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## URBAN PUBLIC SPACES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC<sup>1</sup>

**Petr Kratochvíl**

*Institute of Art History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Husova 4, 11000 Prague 1, Czech Republic  
E-mail: kratochvil.petr@volny.cz*

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**Abstract.** The study deals with public space both as a physical phenomenon and social phenomenon. It defines its fundamental meaning by referring to the works of sociologists Richard Sennett and Hans Paul Bahrtd: The public space offers the opportunity to meet other people, confront the differences, and at the same time it is a place where we can strengthen social solidarity and mutual respect. The study briefly mentions the development of public spaces in Czech towns at the time of communist regime. However in the first instance it shows selected current works to document the attempts to express the openness of democratic society after 1989 and the new arrangements of public spaces. Evaluation of the development during the recent years shows both positive and negative aspects: On one side it is a sensitive reconstruction of previously neglected public spaces in historical centres of towns and several completely new spaces in other town quarters, on the other side it is too strong commercialisation of these spaces, their submission to tourism, and the lack of interesting public spaces in the places of everyday life of the inhabitants and in newly developing areas of towns. The increasing interest of professional community and general public in the quality of public space, as well as attempts to make the care for public spaces a substantial part of municipal strategies in some cities give a hope for the future.

**Keywords:** public space, town planning, contemporary Czech architecture.

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*Motto: “In our country, in Italy and in France a street is a sort of great pub or public gardens, a village green, a meeting place, a playing field and a theatre, an extended home and a threshold ... the most interesting saloon where you encounter a thousand spectacles or have a thousand adventures speak to you, a saloon where people whistle or fight, make a racket, flirt, rest, write poetry or philosophise, relieve themselves and enjoy life and make jokes and discuss politics and cluster in pairs, in threes, in crowds and families or in revolutions.”*

*Karel Čapek, 1924*

### Introduction

The aim of this essay is to analyse the changes of public spaces of Czech cities and towns after the transition from the communist regime to civic society, democracy and market economy. We will concentrate not only on the physical form of streets, squares and green parks and on the aesthetic and architectonic tenden-

cies that dominate their shaping. We are interested as well in the social content of these spaces, in the relation between physical form of urban spaces and changing urban life. What socio-economic and political trends are mirrored in the appearance of our public spaces and in activities that take place on this stage? Are there substantial differences in comparison with the situation under the previous regime? And can the public

<sup>1</sup> The essay is part of the research project “Architecture and Public Space”, GA ČR P409/11/2220.

space be not only the witness but also the means of the transformation of society towards a more democratic order and active participation in public affairs?

We have already a sufficient historical distance from the turning year 1989. So we can perhaps more unbiasedly assess weak and strong aspects of the recent development. Czech architectural historiography has already got rid from a simplifying view on the post-war period. (It is evident that also in 1960s–1980s – very often in defiance of times and power – many outstanding architectonic works arose.) And the historians have also overcome the fluctuation between too optimistic expectations of a radical transformation after 1989 on one side and similarly one-sided disenchantment stemming from new, not expected problems on the other side. The same might be said about the theoretical reflexion on the development of town planning. However, a similar realistic view on the development of urban public spaces begins to be searched only recently when this partial, nevertheless important aspect of town planning has become part of new urban strategies and is attracting more and more the interest of a broad public.

#### Definition of the term “public space”

“Public space” is an ambiguous term. Primarily, it means a real space in town or any other publicly accessible physical place. However, we speak about public space in context with politics, social relations and interpersonal contacts, where a relation to a particular place is utterly irrelevant or where the processes take place in the virtual world of media. Hannah Arendt expressed the most profound and philosophical meaning of “public space” when she described it as the space of appearance: “Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance, in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the broadest public space is: “the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from privately owned place.”<sup>3</sup>

The ambiguity of the term of public place is no accident; language always depicts a complex human experience. Connecting and merging physical, social and generally human aspects, public space is really a complex phenomenon. A place that is not filled up with social activities or that potentially offers an opportunity for such activities is not a public space, it is only a

physical space. Vice versa: The public sphere of social life, politics, and culture always needs a localization at a particular place in the last instance to become apparent and effective. Thus it requires to penetrate into the physical public space (e.g. Occupy Wall Street movement). This very complexity of the public space makes it possible for us to follow the relation between the changes of urban public space on one side and the social and political changes on the other, including those that happened in central Europe after the fall of communist regimes in the countries of the region. The appearance of public space always mirrors the community it is inhabited with. The public space reveals footprint of everyday life and footprints of pretensions of power of the Establishment, represented with its symbols. The public space was, historically, the cradle where the elementary mechanisms of social and political integration were formed. A brief historical review can help define substantial features of the public space and offer us a referential background to understand current changes of the phenomenon.

The historical model of public space is usually considered the Greek “agora”, as an open space surrounded with *stoa*, where people met to discuss politics, take legal proceedings, negotiate trade or just talk. According to the American urban sociologist Richard Sennett, the important aspect of agora was its poly-functionality, which brought different people for different purposes to the place. It enabled a person to meet the difference, other, unknown people and their different customs, professions and preferences, and it made a person to develop common strategies of mutual and natural coexistence. Sennett says that providing the possibility to meet differences is the fundamental social purpose of public space up to the present time<sup>4</sup>.

German sociologist Hans Paul Bahrtdt<sup>5</sup> referred to medieval market place, where the public sphere with its specific features was formed for the first time. These features included mainly the fact that the integration of individuals at a market place is fragmentary. Unlike country people the relations of who are firm and transparent, the townspeople meet as anonymous individuals. However this is the situation that makes a person to develop such forms of conventionalized behaviour, symbolic displays and representations that bridge the distance between people without cancelling it completely. The medieval market place taught a person to

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, H. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 198 p.

<sup>3</sup> Idem. 52 p.

<sup>4</sup> See: Sennett, R. 1998. *Spaces of democracy*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The Michigan University College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

<sup>5</sup> Bahrtdt, H. P. 1969. *Die moderne Grossstadt*. Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag.

respect the other anonymous person as a human being, without being bound to them by a firm social tie. The public space of the medieval market was, according to Bahrtdt, also a place, where the elementary principles of democracy arose.

We could summarize a number of other roles the urban public space has had since the past: A place of manifestation of power (municipal and/or state), a place of work, trade, relaxation or simple *flânerie*. And we could mention various physical forms the public space has taken during the course of history, which – in case of Czech towns – would undoubtedly be a very rich narrative. However we stressed mainly the role of public space as a place where the elementary and live democracy has been formed, because this is what links our topic of changes of public space after the fall of communism and return of democracy in the countries of central Europe. After all, the igniter of the “Velvet revolution” in November 1989 was an event in public space: the police action against student demonstration in the streets of Prague.

### Public spaces of the socialistic Czechoslovakia

During the previous regime, only very few public spaces were created whose urban form straightforwardly represented political communist power. The historical squares and streets of Czech towns offered sufficient stage for everyday life and for occasional rituals of political manifestations. The period inscribed in those spaces with a lot of monuments of the ideological motifs. Isolated suggestions of radical rebuilding historical centres and constructing monumental spaces for mass gathering fortunately ended only in drafts. Thus new monumental spaces arose only in new residential areas in the first half of the 1950s, when historicizing trend of so called socialistic realism in architecture was connected with traditional perimeter blocks of buildings and classic urbanistic composition. (Examples are particularly in new neighbourhoods of Ostrava, a city of mining and metallurgical industry.) Since the 1960s, the new housing estates followed principles of modern urbanism: Free standing buildings surrounded with green parks. However, these public places lack urban character, being rather non-places<sup>6</sup>. They were parts of an abstract space instead of a system of clearly defined places. Even the centres of those new neighbourhoods failed to offer public spaces in the form of formally defined places. They just presented emptiness surrounding the detached blocks of flats. Young architects and theoreticians made an interest-

ing research in a new town of Most<sup>7</sup> in north Bohemia in the 1980s. The town was build as a replacement of medieval town of Most, which was pulled down due to opencast coal mining. The research used a method of mental maps of Kevin Lynch<sup>8</sup> and showed that the inhabitants of the town were able to create more accurate image of the non-existing old town that had been pulled down than an image of the contemporary environment in which they had resettled. The obvious reason was the clear structure of public spaces in the old Most in contrast to amorphous space of the new town.

The foundation of the identity of Czech towns and the support of identification of their inhabitants were the historical centres with their multi-faceted public spaces of squares and streets. Those historical public places showed some positive and some negative characteristics: The time seemed to stop there in the mid-20th century: Czech towns were not damaged in the WW II, the historical centres and their public spaces were protected as historical reserves and the new investments were mostly aimed at the suburbs. However, preserving the historical form had the seamy side: Neglected maintenance and decay of public spaces surrounded with greyish facades and falling off plaster, absence of any innovative elements that might freshen up the public spaces adding a new layer to them. Measures to restrict automobile traffic (e.g. by defining pedestrian zones) were either late or rare. On the contrary, thoroughfares were often pushed through the centres in the time when cities in the West started hindering from constructing these roads. Such was the condition of public places at the end of the communist era: Amorphous space without real places in the new housing estates of slab blocks and preserved, although neglected spaces of streets and squares in historical centres.

### Awakening the public space

Richard Sennett, who has been mentioned in this text, said at the recent Prague conference “Forum 2000”: “An urban milieu, a place which brings different people together and gives them a chance to interact locally on the ground breeds something like democracy.”<sup>9</sup> Does this hold true vice versa, the political democracy supports democratization of the public space, too?

<sup>6</sup> Augé, M. 1992. *Non-Lieux*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

<sup>7</sup> Ševčík, J. a kol. *Obraz města Most* [The image of Most]. Unpublished research. Faculty of Architecture ČVUT, Prague.

<sup>8</sup> Lynch, K. 1960. *The image of the city*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.

<sup>9</sup> Sennett, R. 2010. Conference report, in *The World We Want to Live in, 14th Annual Forum 2000 Conference*, 10–12 October, 2010, Prague. Praha: Forum 2000 Foundation. 91 p.

The fall of the communist regime and reinstatement of the democratic political system after 1989 drove the creeping anxiety of permanent control of secret police out of the public space, which nipped any public expression of civil disagreement in the bud. Loosening the general regimentation of life enabled the public space to start filling with formerly unthinkable spontaneous activities. Privatization of services and retail trade quickly resuscitated streets and squares, new attractive shop windows and interiors of shops and restaurants attracted growing crowds of buyers. Opening the borders and high tide of tourists became the reason to reconstruct public spaces and the adjacent houses in attractive historical centres bringing in financial resources for their renewal.

In addition to these spontaneous results of the political relief we could see projects that wanted to form the environment for the new civil society intentionally (to use the favourite term of the first democratic president Václav Havel after November 1989). One of the noticeable symbolic acts was opening the Royal Garden (Královská zahrada) and other areas near Prague Castle, which were inaccessible for public and guarded by secret police for security reasons during the previous regime. A part of this was re-arrangement of Jelení příkop (Deer Moat) (Fig. 1). The designer of the architectural and landscape project was Josef Pleskot, who – apart of other things – connected both parts of the gorge in an interesting way creating a new walkway through surprisingly romantic natural scenery. The walkway runs also along a slope where it is intentionally very narrow. The architect explains:



Fig. 1. Josef Pleskot, AP Atelier: Tunnel in the Deer Moat, Prague Castle, 1996–2002. J. Malý photo

“When two people are slowly passing by, they have a chance to almost touch shoulders, they have a chance to express courtesy as one can step aside to let the other walk by. These are actually challenges for pleasant social contacts.”<sup>10</sup> Or, as Richard Sennett would say, it is “a place which brings different people together and gives them a chance to interact”.

Opening public places did not apply only to outer urban spaces or parks. The buildings that represent state authority or municipal administration were supposed now to have an open and accommodating character. They were not to look like fortifications, but they were to be connected to surrounding public space much widely. When the town hall of České Budějovice, which stands on a historic square, was being enlarged, Zdeněk Jiran and Michal Kohout, the architects of the project, created a new public atrium that can be used for various cultural and social events (Fig. 2). At the same time they removed visual barriers between the clerks and waiting people in the new building to express the unsegregated relationship between a citizen and the institution. Possibly, this small example can illustrate the new ethos that prevailed in the newly establishing civil society in the first decade after 1989. At least for some architects (and some enlightened investors), the rehabilitation of public spaces became an important part of committed architectural production. Thoughts about how to suitably express character of public, semi-public, and private spaces, and how to define their mutual live relationship became an important part of architectural concepts of a number of architects: among Josef Pleskot – who has been already mentioned – and his other implemented projects such as new annex to the townhall in Benešov, the following should be listed: Aleš Burian & Gustav Křivinka (campus of the Faculty of information technologies in Brno, public spaces in Litomyšl), Alena Šrámková (new bridge in Přerov, Fig. 3), Projektíl studio (new building of Prague National Technical Library, Fig. 4), Petr Hruša (reconstruction of Moravian Square and Dennis Park in Brno, Fig. 5), Pata & Frydecký Architekti (New square in Prague – Dejvice, Fig. 6), Jan Línek (a number of senior houses), Šafer Hájek Architects (recreational premises Ladronka in Prague) etc.

Barcelona with its projects for Olympic Games 1992 is considered to be the pioneer of the rebirth of the interest in public spaces. The inspiration of Barcelona brought also certain aesthetics. Two of the important participants of the turn of the focus towards public places, the Catalan architects Oriol Bohigas and

<sup>10</sup> Kratochvíl, P. 2005. *Rozhovory s architekty* [Interviews with architects]. Praha: Prostor. 11 p.



Fig. 2. Michal Kohout, Zdeněk Jiran: New wing of the town hall in České Budějovice, 1997–2000. P. Kratochvíl photo



Fig. 3. Šrámková Architekti: New bridge in Přešov, 2012. P. Kratochvíl photo



Fig. 4. Projektíl: National Technical Library, 2009. P. Kratochvíl photo



Fig. 5. Petr Hruša: Moravian Square, Brno, 2008. F. Šlapal photo



Fig. 6. Pata & Frydecký Architekti: New square in Prague – Dejvice, 2007. O. Polák photo

Manuel de Sola-Morales characterize this “Barcelona style” with an accent on urbanity of space (so, not on natural park character) and with hindsight they warn of too excessive mannerism of designs<sup>11</sup>.

However, it is too difficult to classify dominant tendencies in the designs of public places in the Czech towns unambiguously. Most of the works were modifications of existing public places in historical centres of towns, where traffic and parking is, at least sometimes, gradually restricted. Almost all main squares were given new paving (traditional materials usually replaced asphalt paving), and street furniture and streetlights received the contemporary appearance. If these designs exceed simple renewal of a public space revealing substantial artificial and architectural ambitions, a similar feature as in the whole present Czech architecture can be observed: A trend to sobriety rather than splendid show of a lot of ideas; often a distinctive emphasis on harmonic mastering and clear arrangement of spatial relations; ingenious play with paving; minimalism in design of urban street furniture (benches, lanterns); usage of contrasting modern materials (weathering COR-TEN steel); rather suppressed natural elements except for water, and clear differentiation between urban spaces of the square type and the park type space. The most interesting designs of historical squares and pedestrian zones are in Olomouc (by HŠH studio), Cheb (by A69 studio) (Fig. 7), Litomyšl (see above), Broumov (David Chmelař), and in the largest cities: Prague, Brno, and Ostrava. In some towns new arrangements succeeded to heal up scars caused by previous



Fig. 7. A 69: Pedestrian street, Cheb, 2010. J. Moravcová photo

unnecessary demolitions. In Ústí nad Labem, the original historical layout of the square was reconstructed to retrieve reasonable dimensions and clear shape by constructing new buildings along the perimeter. (Unlike similar urbanistic reconstructions such as in Roemerberg in Frankfurt am Main the new architecture in Ústí does not follow the historicism.) Eventually some public parks in neighbourhoods of blocks of flats built in during the previous regime gained cultivated appearance.

There are only a few really newly built, not just reconstructed, public spaces. Among the rare examples is the reconstruction of Bastion XXXI in gothic-baroque fortification walls of Prague<sup>12</sup>. The place between the inner wall and the outer wall of the fortification seemed to be nonexistent. The waste had been dumped into the space for more than one hundred years making the space inaccessible. Architects Miroslav Cikán and Pavla Melková emptied the space and inserted a low building of multi-functional coffee house sensitively inside (Fig. 8). The site in front of it was changed into a park overlooking the city skyline. Considering the present interest in public places, it is characteristic that the design and construction won Grand Prix 2012 as the best architectonic work of the year in the Czech Republic.

### Both sides of the coin of present development

Soon after the fall of the communist regime a large international conference “Prague – the future of historical city” took place under the patronage of UNESCO



Fig. 8. Miroslav Cikán, Pavla Melková: Reconstruction of Bastion XXXI., Prague, 2012. F. Šlapal photo

<sup>11</sup> Bohigas, O. 2004. *Espacio público – Contra la incontinenia urbana*. Barcelona: Electa. Sola-Morales, M. 2010. The impossible project of public space, in M. Angles (Ed.). *In favour of public space – ten years of the European Prize for urban public space*. Barcelona: CCCB and ACTAR.

<sup>12</sup> Melková, P.; Cikán, M. 2012. *Bastion XXXI*. Praha.

in Prague in 1991. The final declaration said among others: “Tourism is a welcome resource corresponding to the attractiveness of Prague, however it must not transform the city into mere tourist attraction.”<sup>13</sup> Despite this warning, Prague could not resist the pressure of tourist industry. The number of permanent inhabitants in the historical centre decreased, while the number of hotels and other facilities for tourists increased. This, of course, changed the character of public space and the social spectrum of its users. The drawback of successful renovation of these spaces is the stylization into sleek picture-postcard look, shift in the social structure of people, who meet in the streets and single-track activities taking place in this part of the city. This kind of “expropriation” of public space in favour of tourists has happened, of course, only in those Czech towns, that are, similarly as Prague, famous for their historic sights.

Public spaces of smaller towns are weakened by another factor: the new shopping malls built in the outskirts that lead customers out of the centres of the towns undermining economical functions of the traditional urban space. Even though those new shopping malls are trying to offer an illusion of urban space – interior corridors, galleries and sheltered piazzetas – they are not real public spaces. Their appearance is completely driven by marketing strategies, continuous supervision and regimentation of behaviour are features hardly compatible with the principles of public space, we have mentioned at the beginning of this text<sup>14</sup>.

Such separation of a part of town from the sphere of public law and moving it into the private sphere has a parallel in housing: The first gated communities have grown up in some large towns for the richest clients. Although there are not many of them, they are a symptom of continuous privatization of public space, which is inconsistent with Luis Kahn’s thought that: “The street is a room of agreement. The street is dedicated by each house owner to the city in exchange for common services.”<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly a permanent obstacle for development of public spaces is sluggish regulation of private car traffic in towns, and the number of cars increased after 1989 significantly. Pedestrian zones were established only in historical centres of towns. There are no con-

tinuous systems for foot traffic or bicycle traffic that could be an option to car use. In spite of the fact the general public is very interested in creating such optional system that does not collide with other usage of public spaces. All books, including *Cities for people* (2010)<sup>16</sup>, written by Danish architect Jan Gehl, a great promoter of car traffic calming in towns, were translated and sold out, which clearly shows general interest in the topic. A weak point of the development of present public spaces is the fact that care mostly concentrates on the historical spaces in the centres of towns. Thus the suburbs remain full of large unattended areas that could have been cultivated into public urban or green spaces. The large housing estates of block of flats has not gone through a process of the improvement of their empty spaces, in spite of the fact that improving these areas could prevent social degradation of these neighbourhoods. Urban sprawl that significantly enlarged the areas of towns after 1989 with colonies of single-family detached houses, is chaotic, lacks any elaborated urbanistic conception and does not have any clear outline of public spaces. Also in other spheres of urban development it is difficult to find a successful public-private partnership that could sufficiently stand up for public interests while building public spaces (Paradoxically, one of the most attractive new public spaces is a green pedestrian zone in the middle of the new complex of office buildings “The Park” in Prague (Fig. 9), the private investor of which left the space accessible for the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhoods.).



Fig. 9. Cigler Marani Architects: The Park, Prague, 2002–2010. P. Kratochvíl photo

<sup>13</sup> Galard, A.; Kratochvíl, P. (Eds.). 1992. *Prague – l’avenir d’une ville historique*. Paris: La Tour-d’Aigues, Praha: Éditions de l’aube. 283 p.

<sup>14</sup> See: Crawford, M. 1992. The world in a shopping mall, in M. Sorkin (Ed.). *Variations on a theme park – the new American city and the end of public space*. New York: Hill and Wang.

<sup>15</sup> Latour, A. (Ed.). 1991. *Louis I. Kahn, writings, lectures, interviews*. New York: Rizzolli Int. 265 p.

<sup>16</sup> Gehl, J. 2012. *Města pro lidi*. Brno: Nadace partnerství (in Czech).

In connection with these facts – well-known in other countries – many critics speak about crisis of public space, while others perceive it as continuous changes of functions and appearance of public space<sup>17</sup>. Although we cannot settle whether the positive or the negative trends dominate the real development of public spaces in Czech towns, we can point to a promising move in perspective on the issue. It is actually obvious the general interest in the quality of public space and the way the decisions on the issue is made keeps increasing. The general public responses to various civil and artistic initiatives actions that try to find a solution.

One of these initiatives is called “Urban Interventions”, an event, which started in Bratislava in 2008 and successfully continued in Prague and Brno<sup>18</sup>. The organizers, Slovak architects Matúš Palo and Oliver Sadoický in Slovakia, and Adam Gebrian in the Czech Republic later, prompted their colleagues to find places that should be improved in their neighbourhood and suggested a solution on a single sheet of poster. Both serious and humorous designs were displayed at an exhibition and became objects of discussions. The goals of such activities are not only bringing original ideas and offer them to municipal authorities for possible implementation but also activating interest of general public in particular public spaces and the environment in which people live and work. A similar platform for discussion is at the “Festival of Public Space” in so called “Zone Ideal”<sup>19</sup>: exhibitions, lectures, concerts and playful workshops in a provisional large tent in



Fig. 10. “Zone Ideal”, Prague 2012. P. Kratochvíl photo

the middle of a block of flats neighbourhood in Prague should encourage the inhabitants to articulate their own ideas on suitable arrangements of the local environment (Fig. 10). International conference “reSITE” on the same theme has been held in 2012 in Prague and will be repeated regularly<sup>20</sup>. It is to say that the number of similar civil initiatives supported by progressive architects and artists has been growing during the recent years. In some towns these initiatives become partners of the official municipal planning institutions.

The mere initiatives of enthusiastic propagators of public spaces, however, would not be sufficient to change the situation in a broader scope if there was not a real renaissance of the interest to use again the streets and squares also for other purposes than only for movement and transport. For example so called “farmers markets” (weekend street markets with local food) have become very popular during last 2–3 years; people come here not only for shopping but also to meet friends, neighbours or simply to enjoy the urban atmosphere experiencing thus maybe the same impressions as those described by Hans-Paul Bahrtdt. Farmers markets, neighbourhood street festivals, city beaches on closed streets during summer weekends and similar events intended not for tourists but for local residents are symptoms of changing attitude towards public spaces. They can later result in the demand for the architectural improvement or reshaping of these spaces.

### Concluding Remarks

We opened this essay with a quotation from a book written by Karel Čapek ninety years ago. His enumeration of activities taking place on streets of Czech (and Italian, or French) towns could be taken for almost complete and accurate characterisation of purposes and meanings of urban public spaces. But do we still really need streets and squares in such a large extent as mentioned by Čapek? Jan Gehl is right saying that while in the past urban public spaces were connected with necessary activities and therefore had to be used, now they mostly offer a stage for only optional activities and the visit of them is a matter of choice depending on their attractiveness<sup>21</sup>. We really do not need to go to the main square in front of the town hall to learn about the decisions of our city council and the shopping we can do everywhere. Some people even

<sup>17</sup> Selle, K. 2004. Öffentliche Räume in der europäischen Stadt – Verfall und Ende oder Wandel und Belebung?, in W. Siebel (Ed.). *Die europäischen Stadt*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag.

<sup>18</sup> Vallo, M.; Sadoický, O. (Ed.). 2012. *Urban interventions – from architects with love*. Bratislava: Independent Publishing Group.

<sup>19</sup> *This is Martins* [online], [cited 20 April 2013]. Available from Internet: <http://thisismartins.com/works/2011/zona-ideal/>

<sup>20</sup> *reSITE: a collaborative platform to exchange ideas about making cities more livable* [online], [cited 20 April 2013]. Available from Internet: <http://www.resite.cz>

<sup>21</sup> Gehl, J. 2006. Public spaces for changing public life, *Urban Space* 61: 16–22.



believe that the idea of public space as an important physical form is a thing of the past and that modern society already uses other means of integration and communication that needn't have a specific location but instead take place in the virtual world of mass media and the Internet.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that urban public spaces can be not only pleasant places for leisure time activities but they still play further, more crucial – existential and social – roles.

We live in an intricate fluid world and it is not easy to orientate in it. Physical places can help us in this orientation both in a physical and in a mental sense of the word. They must have, however, a distinct form and strong character that guarantee their identity. And in most cities and towns that are just their public spaces that represent the identity of the whole environment and enable thus our identification with our place.

As far as the social mission is concerned, urban public spaces (streets, bridges, etc.) interconnect areas with different social atmosphere and – as town squares – gather different social groups and activities at one place. In this way they can help to prevent the social segregation and evoke a sense of elementary solidarity based on a recognition that in spite of all differences we share something common.

To what extent public spaces of Czech towns and cities succeed in this mission, whether our failures are still the consequence of the transitory nature of our development from post-communism or they are general symptoms of Western civilization the future will show us that. Some promising tendencies are, however, evident. The opinion that a town is not a real town without good public spaces comes into general municipal strategies of development. For example, in Prague in 2012, the City Development Authority created the “Office of Public Space” that prepares a strategy and a manual for development of public spaces of the city. The starting point of the strategy should be the thesis: Public spaces make up the basic structure of a city. The increasing interest of professional community and general public in the quality of public space, as well as attempts to make the care for public spaces a substantial part of municipal policy in some cities give a hope for the future.

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## PETR KRATOCHVÍL

Ass. Professor, Institute of Art History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Husova 4, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic.  
E-mail: kratochvil.petr@volny.cz

His research interests are theory and history of modern and contemporary architecture.