

NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMERCE

THE ADVANTAGES OF THE LOCAL PARTICULARITY OF COMMERCIAL SPACES

It is now taken for granted in nearly all so-called civilised human societies that whenever a decision about a matter of mutual interest is taken freely, in a democratic, participatory and informed manner (a combination that is nevertheless still quite rare), our cities improve. The quality of life and the environment gain and the common heritage is more efficiently preserved.

For the same reason, these factors - freedom, information and civic participation - are not always attractive in certain socio-economic or socio-political contexts, where the blind pursuit of profit or desire to impose an idea or religion supersedes everything else.

It would be almost a truism to say that the city only serves humankind with efficiency and quality when there is freedom and true civic participation. As a result, those of us who are concerned about the city must first ascertain whether this condition is already common practice, or is likely to become so in the near future, before we proceed with the corrective action or town planning that would otherwise be doomed to eventual failure.

I have actually met citizens who claim with conviction that if there is freedom and participation, the city gains quality on its own, without the need for intervention by specialists. This seems to me a little naive, but it is also an understandable reflection of the disastrous policy of supposedly spectacular urban intervention that is just a/an superb/exquisite/excruciating exercise in bad taste.

In this context it is also commonplace to claim that when we are given a choice, **IN AN INFORMED MANNER**, about the advantages of neighbourhood commerce over those of large commercial units, we always choose neighbourhood commerce.

But... what is neighbourhood commerce? This question seems to verge on the ridiculous, as the answer is so obvious! But, in fact, if we look at what has actually taken place, it is not.

In places where there has been a resumption of commerce by street-side shops, situated next to residences and/or public and private services, with well-defined hierarchies - the true city, therefore, in the proper sense of the concept now called "MIXED USE"-, in such places we can see that there are still aspects that need to be corrected and improved. If not, things may not work so well.

Firstly, the supply of shops in a particular neighbourhood ought to correspond to the demand and be properly balanced in relation to it. This is important for businesses to be able to prosper and not close down. For example, if there is a pharmacy every twenty metres in the same street, even taking into account that competition is healthy, it is obvious that things will not work well.

Then there is also the question of the quality of neighbourhood commerce, which promotes a closer human relationship between the user and the person who serves him/her. The familiarity that grows out of proximity and neighbourhood confers a more human character, with more trust and security, on the act of buying and selling.

It is a little like what happens to us when we are attended by a doctor in a big central hospital (with the odd exception). We are almost always treated as numbers and not as human beings, unlike when we are seen by our own family doctor in our neighbourhood health centre.

The space of the shop must never be a matter of indifference in this context. There is always a spatial, architectural characteristic that results not only from the "empty space" itself but also from the context of the neighbourhood. The concept of "GENIUS LOCI", now so much in vogue, extends to the smallest details. In the case of commercial space, it contributes towards better integration or harmony with the street in which it is situated and the neighbourhood it serves. This makes it distinct (not better or worse, just distinct) from others of the same type situated in some other district.

Sometimes, of course, this quality takes on proportions that go beyond the scale of the actual neighbourhood. I clearly remember that as a child I used to love going to a café in a neighbourhood a long way away, not just because of its excellent products but also due to the very particular quality of the space. This still happens to me now as an adult with certain shops - bookshops, record shops, shoe shops, etc.

This aspect of the particular nature or special-ness of one neighbourhood in relation to another is important not only in the more general aspects - geographical, morphological and typological - but also in their commerce. The small details contribute a great deal towards accentuating this diversity.

Having solved the problem of the large units, we shall now have to confront another one that is sweeping through the commercial spaces of our neighbourhoods like an epidemic or infection, eating away at the balanced fabric of their shops: the brands with a predefined image, a reducing, atypical image.

Some prestige brands, and even the major banks, manage to assert their image from neighbourhood to neighbourhood without debasing the quality we have described above. Others, however, choose to superimpose a predefined concept on the space or context, introducing a disruptive factor and impeding the fluidity of the personalised contact that is so important for the “good health” of the neighbourhood.

And it is not only certain brands: look at what happens with pharmacies - I return to this example only because circumstances have given me a certain familiarity with it -, where there is a very strong tendency to subordinate the organisation of the space to mass-produced furnishings and fittings. Instead, the fixtures and fittings should be adapted to the general design of this space by being subordinated to, and integrated into, the particular context. This helps to make the service more personalised and human.

But this phenomenon appears in many different forms. I always remember the story of the first shop of a well-known international hamburger brand in Rome, where a civic movement, later to become the “Slow Food Association”, was able to make a decisive contribution to the design of a space that was quite well integrated into its environment. (I do not know if it is still like that but I remember that when I entered for the first time the impression was of a counter with Italian confectionery and coffee, the floor was Roman mosaic and the walls were painted speckled ochre, with elements alluding to ancient Rome. Inside, besides the ‘classic’ features, there were also two counters with pasta and salads, from Italian recipes, of course). This shows that even cultural aspects related to commerce should be a matter of care and attention. A gastronomic tradition, an art or a

craft are aspects that contribute to the character of a neighbourhood, as of a city, region or country.

Another point that we must take into account when we think of the neighbourhood commerce in “our street” is the problem of security - “the eyes of the street”, in the words of Jane Jacobs. These consist, among other things, of commercial spaces that open on to the street and are not closed and inward-facing, with their backs to what is happening outside, whether this is a rape or a street party.

We professionals in these matters of architecture and town planning must, therefore, be equally attentive to this particular aspect whenever we undertake the renovation or design of a neighbourhood, or the simple design of any commercial space in a street. Besides us, the civic associations, the municipal authorities and all the other agents with an influence on these decisions must also pay attention to these issues and - who knows? - create their own “Slow Shopping Associations”.

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