What is Public Space's service value? Some relevant research questions

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1. INTRODUCTION - A RELEVANT RESEARCH QUESTION?

In spite of its 'youth', Public Space theory is now facing recognition of its role in space production of contemporary urbanity. However, public spaces' conventions (naming, codes, laws, rules, standards...) generally are not referred to by the needs they cover, neither by the services they provide, but as 'qualities and attributes' those spaces must possess. This practice leads to a notion of public space based on 'exceptionality' and on quality perception prevalence, rather than relational and organizational factors related to its production, use and meaning. So while awareness of Public Space has positive effects on available resources, mainstream concepts are narrowing representation of public space values.

This is the knowledge deficit that PSSS research aims to tackle: to give conceptual primacy to needs public space must satisfy, requiring a critical analysis of space production processes (both of its hardware and its software) and leading us to a model focused on service, on the public value it involves and on the systemic way it is organized. For this purpose PSSS – Public Space's Service System (an interdisciplinary research project led by IST - Lisbon University, with Oporto and Barcelona Universities' urban research centres) aims to develop new concepts and tools to foster awareness of public space service value. We shall offer an integrated assessment methodology – through literature review, study of public space production and its interdisciplinary framework, case-study presentation and stakeholders' interaction.

So we need to agree upon theory, naming relevant questions or problems, so as to allow a discussion on physical and cultural contexts with relevant urban diversity trends: **What are the current motivations for public space production? What approach is needed to 'translate' those motivations into notions of public space service, and its values, as a part of urban systems?**

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2. A SHORT REVIEW ON PUBLIC SPACE AND ITS THEORY

If Urban Design 'geographies' show relevant and globally spreading conceptual diversity, its 'history' is still a short story of last decades of public space observations and assessments, with ongoing discussion. Final outcome need theoretical 'refurbishing' to understand space production: its economic, social, morphological and ideological components, with different interpretation of public space return values.

During CIAM crisis of the 50s to 60s, Jose Luis Sert's activity at Harvard University showed opportunities for new reflections on recently coined Urban Design matters. Studies from pre-World War II attempts out of architecture field (Chicago progressive sociologists), until post-war approaches of Sert and Giedion launching centrality's theme (Sert, 1952), and in the sixties the new critical generation of 'Team 10', showed that Urban Design opportunities would come through Modern Movement criticism and not just from trading between architects, landscapers and planners' disciplinary gatekeeping.

Lynch (1960), Jane Jacobs (1961) and first followers, such as Alexander (1965), Gehl (1971), Leslie Martin (1972), Whyte (1980), Appleyard (1981) and others observation on urban life and peoples' perceptions of outdoor activities, led to the revalorization of streets and street life as a major urban structuring element. In that turning point, different theoretical inspirations led many towards a nostalgic reaction to functionalism: on the one hand by returning to European architectural historicism references (Krier, 1984; Rossi, 1966), on the other hand moving towards new ecological and environmental psychology concerns on spatial character and contexts (Cullen, 1961; McHarg, 1969; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). In Urban Design practice a line of thought came to light with diversity – in some cases, with nostalgic conservative agendas, such as "New Urbanism", influenced public awareness about Public Space.

With socio-geographic theoretical base for urban globalization critics, coming from Harvey (1990), Sennet (1992), Zukin (1995) and others mostly in USA, were promoted new reflections on public space economic and social contradictions. In Europe, structural lines of thought from Lefebvre's "Production de l'Espace" (1974), and Castells' "Information society"(1989), to Ascher's "Metapolis"(1995), gave a structuring sense to new theories on Public Space and on urban value global theory. Connections between theory, practice and politics converged in new policy actions under European left governments, at the end of the 20th century, such as in Barcelona's transformation for '92 Olympics (Bohigas, 1985; Borja, 2003) or, in the UK with Urban Renaissance (Urban Task Force, 1999 under Rogers coordination) and CABE (2001, 2006).

For the purpose of PSSS and the understanding of different interpretations of "what is Public in space", we may recall two state of the art reflexive inputs, leading our work and our research questions:

> "In this «American» model of public space, the ideal city no longer influences the real city. Instead, the stores, entertainment complexes and art museums that are important interventions in public spaces are shaping an ideal city based on consumption (…) the projects of «public space» people talk about – without irony- include growing numbers of coffee bars, «Disneyfied» streets, and large interior shopping complexes that provide attempt to provide an overarching spatial metaphor for social identity."   (Zukin, 1998)

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"El espacio público nos interesa principalmente por dos razones. En primer lugar porque es donde se manifiestan muchas veces con más fuerza la crisis de la «ciudad» y de la «urbanidad»" (y del urbanismo?) "Y en segundo lugar porque las nuevas realidades urbanas, especialmente las que se dan en los márgenes de la ciudad existente, plantean unos retos novedosos al espacio público: (…) las nuevas centralidades y la fuerza de las distancias que parecen imponerse a los intentos de dar continuidad formal e simbólica a los espacios públicos"   (Borja & Muxí, 2003)

Figure 1 - Barcelona's transformation, by public space production. In the 1980's and 90's Barcelona is a reference for urban regeneration projects (Source: Archivo Fotográfico de Barcelona)

3. PUBLIC SPACE PRODUCTION - DEFINITION AND MOTIVES

If Public Space itself is rendered as a subject of quality perception, we may ask: are spaces quality perception the same everywhere? Do we really know how to define it? Is it self-defined, as a motivation?

The fact is that twenty years after publishing "The Image of the City" (1960) Kevin Lynch made something rare in urban theory by putting under suspicion the concept of "spatial quality perception" he himself had launched twenty years before: "Enquiry sample size being too small(…)" he asked:

> 1. "What was not foreseen, however, was that this study, whose principal aim was to urge on designers the necessity of consulting those who live in a place, had at first a diametrical opposite result… professionals were imposing their own views and values on those they served."
> 2. Method had no sense of development dynamics in it... On how perceptions might change in future based on experience, or on cities modification. This fed the designers' illusion: "that a building or a city is something that is created in one act, then to endure forever" (…) mistaken as a matter of value.
> 3. "Interesting as this work is, it labors under the difficulty that places are not languages: their primary function is not the communication of meaning". If they can be considered not only as a silent discourse on the past… in their own nature… meaning could bring to richer results.
> 4. "Last, perhaps I would criticize our original studies because they have proved so difficult to apply to actual public policy (…) to change the way in which cities were shaped (…) True city design -, dealing directly (…) in collaboration with the people who sense it – hardly exists today". (Lynch, 1984).

More than 30 years after (until now), this honest intellectual reflection is still passing by more or less 'incognito', while all the rising interest on Urban Design and public space projects production all over the world, has been growing without a credible Public Space assessment being done.

Nowadays it seems that 'spatial quality' and 'vibrant urban environments' are representation for the same globally desired urban lifestyle (UN-Habitat, 2015). In fact, a high percentage of urban design motivations call for the same attributes for leisure, tourism and cultural use, soft mobility or pleasant landscaping contexts, with a tone in management, more and more based on consumption models. These actions have been somehow 'translated' from global affluent real-estate market, images of 'quality of life' are reproduced everywhere with narrowing 'colonized' representations of space values' criteria. In this direction, public resources are invested in public spaces, focused on image and fostering economic value of urban leisure spatial types (touristic historic styled places, waterfronts, iconic cultural or commercial developments).
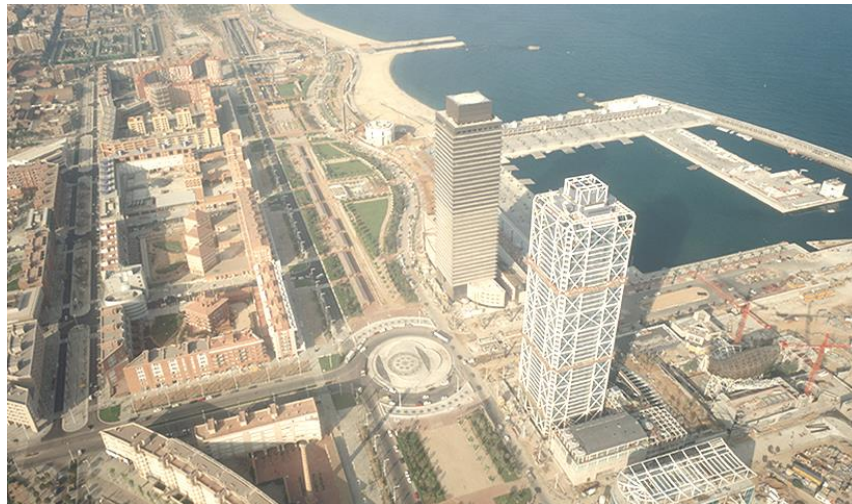

Figure 2 - Ronda Litoral and Port Olimpic, Barcelona (Source: Archivo Fotográfico de Barcelona)

In Barcelona's '92 Olympics, besides the event promotion itself, the main goal was to develop in a short period of time, a new centrality's space system – where public space as an urban recipe is the basic feature continuity of leisure activities, street life, public Art, consumption centres, waterfronts, new urban parks, etc., meeting a larger rank of objectives including new infra-structuring system's and maybe landscape adjustments' updating strategies (Figure 2).

Not far in time and space, in Portugal, a specific turning point can be traced down to Lisbon's EXPO1998 World Exhibition project, where issues as environment, quality of life, public space and leisure were being targeted by policies and design actions, from central and local governments. Connected to a cycle of economic growth and large public investments, symbolic relevance as paradigm of "new Portuguese society" the event marketing theme was Portuguese discoveries (Figure 3).

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Figure 3 - *Parque das Nações*, former EXPO '98 area. Lisbon. (Source: Ana Brandão 2009)

Visibility and success of these events had important spill-overs not only by setting new standards for urban transformations and public space, but also by generating urban values (Brandão, 2006) several public investments (and also private operations) disseminated the new paradigm over both countries. In Portuguese cities, cases like POLIS and PROCOM programs, supported dozens of urban projects, in historic central areas, waterfronts, urban parks and leisure facilities, with important political components of central and local government, and stakeholders demands for images of public space 'quality' (MAOTDR, 2007).

Whatever the scale, aesthetics and model's dynamics may be, we may even consider it familiar looking at Dubai's instantly coming from nothing (Figure 4) to a global leisure-consumer centre, and in many other places worldwide, with similar approaches in space production - where 'space quality factors' (liveability, vitality, vibrant, attractive, delightful, distinctiveness, …) are presented as the means to explain anything anywhere as space 'imagery', and still running to fame... when global urban images are selling ok.

Figure 4 - Waterfront sidewalk in Dubai (Source: travel4all.org)

Truth is, however, that not all urban contexts and spaces respond easily (or adequately) to standards or desires of so called 'qualities'. For instance, in disperse or more peripheral areas – suburbs, peri-urban spaces,

the diffuse city – there is a larger diversity and superposition of dynamics that do not typically correspond to clear paradigmatic urban models or recipes: "fragmented and discontinuous urban form is the result of a layered urban landscape with a big variety of urban patterns"(Valle & Travasso, 2014).

What is the need for (and what kind of problems are posed by) public spaces as founding elements of urbanity in these areas? (Figure 5)

Figure 5 - Urban dispersal in the northwest Portugal (Source: Filipe Jorge)

This is a relevant question that current planning instruments, research production and design knowledge are not solving. Several European recent policy's initiatives on urban regeneration are leaning on institutional programs and planning logics, using Public Space as the main ground to conduct transformations and deliver valued benefits. Despite these strategy, it is not uncommon that these actions focus on isolated units or segmental goals (air and noise control, energy saving, environmental risks, etc.) supported on legal legitimations, more than true effects on valued public benefits that may be related to funding sources, management structures, stakeholders' action, or a policy trends favouring appealing urban areas.

Frequently, Public Spaces lack integration with other urban systems to provide sustainability and social, cultural or economic returns and we acknowledge weakness in social cohesion, economic activity, basic landscape promotion, due to poor evidence of networks structure. Meanwhile there is growing interest on systemic approaches to urban problems – especially in relation to ecological and infrastructural aspects of urban spaces connection. Considering that such policy issues still remain apart from each other, it is obvious that new Public Space production needs an integration concept - as a **public space services system**.

If we broaden our perspective about public spaces of contemporary urbanity, we may find that it should no longer be restricted to a feature of urban life based on traditional city spatial references. Some programs are now understood within urban changes: increasing mobility, social and economic connectivity, new 'time typologies' (24h spaces, shared spaces…) of heterogeneous and conflicting characteristics.

Public space production is now embedded in all urban dynamics and requires interdisciplinary and integrated approaches: "What is clear is that contemporary trends in public space design and management are resulting (over time) in an increasingly complex range of public space types" (Carmona, 2010). Once Urban Design has recognition as an interdisciplinary area of urban knowledge and action, the time has come for deeper collaborative reflections on Public Space and new questions to ourselves:

What is public and what is public in space? Isn't it public to serve public deeds?

What is its service or benefits to the public? Is it connected to common needs?

Is Public Space organized by design styling units? Or as a system of public service?

Can we define service needs by design goals? In different and changing urban contexts?

What defines a public space service system? And how to define its value or values' service?

How do kinds of space services express kinds of value? Is there a taxonomy of urban values?

4. VALUE OR VALUES: WHAT IS VALUED IN PUBLIC SPACE?

Much of public investment, supported by a notion of Public Space benefits, is based on affluent leisure enjoyment in connection to representations of "happy lifestyle", fostering natural or cultural "styles of life", identity and even wishful thinking. More often in peripheral urban settlements, desires for urban self-representations are expressed in roundabouts, entrances and other visible locations with 'works of art', referring to concepts of value, added to commercial activities and real estate surroundings, "plaza" types of public spaces. But what are today's mainstream Public Space values' assessment focusing on? Do they regard 'public values', or just qualities of space' marketability, as commodities with 'exchange value'?

Many studies on interaction of people with spaces have as a starting question "What attracts people?". As the questions' motive is to understand users' options, to identify reasons why some spaces are used and others aren't, meaning 'what works and what doesn't' (Carr, Francis, G.Rivlin, & M. Stone, 1992; Gehl, 2010; Whyte, 1980). These approaches may use simple tools and methods to answer basic questions about space frequency, like "How many?", "Where?", and "For how long?". They rely on the sense of observers' judgment, to address setting's complexity and simultaneous activities, using techniques such as direct observation, mapping users' activities and behaviours, complemented with interviews and a direct involvement in space's activities (Gehl & Svarre, 2013).

Other assessment methodologies, developed for community's users, intend to raise awareness of public space issues and demonstrate how to address them. They are mainly based on on-site diagnostic tools that gather perceptions to initiate a constructive debate between diverse actors. Confrontation between different perspectives allows to identify problems and seek improvements to be introduced into spaces (CABE, 2007; Cowan, 2001; Project for Public Spaces, 2000). More specific research analyses urban design quality effects in space performance and value generation translated into benefits (CABE, 2001; McIndoe et al., 2005). This idea, that space generates values, is developed by distinguishing positive effects that may arise as a sum-

up of diverse (contradictory?) values, like use value, image value, social value, environmental value, cultural value and so on (CABE, 2006).

Finally, approaches focused on design process and space management aim to incorporate aesthetic objectives with economic requirements and users' preferences. These methods combine guidelines and project recommendations with qualitative assessments regarding space's success, highlighting the engagement of different stakeholders, especially users (Brandão, Águas, & Carrelo, 2002; Marcus & Francis, 1998).

In general, evaluation of public space is based on features and assets normative (usually quite extensive) that a successful public space must have or provide, identifying a set of "universal" positive qualities for public spaces (Carmona, Magalhães, & Hammond, 2008): clean and tidy; accessible; attractive; comfortable; inclusive; vital and viable; functional; distinctive; safe and secure; robust; green and unpolluted; fulfilling with the premise that a higher quality space has them all. Although these attributes may express 'qualities' that a space must satisfy, it is not easy to identify them as evaluation issues, nor to dissociate them from urban, social, environmental, economic, or other contexts they integrate (Khan, Moulaert, Schreurs, & Miciukiewicz, 2014).

Mainstream 'state of the art' assessment of Public Spaces seems now inadequate, with the use of flue expressions 'place making' and 'place pride' as kinds of tools, while a service fields criteria is missing in assessments models. PSSS tools for upraising Public Space Service shall be considered in three service types:
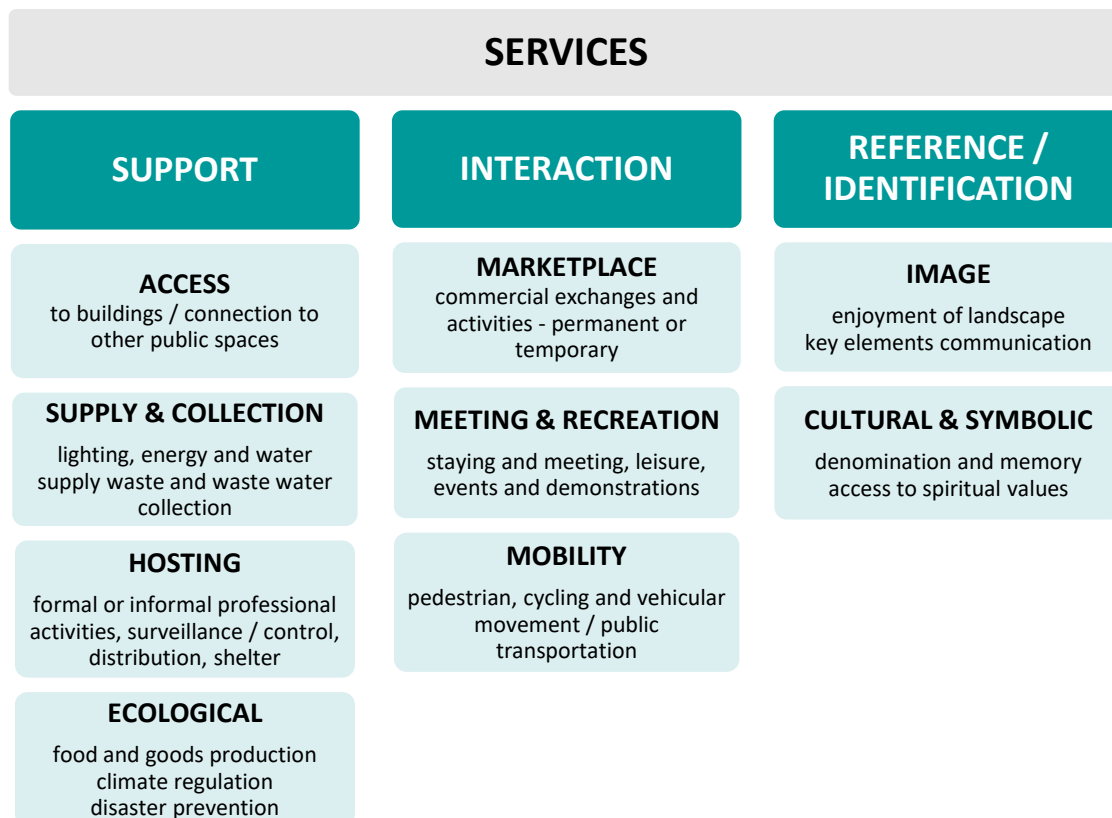
SERVICES

SUPPORT	INTERACTION	REFERENCE / IDENTIFICATION
ACCESS to buildings / connection to other public spaces	**MARKETPLACE** commercial exchanges and activities - permanent or temporary	**IMAGE** enjoyment of landscape key elements communication
SUPPLY & COLLECTION lighting, energy and water supply waste and waste water collection	**MEETING & RECREATION** staying and meeting, leisure, events and demonstrations	**CULTURAL & SYMBOLIC** denomination and memory access to spiritual values
HOSTING formal or informal professional activities, surveillance / control, distribution, shelter	**MOBILITY** pedestrian, cycling and vehicular movement / public transportation	
ECOLOGICAL food and goods production climate regulation disaster prevention		

Figure 6 - Public Space Services. Organization in progress (Source: PSSS, 2017)

5. A SERVICE FOCUSED SYSTEM - TO CLEAR EPISTHEMIC TROUBLES?

Several epistemic clarifications are needed, as cultural differences in urban matters of theory and practice are often due to differences in language (disturbs happen between languages and how they generate confusion about common words ambiguous meanings, such as "city", "urbanism", "plan", "project", "development", "speculation", "common", "liberal", and so on…). So as to clear epistemic base regarding 'Public Space Service System' (this project) we must clarify what is Public Space and what is a Service System.

Although 'service assets' concept referred to Public Space(s), basically have identical expressions and meaning regardless of regional or local diversity, in some environments they may not correspond specifically to the same thing – just to give an example, in many Latin American cities, sidewalks are privately owned and some streets may have entrance gates – is it a contradiction? On the other side, if we see a difference between 'public sphere', referring to interaction areas of social life (Habermas, 1989), and 'Public Space', referring to physical spaces, may we correctly word both the same way? So wording precision is needed both in Latin and English expressions, regarding fields of media and ideological concepts (like the meaning of "publicness – the quality of being public" that may translate as "publicity" - "advertising").

The same is true for older concepts: such as the "Commons" notion (more specific in English expression), meaning an open property, accessible, usable and cared for by a community, while "Public Space" means "publicly used, cared, managed…" and in specific cases "owned by public authority". It may then be more effective a definition as "commons", when there is less than an "ownership" meaning, but more than a "functional" meaning. Anyhow, when we say something is "Public" that is understood as something that is not personal, but somehow shared, referring to a community group, or else to everyone.

Sharon Zukin (1998) while naming gentrification and privatization as the "USA model", expressed it with the example of New York "success" of Collective Space (like Times Square, Nike Town, Bryant Park), as specific demonstrations of a perversion sense of what is "Public" in Public Space (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – New York perversion of what is "Public": Times Square, Nike Town, Bryant Park.
(Source: nycgo.com, nyhabitat.com, formatmag.com)

In what regards notions of "service" and "public value", they generally refer to what is "public", or to a "public character", that everyone may commonly expect from Public Space, although some "nuance" may exist between political interest, ideological interpretation and lay people discourse, in urban matters.

Regarding language in technical literature, it refers to Public Space as the type of open and freely used spaces in urban context (sometimes related buildings fronts, named as "urban landscape", option that could be rejected by professionals) and a Public specification is different from Collective (privately owned spaces, opened to more or less free use or passage by people generally referred to as clients, rather than users or citizens). Differences between "service" notions[4] may exist between the understanding of Public Space values in connection with Economy subjects (service as trade), and with Social subjects (such as in public services). Finally, in Urbanism, Engineering or Ecology disciplinary areas, "service" meaning is generally equivalent – either in concepts regarding infra-structural service, eco-system's service, or urban morphology service, with the acceptance of Public Space as a service concept – an ethical base for administration's accountability, defining urban citizenship as its final objective, within an urban **deliberative process**.

Despite its importance and its central role in the city, Public Space turns out to be the result of many different actors, agents, processes and contexts that are not always competing, but collaborating. The ability to assess this diversity of interactions, conflicts or synergies, should be part of everyone's goals - not always to solve these issues, but to make them more understandable and intelligible, as contradictory parts of urban life. So we may define a Public Space System as a spatial mode of organization that serves citizen's concerns and needs. Integration of space dimensions appeals to urban citizenship as the common place of "all of us". This means (such as in Remesar, 2000), regarding Urban Design, that it doesn't have to be made **for** people but **with**, or **by** them, if citizens actively participate in decisions. So public authorities and professionals must regard benefits coming from Public Space's service and become better facilitators of the "publicness" that they serve, through Public Space Service Systems.

> "If the public authorities think and act like private firms, it means their basis for decision making would also be similar to that of the private sector firms, which is primarily to seek exchange value. This would enable them to meet the demands of the economy, but would reduce their ability to meet some needs of the society, especially that which cannot be met through market mechanisms, which need public support. The remit of the public authority, therefore, is to provide use value, and to strike a balance with exchange value, rather than be primarily driven by it." (Madanipour, 2006)

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[4] Translation isn't of major concern regarding public space service meanings, generally referred to, just as other tangible services, like water supply, street access, garbage recollection, street paving, as public services classified responsibilities. Current wording in English, Portuguese or Spanish, connecting "to serve" and "public service":
- **ENG** (Following Antonio Houaiss - Oxford Advanced Dictionary): **To serve:** To help somebody**; Public service**: A system or organization that provides something that concerns public needs, organized by a government or by companies (water supplying, gas, electricity, transportation, ambulance…) or self-organized in common.
- **PT** (Following Cândido de Figueiredo - Grande Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa, Bertrand): **Servir**: Ser útil, cuidar, oferecer benefício a outrem, dar serventia, satisfazer, cumprir…**Serviço Público**: Sistema, organização ou coordenação de actividades para uma função de utilidade pública.
- **SP** (Following José Luis Sánchez, Dicionário Editorial Oceano): **Servir**: ser de utilidad, atender, prestar ayuda… **Servicio público**: suministro de actividades necesarias, de utilidad pública (transportes, pasaje, circulación…)

CONCLUSION: PUBLIC SPACE EVALUATION IS AN INTERDICIPLINARY TASK?

As said, Public Space production still lacks an assessment practice focused on the services provided to common spatial needs: what is the kind of organization designed to provide them, with what costs and benefits being at stake. Specific goals should be defined to promote some kind of 'liability' of urban design shared values regarding public expectations (all actors and all users, comprised in a "citizenship" concept of stakeholder) and also public administration who funds, programs and delivers most of space products.

How are values and services assured and how do they relate to stakeholders' will? PSSS at the least shall upraise and clarify assessment questions, based on needs and resources provision, scale organization, integration, continuity… between other systemic concepts, while regarding public space values.

Figure 8 – Afurada, Vila Nova de Gaia. Urban systems shared space: Infrastructure+Landscape+Public Space. (Source. Adam Jones, Wikimedia commons)

What shall be our aim, regarding Public Space systems' interdisciplinary evaluation process? As an interdisciplinary practice subject, Public Space and its multidimensional approach may express its potential (and limits) as a spatial services' provider – that is its central character and attribute to be assessed. Other relations express service values in time, such as continuity, adaptability, scale… A system that connects, relates and often coincides in space, with other systems – landscape, infrastructure, communication and other, organized around a set of institutional relations between different kinds of needs' understanding, disciplinary knowledge convictions, legal constraints, economic resources, design practice.

Decision making process involved in Public Space production must be interdisciplinary and democratic. Its assessment is a spatial integration production practice, by recognition of space's public values within an interdisciplinary rational, concepts and tools. To understand social, economic, environmental and cultural values of urban systems, a multidimensional assessment of overall value of Public Space is necessary. But such assessment must also be based on common claims of rights – sharing participation and legitimacy of public value, have to be defined, characterized and organized, as part of space production practices.

"There are pressing needs that public space can help to satisfy, significant human rights that can be shaped to define and protect and special cultural meanings that it can best convey. These themes (…) reveal the value of public space" (Carr et.al., 1992)

Democratic participation in Public Space governance is something of a different nature than a "performance", separated in various disciplinary fields and several service indicators – from street life to transportation mobility, from ecology to social cohesion, from public art to economics, from cultural activities to infrastructure, from communication to landscape and more… Most likely, we can't evaluate all actors and partners' satisfaction, trying to define public value as a measurable or a design quality proof, where all social groups could recognize themselves as the central stakeholder, in decisions, resources and so on. A Public Space system is mainly a structuring network (as in "The grid is the generator" Martin L., 1972), an organization of services provided as a hole, to all users, and it must be assessed in that quality.

In practical terms, creating public value relies upon taking an approach to the delivery of public services, through the principles of equity, accessibility and participation. Specific PSSS intents to develop references of public space service assessment, shall be useful for:

- diagnose of public space systemic services real and/or potential benefits in different contexts;
- support for strategic public space decisions in planning management and investment program;
- improve governance integrating stakeholders shared visions regarding what are the public values;
- public space rational reference of production, ex-post assessment on goals, expectations and results;
- support a "road map" for urban policies focusing on public space service value, advocacy and voice.

We have defined Public Space service value, not as a mechanism but as an operative instrumental concept. To conclude we need the understanding that Public Space best characters should arise from its **systemic and multidimensional approach** with a users' centred rational, arising from service provided and not from a set of undefinable qualities, nor from a 'value' transaction of 'public space commodities'.

As such, a new meaning arises: that Public Space has a diversity of contradictory stakeholders (all those who have a part in it) with conflicting interests. So, when we use the singular form – "value" – we could be referring or be understood as meaning just one of the values (eventually the one arising from "economic transaction value") but it could also represent another level of Value, meaning citizenship. For that, the commons need procedural and deliberative methods with governance platforms agreed upon.

"To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separations, the trivial and the poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation. The dialectic of the urban cannot be limited to the opposition centre-periphery, although it implies and contains it. (…) In thinking about these perspectives, let us leave a place for events, initiatives, decisions. (…) All the hands have not been played" (Lefebvre, 1985).

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