

Consumption and City Fragmentation

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Abstract

The majority of the world population now lives in cities, a very dynamic socio-spatial reality with hubs of communication networks, large concentrations of finance and other economic activities, serving as arrival points for populations of different origins, composed of multicultural societies, and simultaneously the domain of freedom and wealth as well as the homeland of exclusion and despair. Diversity and change characterise urban regions portraying the dynamics that affect society from all points of view (whether its technology, economy, demography or culture). This paper focuses on recent changes in urban landscapes and urban structures related to new forms of space appropriation and production both for residence and consumption. In analysing gated communities and shopping centres, evidence shows trends leading to the fragmentation of contemporary urban regions. I have adopted a process approach, focusing on the main actors in order to understand the change that is transforming cities from sites of production to sites of consumption. In the context of increasing global competitiveness and mobility, my intention is to underline the role of consumption in individual and group identification in terms of geographical space, choosing examples from the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Key words: gated communities; shopping centres; fragmentation; consumption

Cities, Diversity and Change

Diversity and change are important features in urban regions. Diversity may be witnessed in three main dimensions: social, functional and morphological. Cities are highly diversified societies because they are composed of concentrations of people who come from various origins and have different cultures. Large numbers allow a great range of individual variation, while density reinforces the effect of numbers in diversifying people and their activities and increasing the complexity of the social structure, as the classical texts from the Chicago School have explained.

Urban settings are sites for heterogeneity and interdependence where people are specialised in different activities. But they also are places of innovation and life experiences; here, new values and life styles emerge which are very often the products of interaction with strangers who are different. The anonymity associated with urban life, partly due to the concentration of large numbers, tolerance and sense of independence which people experience in cities, as well as the emergence of new values and life styles with the ability to include the “other”, underpin the classical idea that cities are the domains of freedom. They also lie behind the new ideas of creative cities (Hall, 2000, Landry, 2000, Florida, 2002) which stress the ability the urban population has for innovation and the importance culture and creativeness now have in the urban economy.

In functional terms, the diversity of cities can be assessed by the offer of a wide range of services, jobs and activities that make cities places of opportunities. From the industrial revolution onwards, cities have concentrated an increasing percent of employment and this

serves as a magnet attracting people. Even today, the members of the creative class prefer to concentrate in the cities because “people don’t look for a job but for a place that offers lots of jobs” to quote Florida (2005, 31). They have also become the preferential sites for shopping, leisure, culture and excitement because of the diversified character of their offer.

The last dimension of diversity is the morphological aspect, which is very obviously present in the urban scene. In opposition to the village where most, if not all, buildings look the same, in the cities we find an enormous variety of styles, sizes, building materials, functionalities, and so on. The buildings’ diversity makes for the wealth of the cityscape, its identity, and they create different environments, transporting people back to the old days or into the future. Nowadays, the past inscribed in the cityscape is another important asset for cities to compete for the attention of tourists, residents or firms. But it is not only based on past heritage since, within marketing strategies, many cities invest in new iconic buildings, designed by famous star-quality architects designing real contemporary landmarks.

Change is also particularly patent in cities due the important concentration of the population and investment in places where innovation grows because of this concentration. At the same time cities are open to external influences exercised through several networks (transport, information, production, services), which have the cities as their nodes.

Even if internally originated owing to a special creative milieu, innovation spreads all around and often arises as a response to a problem that has been imposed from the outside. As matter of fact, cities are not isolated spaces and globalisation has strengthened both the competitiveness among regions and the importance of networking in order to deal with it. Therefore, a complex interplay of external and internal forces (economic, technological and cultural) helps to bring about change in urban settings. Several authors have pointed out the large-scale transformation of cities during the last quarter of 20th century that warrant the metaphors or new expressions coined to describe the urban regions (the galactic metropolis, the 100-mile city, the metapolis). They reveal that a new reality has emerged which is opposed to or, at least, differentiated from the modern industrial city.

Cities are different from the past, in first place owing to their size, not only their demographic dimension but also the size of the geographical area occupied and the way this is done. The net limits of compact cities have given way to large spaces with sparse, diffused occupation extending over a wide range of functions, from housing and retailing to factories and business parks, from amusement parks to technopoles, from parking lots to airports, from golf courses to shopping centres. Tim Hall (1998) talks about a set of spectacular complexes of apartments, office and retail buildings separated by economically - or environmentally - depressed areas, which have the merit of underlining the fact that contemporary change has not solved problems of uneven development. On the contrary, social and economic polarization, along with the contrast in built-up environmental conditions, has increased.

Another feature of change has to do with the increasing number of nodes (polarities or centralities) throughout the urbanised areas. The structure of the metropolis has changed from a monocentric model, a coherent unit polarised by centres organised according to rank and overseen by a principal major centre which is the core, the downtown area or the central business district in the bigger agglomerations, to a polycentric one (Graham and Amin, 1997, Hall, 2003, Barata-Salgueiro 1997 and 2001), as a consequence, offering alternatives for location and consumption.

The recent transformation of the city landscape and structure is a result of many factors working worldwide. In this text I stress the change in consumer values in relation to the production of the built environment because they eloquently express the action of global trends at local level. The variety of buildings has increased to meet the new functions one can find in the cities. Actually, diversification has also brought real estate new products, ones that are not new in form or main function, but new primary due to their role in the capital market, and in production conditions, and the set of functions they support, including at the symbolic level, and in their appropriation by users.

The new products have taken the shape of mixed-use complexes, regional shopping centres, office complexes, business and entertainment parks, gated communities, large-scale developments, very often mixing their uses and becoming anchored as new centralities. In terms of process, they may be associated with large-scale redevelopments, sometimes in the regeneration of brown fields or waterfronts.

New real estate products also translate the strength of real-estate capital in contemporary economies and cities. David Harvey (1978), following Marx's arguments, justifies investment in real estate with the difficulty of making further profits in the primary circuit of capital accumulation due to over production (or over accumulation); surplus value created in the production process is then channelled via capital markets into the secondary (or tertiary) circuit which is the built environment. Neil Smith (1996, 267), writing about the gentrification of the inner city's districts, develops the theory of the rent gap ("gap between the actual ground rent capitalized from the present (depressed) land use and the potential rent that could be capitalized from the highest and best use"), an explanation for recentralising capital and once again making the highest profitable use of the land. For Milton Santos (1996) growing investments in building production are the main cause of the obsolescence of existing structures, which are not yet old enough. As matter of fact, the process involving built-environment production implies devaluating the old structures whilst favouring new buildings and locations that are presented to companies as the best sites for doing business in, and to families as localities offering the highest quality of life.

Many authors stress the fact that the on-going transformation of cityscapes displays the replacement of production sites such as factories and wholesale districts which have been razed to make way for consumer sites in the shape of shopping centres, convention halls, entertainment sites, hotels, restaurants and so on. This process has sometimes been called the speculative production of places. Often, this change comes by means of a regeneration project resorting to public engagement and funding and its success is sometimes associated with an occasional, cultural, sports or commercial event. The north-east part of Lisbon close to the river front was redeveloped because of the 1998 international exhibition. This is a common example of property conversion from industrial use to residential, offices, and consumer activities, taking advantage of a good location in the central city close to the waterfront.

Jayne (2006) sees the contemporary city defined by and acting through consumption because it is the product of a post-industrial consumer economy affected through a fundamental shift involving production and consumption. There are many definitions of consumption, but one should keep in mind the idea put forward by this author (Jayne 2006,5) that consumption is about the purchase and use of goods and services, although these practices help us to construct our identities, understand our place in the world and mark our attachment to social groups, spaces and places. Moreover, goods and services and places are imbued with symbolic meanings that help us to communicate and interpret via consumption.

Our identities are determined by our access to and use of an increasing number of goods. Some time ago, T. Veblen (1899) already talked about consumption in relation to the growing importance of goods as markers of social status. People show others their wealth and who they are by means of consumer signs, by means of the objects they have (clothing and style, cars, apartments and furniture, and so on), but place increasingly enters the shopping-basket of identification signs. It implies a natural process in a period of intense change and increasing mobility in which even identities are disturbed. Going to the same places where people display the same type of attitudes and behavioural patterns helps to strengthen (bonds within) communities or tribes, as Maffesoli (1996) calls them.

New Forms of Residence

A sign of distinction for the middle and upper classes is now associated with living in an enclosed or gated community, a new form of residence that offers a set of services besides housing. Gated communities are enclosed residential spaces, with material boundaries, such as walls or fences, gates and restricted entry, and they offer residents' services and facilities, namely safety and leisure facilities, and sometimes also cleaning services. In these new residential formats there is a collective use of open spaces that provide most of the leisure facilities. These spaces and their dimension vary with the size of the community and its location, and can range from a garden and swimming-pool in the smaller ones, to tennis or golf courts and woodlands in the larger ones located mostly on the outer fringe. Gated communities may be seen as a sign of embedding housing in a consumer rationale: the transaction entails much more than the real product, i.e., the dwelling. Besides the house's features and its location, it is also awarded a status symbol whereby the neighbours have certain characteristics and safety, leisure facilities, and clubs, greenery and open spaces are part of the package.

Gated communities appear almost in every big city, functioning as a global product for wealthy social groups with international life styles. They originally came from USA, or at least their present versions did. They first appeared in Portugal in the 1980s but spread very fast from the 1990s on. The largest concentrations are found in the two metropolitan areas Lisbon and Oporto; and the Algarve, the southern coastal region, which is an important tourist destination, although we can also find them along the coastal resorts and in some inland vicinities close to dams, for instance.

As new forms of housing for the upper and upper-middle classes, gated communities reflect changes in the socio-economic structure that has impacted on land use. Their growth is related to the economic restructuring and social changes of the last few decades and the emergence of wealthy new upwardly-mobile social groups. These groups need to express themselves and affirm their position signposting their distance from other groups, underlining their success in material and symbolic terms, along with an infill of consumer values in all spheres of life. Their upwardly-mobile situation implies some fragility, which makes them afraid of the less-affluent groups perceived as potentially dangerous or even a threat in a society showing traits of fragmentation and less solidarity. It is this need to signalise distance, both physically and symbolically, that helps us to understand the importance of walls, fences, controlled entry, rather than as a defence against crime, at least in Portugal which is not a very dangerous society at all.

Besides this reason, changes in life styles and cultural patterns should also be considered. Gated communities answer the wealthy urban population's growing demand for outdoor activities and sports, as well as a measure of fascination with nature and greenery. Studies on

the publicity advertising these developments (Raposo 2001) show the importance of sports facilities and safety measures to attract residents, whilst interviews with residents indicate that the most important factors leading to their choice lay in safety against burglary and road traffic, namely for children to play out of harm's way, and leisure/sports facilities, along with quietness.

In Portugal, gated communities are different owing to their size, location and use (first or second homes). As the resident almost always owns his own property, such communities can be located in the inner city, in the suburbs or on the fringe, but also in the rural areas or in holiday spots. In the inner city, they are made up of apartment buildings, sometimes as result of restoring old structures but also of rebuilding in the place of the old one. Developers look for prestigious neighbourhoods that are either stable owing to the value of their charming buildings and environment, and the residents' status, or the pleasant panoramas overlooking the Tagus River in Lisbon. Occasionally they may appear in districts, which are not so highly considered, and even have a negative industrial image. In these cases, publicity campaigns ignore this setting to valorise the neighbourhood's centrality or accessibility, the building's modern conditions or the residents' status. There are also enclosed inner-city communities composed of semi-detached (or terraced) housing but this type of dwelling is more common in the suburbs or on the fringe. Here large villas and large estates are much more frequent.

The construction of gated communities in old neighbourhoods either assures the continuity of wealthy people in certain districts or brings the wealthy into places where they were non-existent, thus allowing for gentrification. In central Lisbon, enclosed communities and other luxury housing present a scattered pattern. In the inner city, therefore, gentrification and high-status housing has advanced punctually making the social geography of cities much more complex. Gated communities and other forms of luxury housing in the inner city show evidence of the (re)valorisation of centrality by high-income groups and the socio-spatial fragmentation of the metropolitan areas, owing to the fact that the residents in these kinds of enclaves do not interact with their neighbours living in the vicinity outside the condominium. Residents come home by car through the garage door and carry out most of their social activities in several places that are located far from one another, and are not in the neighbourhood. They shop in one place, meet friends at the club or restaurant in another, go to the theatre in yet another, interact on the internet, travel not only around the city or the country, but frequently go abroad.

Free from distance constraints in their daily lives, today's people display more complex spatiality in that they articulate their lives in specific personal configurations. This ability to become network connectors similar to words in a hypertext, has led Ascher (2001) to talk about a hypertext society.

Shopping Centres and Status Signs

The impact of new patterns of time organisation in shopping behaviour no longer implies the relationship between the frequency with which goods are used and the distance travelled to buy them, i.e., the basic assumption in hierarchical models such as that of Christaller. At the same time, centrality acquires new meanings, and the travel patterns for shopping have become more complex. Several combinations that meet changing needs in terms of stock provisions, leisure and culture oppose the rigidity of the stepwise travelling choice from the convenience corner shop to the CBD. The appropriation of retail spaces is no longer decided upon by continuity and proximity, which is the bases of speciality founded on distance, but

rather, follows a spatial rationale close to that of the networks, where the tunnel effect is growing, thus favouring the punctual, fragmented appropriation of territories.

Studies carried out on medium-sized cities in Portugal have shown that people associate retail formats with distinct values of consumption, so that the frequency of one or the other is conditioned by different interests. If they want general food provisions they go to a hypermarket, for cheap bulky housing goods the retail park is chosen, but if they need assistance and professional advice they prefer the high street store. The local market is associated with fresh fruit and vegetables, tradition and nostalgia or memory, while the regional shopping centre is the place of modernity, comfort and safety; it has a good atmosphere for consumer displays where people like walking around seeing and being seen.

Shopping centres and other forms of new retailing appeared in Portugal in the 1970s and have registered a great increase since the mid-1980s. They are carefully planned, aiming at creating an atmosphere and offering consumers experiences. Sometimes they reproduce pleasant indoor plazas with terraces, old neighbourhood streets, with pictures of building facades that have little to do with the real world. Fountains and palm trees are added in an attempt to display their own variety of city streets conducive to shopping and entertainment. Often through simulacra of the old days or city districts that do not exist anymore, the *mise en scène* is facilitated, allowing consumers to migrate to hyper reality where time is suspended and space is a collage of fragments enabling consumers to role play surrounded by merchandise, the basis for creating their own identities (Cachinho 2002 and 2006).

Shopping centres and gated communities show some common features. Both bank on safety, a pleasant environment, a certain social homogeneity and both behave like enclaves which means the absence of continuity with their social and physical environments, something that is vigorously affirmed by their closed characters and by the boundaries that separate the inside world from the outside, restricting entry by means of doors. The design of shopping centres and gated communities seeks to make a contrast with the outside streets that are either freezing or too hot, dirty, rain-soaked, traffic-congested and noisy, where consumers can be disturbed by burglars or beggars. In contrast, shopping centres have a clean pleasant environment with corridors like streets, only lined with flowers or trees, fountains, benches to sit on and, most of all, at a nice temperature. It never rains; there is music and lights that favour shop window displays and a carefree promenade in suspended time. In these environments, one never finds clocks, and people easily lose their sense of time.

In gated communities the contrast with the outside is not in the controlled weather conditions but mainly in terms of the absence of traffic, a cleaner, more pleasant environment with natural components like greenery, trees and flowers, and the prevention of intruders. In shopping centres, security is also ensured by the presence of security guards, and by restricting the entry of undesirables like the poor.

In terms of homogeneity it is important to note that both forms allow one to be among one's equals, a situation that is more common in gated communities than in shopping centres, at least in Portugal. Normally, these retail formats aim at specific consumer targets and the tenant mix is organised in accordance with goal so that people of the same income level visit them. Even if there are some shopping centres in Lisbon and Oporto that are more sophisticated and preferred by upper-income groups, in general, they are relatively democratic attracting a wide range of consumers. In the metropolitan area of Lisbon, suburban shopping centres receive different groups from several neighbourhoods and when they are the centres of a new real estate development, they help to fix identities and local images (Cachinho, 2006).

I have mentioned that shopping centres can be simulacra of outside streets. In the USA there are many examples of thematic gated communities (Soja, 2000), which are imitations of Italian towns, Mexican villages and so on. In Portugal there are some developments (thematic resorts based on vineyards, for instance) that sustain specific ways of life (agro friendly, sportive and so on) but they are not very common yet.

Both regional shopping centres and gated communities have become enclaves because there is contiguity without continuity with their vicinity. P. Hall (2003, 146) has noted that “the new forms of segregation has at least two dimensions as it can be coarse-grained and also be fine-grained such where disadvantaged social housing is found next door to affluent villas”. Shopping centres may display the same pattern when located in lower income suburban districts. Thus, the morphological contiguity is not followed by social and economic continuity. Although they are side by side, they are like distinct worlds placed far apart.

Besides enclave characteristics, regional shopping centres also become the core of new centralities because they attract large numbers of consumers, sometimes people travelling long distances. Enclave features and centrality make these new landscape forms into the pillars of the new fragmented, polycentric city.

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