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HOW THE PERCEPTION OF THE CITY AND THE HOUSE CHANGES IN THE ERA OF THE CORONAVIRUS

Abstract

Due to the coronavirus crisis, the meaning of concepts such as 'urban space' or 'public space' have been modified and will no longer work as they did before. This paper will discuss a new understanding of the city and the house caused by limiting interpersonal contacts to communication via social platforms. Current phenomena such as empty streets, loneliness or confined life has inspired artists and will be shown on the example of selected works.

Key words: coronavirus and the house, coronavirus and cities, social network as an urban element, digitisation of public and social space, confinement to the house

Jak zmienia się postrzeganie miasta i domu w dobie koronawirusa

Streszczenie

Z powodu kryzysu związanego z koronawirusem, znaczenie pojęć takich jak „przestrzeń miejska” czy „przestrzeń publiczna” uległo modyfikacji, a one same nie będą dłużej działać tak, jak do tej pory. W niniejszym artykule omówione zostanie nowe rozumienie miasta i domu spowodowane ograniczeniem kontaktów międzyludzkich do komunikacji za pośrednictwem platform społecznych. Aktualne teraz zjawiska takie jak puste ulice, samotność czy życie w zamknięciu zawsze inspirowały artystów i pokazane zostaną w wybranych pracach.

Słowa kluczowe: koronawirus a dom, koronawirus a miasto, komunikatory społeczne jako miejski element, digitalizacja publicznej i społecznej przestrzeni, zamknięcie w domu

Introduction

Social relations are suffering a strong crisis because of the global coronavirus pandemic¹. Due to confinement, the streets have become empty and homes have become full. How does this affect the understanding of both concepts? Cities, built as spaces for socialisation, cease to operate this way, and houses, often used as a passage between work and social life, are becoming our sole reality, serving both these needs—they have become our only world in which we live confined.

How does all of this affect us? How will it end? Did we imagine that something like this could ever happen?

Social relations are, by definition, the interaction between inhabitants who belong to a society. They are based on the creation of emotional and personal ties. But, how can these ties be built if interpersonal relationships are not possible in these days of seclusion? The possibility of communication is now being questioned. How can we do it without direct conversations and physical supporting elements?

[...] human interaction occurs on many levels and in many modalities; and these modalities may qualified the message sent [...] Expression and recognition of subtle forms of human communication, especially irony, sarcasm, and humor involve more than one communicational modality (e.g. facial expression, body posture, tone of voice). It is frequently the incongruity among these different modalities that conveys the more subtle message. Will the expression and understanding of more subtle forms of human exchange diminish?²

To better understand the social changes that we are facing right now, it is important to remember what interpersonal relations looked like before the crisis and how we used to understand the concepts of ‘urban structure’ and ‘the house’. The meanings of these concepts are changing as this paper is being written, and they will hardly mean the same thing when this all ends.

Social relations in public spaces

The term ‘urban form’ can be used simply to describe the city’s physical characteristics. At the general scale of the city, it has been defined as the spatial configuration of elements. The elements of urban form have a great influence of human behaviour. The urban space cannot be understood without people within it.

¹ This text was assigned to the students as an exercise of preparing scientific essays (course: Cities of Information Technology—New Challenges; teacher: assoc. prof. Anna Palej) and was written in Spring 2020 when the Spanish cities experienced the first wave of coronavirus crisis and the government imposed a stay-at-home order to prevent the spread of infection.

² H.L. Lennard, S.H. Crowhurst Lennard, *The Forgotten Child*, A Gondolier Press Book, Carmel, CA 2000, p. 215.

People are necessary for public spaces, they enliven them, give them a meaning, character and identity. Public spaces are necessary for people, too, as a background for their daily routine, as places where they can find psychological support or places that make human experiences deeper and more intense.³

Mutual relationships between urban places and city inhabitants are very important in the Mediterranean culture, to which I belong, and in which it is perfectly normal to live outside homes and interact with others in public spaces for many hours every day. The climate is a key factor here—it is good weather that makes people enjoy their leisure time outdoors, which is why a large part of their social life takes place outside their homes. So, for the Mediterranean culture, as we can see, terms like ‘social circle’ or ‘interaction with others’ are highly significant. Thus, will society be able to remain locked up and not go to exterior urban spaces?

Changes caused by the coronavirus crisis

Firstly, we have to understand how the coronavirus crisis is growing, not only in individual countries like Spain or Poland, but across all continents and on different scales. This disease originated in China and, due to globalisation and ease of travel, mainly by air, began to spread very fast throughout the world. All countries affected by this pandemic had to take action, to the best of their ability, to prevent the spread of the disease among its populations. Most governments opted for stay-at-home orders, which were intended to limit physical contact and thus prevent contagion. The adoption of these restrictions is the reason for postponing for an indefinite period all physical and interpersonal relationships that previously took place in urban places. It was in public buildings and open spaces that people could enjoy what the city had to offer and perform their social roles. What happens when all these places are closed and therefore inaccessible? New proposals appear, trying to alleviate the need for communication and connections of the city’s residents with people from their social circles. New models of social contacts are emerging due to these unforeseen circumstances.

Until now, the home has been understood as a place where a person or group of people can develop their private lives, rest and create familial bonds. On the other hand, home residents used to spend most of the day in places away from home, such as work, school, university, a museum or a place of relaxation and entertainment. Now, the decision to keep people away from public spaces forced them to spend long hours at home, usually with others, and do a whole variety of things for which the house was not prepared. How can this situation change the meaning of the concept of ‘home’?

³ A. Palej, *Cities of information civilization. New challenges*, trans. by A. Półtorak-Filipowska, Wydawnictwo PK, Krakow 2019, p. 215.

With this confinement, our homes have become our absolute and only reality which is why we began to look for places where we can fulfil our social functions, which are now suspended. Balconies and windows are now becoming the only places where people can look outside from homes, and can establish relationships with their immediate surroundings and the city. In all cities of Spain, these elements become the most important parts of the house, because that is where people gather at 20:00 every day to support society and to manifest what is happening inside their homes.

The cities we see now are empty. They have stopped most of their activities and withdrawn from their main function—to serve as a frame for networks of social relations. But people are social entities by nature, how can they survive without going outside and talking to others?

The Internet and social platforms are growing in importance and become a space where one can talk and communicate with those who cannot be reached otherwise. In addition, they are starting to replace workspaces, connecting those who work at home. The Internet and its tools are becoming the main method of keeping in touch with people. We can say that the functions of the urban public spaces are now expressing themselves digitally, replacing streets and squares with *spaces of flows*. We can therefore say that a digital city is now being created.

How will all these affect the perception of cities in the near future? Will people use them as they used to?

Urban changes expressed in art

Due to the coronavirus crisis and the consequences in cities, many artists began to look for inspiration in it and make art based on the moments we are going through right now.

But empty streets, public spaces without people and home scenes showing contact with the city only through the window appeared in art much earlier. Now, we can see ourselves reflected in those artists' creations that showed how cities have changed since they were paralysed and abandoned.

Ignacio Pereira is a Spanish photographer who started his project four years ago—before the crisis and not knowing what would happen. In his works, he edits photos of the busiest streets in Madrid and empties them of people. This idea tries to change the meaning of the street and invites the viewer to appreciate peace.

With the coronavirus epidemic and how the streets have become empty, my work has gone from incredible to credible. In some exhibition, people looked at my photos and did not believe this could be real and now...



Photo 1. Gran Vía street—photo edited by Ignacio Pereira. Source: El Mundo, @ignaciopereira_com, Nueve fotografías para (re)descubrir Madrid, <https://e00-elmundo.uccdn.es/assets/multimedia/imagenes/2019/09/18/15687969349209.jpg>



Photo 2. Current view of Gran Vía street during coronavirus pandemic. Source: Onda Cero. Vistas de la Gran Vía de Madrid sin gente ni coches—Policía Municipal, <https://image.ondacero.es/clipping/cmsimages02/2020/03/21/51F69E1B-B861-45A6-824B-8A7E5A4F9359/31.jpg>



Photo 3. Normal traffic on Gran Vía street. Source: Grupo Larvín, <https://larvin.es/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/granvia.jpg>

Ignacio Pereira is not the only artist who thought about the empty city before the crisis. This idea also appeared in a movie directed by Alejandro Amenábar—*Open your eyes*, made in 1997. It was meant to represent the perfect nightmare, like a utopian scene that would never seem real. We see in these pictures made 23 years ago the reality of this street at present.



Photo 4. Frame from the movie *Open your eyes* by Alejandro Amenábar, <https://youtu.be/csJRiLAlbso>. Source: ABC. Madrid. Escena de la Gran Vía, vacía, durante el rodaje de «Abre los ojos» en 1996—abc, <https://static2.abc.es/Media/201509/23/abre-los-ojos--644x362--644x362.jpg>



Photo 5. Frame from the movie *Open your eyes* by Alejandro Amenábar, <https://youtu.be/csJRiLAlbso>. Source: Comparte y disfruta. Películas rodadas en Madrid, https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-dZtDQllf0_Q/VvliyT-gT2I/AAAAAAAAAuk/s_TaeQcD0jIxWWkqCqkAPnARPhdrbp5ew/s400/ABRE%2BLOS%2BOJOS%2BY-%2BEDUARDO%2BNORIEGA.jpg

José Manuel Ballester, as a visionary, began to consider the idea of unused space in his works in the 1980s. He removed people from the most famous paintings in the world. Forty years later, during the coronavirus pandemic, people began to remember his works, which are a great example of what is happening in cities today.

We can also find others artists that were interested in confined life before this crisis happened. Some of them went deeper into the utopian scenes of empty streets, whereas others preferred to study the life inside homes.



Photo 6. *The Last Supper*, Leonardo da Vinci, 1498—reinvented by José Manuel Ballester. From *Hidden spaces* image series. Source: Verne. El País. Última cena (*La última cena*, de Leonardo da Vinci). https://ep01.epimg.net/verne/imagenes/2020/03/17/mexico/1584416235_465546_1584416608_sumario_normal.jpg



Photo 7. *The tribute to a simple man*, Giotto Di Bondone, 1337—reinvented by José Manuel Ballester. Source: Verne. El País. Lugar para el homenaje (*El homenaje de un hombre sencillo*, de Giotto di Bondone). https://ep01.epimg.net/verne/imagenes/2020/03/17/mexico/1584416235_465546_1584416905_sumario_normal.jpg



Photo 8. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch, 1500—reinvented by José Manuel Ballester. From *Hidden spaces* image series. Source: Verne. El País. El jardín deshabitado (El jardín de las delicias, de El Bosco), https://ep01.epimg.net/verne/imagenes/2020/03/17/mexico/1584416235_465546_1584416957_sumario_normal.jpg

Antonio López is a hyper-realistic artist, who started drawing empty street scenes already in the 1960s. The painter searched in real life for those everyday aspects that he expresses in maximum detail.



Photo 9. Antonio López García drawing in the street. Source: El arte de Rubén Revoco. Antonio López García: realismo espectral, http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-7OsBRWFGJFA/VErAU00x_II/AAAAAAAAAPiQ/JG1Fs8NaT-Ww/s1600/El-genial-pintor-Antonio-Lopez-pintando-en-plena-Puerta-del-Sol-madrilena.jpg



Photo 10. Paintings of Madrid by Antonio López García. Source. Hoy es arte. Madrid por Antonio López, <https://www.hoyesarte.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/gran-via-antonio-lopez-1977.jpg>



Photo 11. Paintings of Madrid by Antonio López García. Source: El arte de Rubén Revco. Antonio López García: realismo espectral, http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-MxSWR6VJE_U/VEq_w9K2zjI/AAAAAAAAAPi/WjoSbFQrkO4/s1600/REAL_lopez_gran_via.jpg

Edward Hopper, in turn, studied housing as the main place of life. He looked from outside and from inside, capturing what was happening around—introspective lives concentrated on his thought. His paintings remind us of what is happening in most homes in the Mediterranean countries, such as Italy or Spain. We continue to live in confinement and the only way to communicate with the outside world is through balconies and windows.



Photo 12. *Morning sun* by Edward Hopper. Source: Historia Arte. Sol de la mañana. Edward Hopper, https://historia-arte.com/_/eyJ0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJpbSI6WyJcL2FydHdvcmtcL2ltYWdl-RmlsZVwvaG9wcGVyX21hbmFuYS5qcGciLCJyZXNpemUsMTUwMHxmb3JtYXQsd2VicCJdfQ.8TMA5Yx1D_pRj_uNojH83fh3cYDYLHfgHkBV_DiDuhl.webp

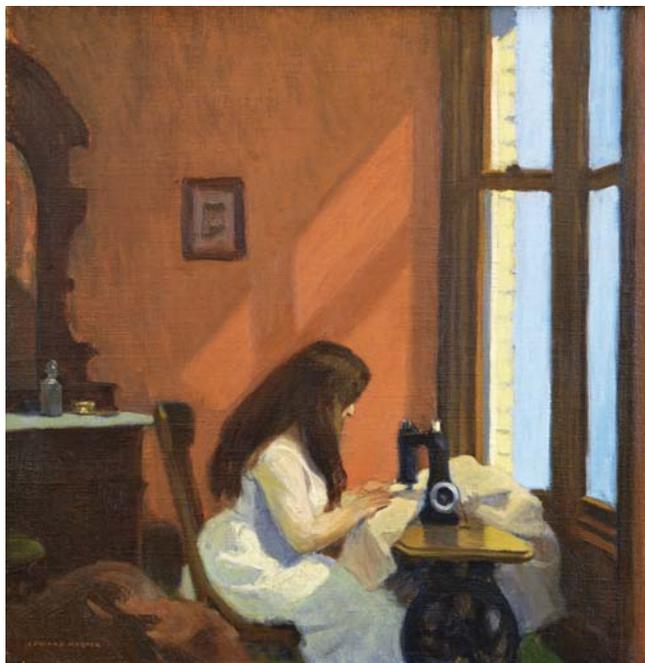


Photo 13. *Girl at sewing machine* by Edward Hopper. Source: Museo Thyssen. Edward Hopper, VAGA, Nueva York. https://www.museothyssen.org/sites/default/files/imagen/obras/1977.49_muchacha-cosiendo-maquina.jpg



Photo 14. *Room in New York* by Edward Hopper. Source: El País. El óleo de Edward Hopper *Habitación en Nueva York* (1932) muestra la intimidad alienada y solitaria de una pareja. Jorge Silva, https://ep01.epimg.net/elpais/imagenes/2017/11/09/eps/1510182300_151018_1510182300_noticia_normal.jpg

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The crisis caused by the coronavirus has a dimension that has never been seen before, which not only affects politics or the economy, but also directly impacts the homes of all citizens. Until now, houses were understood as places of transit or short stay. Now, they are becoming an ‘extension of people’. What used to protect people by giving them a roof over their heads and shelter them from the hostile forces of nature, now gains some new roles serving also as a barrier against the virus. And even more—the house has regained its functions that has long been forgotten.

The current situation has helped us understand the function of the city as a social organism. It has also demonstrated that architecture creates space for its inhabitants and loses all value if it is not used by people. Architecture without people who enjoy it, see it and live in it, makes no sense.

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