

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



SEVILLE: THROUGH THE
URBAN VOID

Miguel Torres García

ROUTLEDGE

Focus

Seville: Through the Urban Void

Recent years have seen a growing interest in undetermined and unqualified urban spaces. Understanding cities as spaces for encounter, conflict and otherness, this book argues that this indeterminacy is not marginal but a key characteristic of urban space, and degrees of liberty foster change, creativity, and political action. The urban void is a conceptual construct that aims to render a principle of absence apprehensible, and to describe how it intervenes in place-making in the city.

Seville: Through the Urban Void builds mostly upon Henri Lefebvre's work using concepts drawn on the social sciences, in order to articulate a biographic narrative of the Alameda de Hércules in Seville, Spain, which stands both as an outstanding instance of urban space and a very influential urban type. During its long historical span the Alameda has undergone alternating periods of decline and development, revealing the relations between successive urban paradigms and ideas of nature, territory, and the people. For the first time its whole history is told in a single account, which adds new perspectives to its understanding, and brings forward formerly disregarded aspects. This book shows how its liminal nature, which stubbornly persists over time, creates the conditions for creative processes.

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Built Environment City Studies

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First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa
business*

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for the book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-64432-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62889-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

To Lucía and Inés

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Stefan Bouzarovski for his insight, help and continuous personal support during my doctorate. I would also like to thank Kevin Ward and Jon Coaffee for their ideas and direction, as well as other scholars and professionals who have given me insight throughout the process, and in particular Mary Elizabeth Perry.

Among the many people who have helped me during my research, I have a special debt to those who accepted to be interviewed. They entrusted me with precious memories and shared their unique visions with me. Every testimony was priceless, and I only hope that I have treated them with all the respect they deserve. Their contribution to my understanding of the Alameda and Seville is enormous, and they are the true evidence that the city belongs to the people who make it.

I am also grateful to the staff at Seville City Archive, and to those institutions and individuals who kindly facilitated textual or graphic information, especially to the nuns of the Order of Mercy in Osuna, and to Carlos Ortega.

Finally, thanks to my family for their understanding and their unyielding support. And to my friends who were always there with a warm laugh and a cold drink.

1 Introduction

The study of socio-cultural particularities that underpin the making of place has become relevant in the light of recent developments. In particular, events related to the Arab Spring, the Spanish 15M and Occupy movements have revealed the significance of particular instances of urban space for political action, in a way that challenges customary understandings of public space between an abstract locus for public opinion and an issue of planning and design. Underlying these standpoints is the widespread notion of *urban space* as a space for encounter, conflict and otherness (e.g. Barthes 1986; Jacobs 1996), in which the practical, the performative and the political converge.

Consequently there have been calls for a closer look at the agency of particular urban spaces in which both particularities and indeterminacies foster creativity and political action, such as Sassen's (2013) recent idea of *a city's speech*. Western culture tends to oversignify and *fill* spaces with content in order to relieve fundamental anxieties (De Certeau 1990; Augé 1992; Milun 2007). This drive for domination causes in turn unsettling (Amin and Thrift 2002, p. 128), and it is spawning new sensitivities towards the edges (Sennett 1990) and undetermined spaces (Sassen 2013), which retain a public condition insofar as they are more accessible and inclusive:

The emptiness is ideal for sorting out inner and outer worlds. It's a democratic space, too. Democratic and popular are not, after all, synonyms. There are moments, in fact, when the two concepts are at odds. A city that offers the alternative of unpopular spaces is more accessible than a city that only tolerates popular success.

(Muschamp 2000, p. 29)

For Franck and Stevens (2007) open-ended, *loose space* conveys an enhanced quality of urban as it better allows processes of emergence, creativity and political innovation that constitute the urban condition (Amin and Thrift

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2002, p. 48). Other authors praise the potential of degrees of liberty and unqualified spaces in the city (McCullough 1978; Lokaitou-Sideris 1996; Borret 1999; Kamvasinou 2006, 2011; Franck and Stevens 2007; Oswalt *et al.* 2013) in times of economic crisis and recession of the state, when a growing number of bottom-up initiatives use up abandoned or marginal spaces as alternatives to formal channels. There is therefore a need to re-categorise urban spaces given this new state of affairs, in which traditional urban features such as streets or squares are increasingly incorporated by privatising, commodifying and corporate strategies, and radical social action moves into the interstices of the global city.

The *urban void* is a conceptual construct that aims to render apprehensible a principle of absence which I argue underlies the condition of urban space. This book is not about vacant or left-over spaces in the city, but rather aims to bring forward the emptiness in every urban space. I take a critical and often retrospective position, within a wide range of literature and theoretical approaches, in order to propose emptiness as a primal constituent of urban spaces, from the moment when they are created over vacant land, and as long as they can accommodate possibility, inclusion, encounter, contestation and conflict.

Framing this study

Voids in the city are regarded in the literature either as negative spaces lacking urban qualities or as positive spaces in that they provide spaces of possibility and alternatives to formal, open or public space. Both standpoints nevertheless seek to incorporate space that is perceived vacant into a given urban logic, thus expanding or originating new urban spaces. The hypothesis of this book is that empty space is in the origin of the different forms of space and urban practice, and as such it has an inherent value. I depart from the idea that vacancy is necessarily an important factor in the original creation of common urban spaces, such as squares, streets or parks, of which it remains a constituent part. The ultimate goal is to decide whether this concept can be used for understanding existing urban spaces and how new ones emerge. Consequently I discuss the manner in which the material configuration of urban space is spawned in the encounter between different social structures (Turner 1969) and a hypothetical antagonistic *void* over which they spread, along the following research questions:

- Is there a principle of emptiness underlying urban space? In other words, if urban space is created by appropriating (conceptually) vacant land, does this emptiness remain to some extent?

- Be it metaphorical (meaningless) or material (empty or shapeless), is this *void* a constitutive feature of urban space? Is this emptiness related to the characteristics of urban space? Is it determinant of its capacity for encounter, emergence and re-formulation?
- What is the void's rapport with built form and spatial practice? If urban space is the product of the meeting of a socio-political ideal and a wealth of practices, how do these relate to an underlying emptiness?

In order to grasp how urban space develops over vacant or strange land, or in moments of crisis when an underlying emptiness surfaces, I not only consider a main framework of social constructionism and the trialectics of space, mainly as defined by Lefebvre (1991), but also consider de Certeau (1990) and pay special attention to Bhabha's (1994; cf. Soja 1996) concept of third space. I argue that an interaction with a void brings about change, and to account for fluid states I rely on a set of concepts from anthropology and sociology. I use *liminality* (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969, 1974) to characterise both spaces that mediate with the void and activities that become possible in undetermined spaces. I also consider *boundaries* beyond an established material feature, as continuously reformulated and re-enacted and in turn constituting place (Pellow 1996; Elden 2006, 2010, 2011; Ingold 2008; Walther and Retaillé 2014). To further make visible an idea of process and dynamic recombination of the dimensions of space, I elaborate on the notions of *bricolage*, *ritualisation* and *fetishisation*. I adapt these terms from anthropology to conceptualise and describe processes in which a space is rendered practicable, is appropriated and dominated or is given symbolic content and agency. The three processes together problematise how representational, represented and practised spaces are re-figured, turning one space into another, within a liminal process in which a principle of absence is central. This book thus adds on recent literature that endeavours to characterise process of emergence and evolution of practices (e.g. Shove *et al.* 2012; Schatzki 2013) by identifying such dynamics in the trialectics of space, and within which affects (Thrift 2004; Anderson 2006, 2009) have a clear role in setting processes in motion.

The Alameda de Hércules in Seville, Spain, as a case study

This book delves into key historical moments and the latest evolution of the Alameda de Hércules in Seville in Spain, an early example of a public garden, hosting the first civil monument in the modern Western world (Albar-donero Freire 2005), in which its enormous influence has only recently been acknowledged. Built in 1574, it predated the appearance of gardened spaces in London, Berlin, Rome or Paris. It has its roots in hydraulic engineering

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throughout the Habsburg Empire (Paya 2014) and, in Spain, the sole precedent of Madrid's Prado de S. Jerónimo (Collantes de Terán and Gutiérrez 2010, pp. 14–15), which was originally planned as an ephemeral promenade, but eventually appreciated and maintained. It is safe to assume that given the success of Madrid's experience, the Spanish authorities decided to use a similar approach on the occasion of the in-fill and conditioning of a neglected and problematic area within Seville.

The so-called Feria Lagoon was the remains of an extinct river branch that was engulfed by the swiftly growing urban tissue. It became a recurrent weak spot against rains and floods; it accumulated all sorts of waste and is acknowledged in different sources as a source of discomfort and insalubrity. The lagoon was central to a wider project aiming to upgrade the growing 16th-century Seville and improve the population's quality of life, including the consolidation and enhancement of infrastructure for water distribution and disposal. The works towards converting this urban void into a qualified space were contemporary to the formulation of the Spanish colonial expansion. They also took place at a moment of understated but extraordinary influence of humanist trends in Seville. As a result of these concurrent circumstances, the Alameda de Hércules (which did not officially receive this name until 1845) was the product of a complex entwinement of practices, technologies and meanings.

The Alameda had an outstanding influence on Western planning at large, and *alamedas* became established as an urban type in the Spanish and Spanish American planning lexicon, most notably during 18th-century Enlightenment (Luque Azcona 2015). Over the modern period they featured in important American cities such as Mexico, Habana, Lima, Cuzco, Quito, Buenos Aires or Bogota. They played multiple roles in urban layouts, often solving contact spaces between cities and hinterland, river or seashores, and providing space for civil representation and popular culture. Collantes de Terán and Gutiérrez (2010) count 168 instances of alamedas in Spain alone. In spite of their spread, alamedas did not figure in the 1573 Laws of Indies as a prescribed urban feature, unlike the other major urban figure in Spanish urbanism, the *plaza mayor*. Whereas *plazas mayores* were officially sanctioned and symbolically laden spaces, alamedas kept an open nature, being the result of local needs, popular practice and social representation.

Such openness created a great variability across the many instances of alamedas as an urban type. It was adjusted to the constraints of different cities and towns, but almost invariably they were gardened promenades of longitudinal layout, located on urban fringes. Much of the uniqueness of Seville's Alameda de Hércules resides in its being inserted amidst the consolidated city while constituting a border territory at different levels throughout Seville's history. Due to its past as a geographical accident it was a boundary between different parishes; being a low area, liable to flood