based on a successive transition from 'topological' to 'projective' and to 'Euclidean' space, as they are analyzed by Piaget and Inhelder (1967: 449, 451-485) (Tsoukala 2001: 41-43).

In conclusion, I believe that we can think anew of an anthropocentric city designed for the child, the youth, and the citizen in general: a city of play and meditation, art and nature, memory and socialization. This city will have a dense network of public, free, and outdoor spaces, each with a purpose: an un-volumetric architecture (Aymonino and Mosco 2006: 15–23), responding to contemporary ecological, social, and cultural needs and problems, an architecture of open and activated situations, and a conceptual architecture.

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