

DISGUIISING THE POVERTY OF URBAN SPACE: ROUNDAABOUTS AND PUBLIC ART

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In the peripheries of the Spanish contemporary cities, a strange marriage between roundabouts and large sculptures has become prolific. The repetition of these spaces has transformed them into an authentic metaphor of new times, of new culture and of the new forms. In the difficult analysis of this vague urban space, a relevant feeling has been attributed to these creations, initially only functional, but soon charged with hedonistic imperatives, very proper of today's culture.

The relevance is large. The roundabouts are very numerous in our cities: In the Autonomous Region of Madrid they numbered 2.700 in 2008, being the province with the greatest number, followed by Barcelona, with about 1.000 less. In Spain, during the same period, following the report carried out by TeleAtlas, there were 24.000. We have present here a recent and invasive phenomenon that seems like it has no limits. We would have to add to this a greater occupation of space that they imply, compared with the reduced space that is used up in classical intersections, as well as the great amount of money that is moved in the construction, decoration and maintenance of these roundabouts. Above all, they directly affect a large amount of population, obligated to use them and contemplate them briefly during their transit.

In the face of their general acceptance, specialists in diverse fields are condemning their vague character and because of that character, the danger that can be caused by their unsuitable and absurd deployment. If one critically analyzes their proliferation, one comes to the conclusion that they are authentic smoke screens that hide an urban landscape that in reality becomes impoverished and standardized. Media, political and economic interests converge in order to elevate these spaces, giving them a significance they should not have: it is a new product, that can be easily marketed and easily become an exaltation of the culture and symbolic landmarks of the places. The key of the criticism is the paraphernalia that involves this piece and its treatment. Beyond this strict function, the combination of sculpture and roundabouts have been assimilated to the binomial of public art and public space that, however, constitutes one of the best incorporations into local policies and has manifested important repercussions in both the design of new urban areas and the process of renovation of marginal areas.

I. APPEARANCE AND SUCCESS OF THE ROUNDABOUT

The roundabout is conceived as an improvement of the road network that solves the problems related to traffic congestion in the points of convergence of different routes, limiting the conflicts between trajectories. According to the Instructions for Highways of the Ministry de Public Works (1999), a roundabout is defined in its traditional form as an intersection in form of a ring with only one way circulation, surrounding a central island. The key to its success and its conversion in panacea has been the implantation of the rule of priority to traffic in the central rings, avoiding gridlock.

From the construction of the first roundabout in Paris, in 1907, carried out by Eugene Henard, in the area that surrounds the Arch of Triumph, until the proliferation of this model, almost one hundred years have passed (Alonzo, 2005). In general in the totality of Europe, their proliferation was slow until the establishment of this rule of priority of the circulation within the ring. In Spain it does not come into existence until almost 1990, in a counterclockwise direction, with priority then, from the entrances, for the vehicles that circulate on the left. A few years earlier, in 1976, the first roundabout was built in our country in Palmanova (Mallorca). Twelve years later the first two roundabouts were built in the Community of Madrid, on Pozuelo's lower beltway and in Aravaca, by chance the area of highest quality in the metropolitan area.

We are especially interested in one element of the roundabout: the central island that obligates the reduction in velocity and change in trajectory. Due to this situation, visibility is essential to guarantee its labor. Combining this factor with the amplitude of those located in the intersection of the large road networks, has resulted in decorative possibilities that from the first works of design have been taken into account by all specialists and by the rules of construction of roads that have been successively approved.

Thus, the roundabout, extends its functions of traffic control to become an urban instrument that pretends to improve the quality of the environment, through the establishment of a *space of landscape quality* (Darder, 2005: 128) y empower the identity of the site, contributing meaning and icons. The versatility of the central islet allow one even to contemplate it as *an attractive canvas in white for artistic expression in large format* (Ibid: 129). It's potential for arrangement using vegetal compositions, ornamental fountains, sculpturesque monuments, pavement, illumination etc. has transcended its virtuality as a regulator of traffic so as to become converted into a symbolic reference, a landmark of identification and a possible site for memory in contemporary cities.

In the treatment of roundabouts, the insufficient critiques have not been able to avoid some generalized false appreciations that have had important consequences. On the one hand, the identification of the islet as public space, and on the other, its ornamentation with public art. In technical texts or in political speeches the islet is identified as inaccessible, with no possibility for a calm contemplation or a fortuitous encounter with a public space in the full sense of the word. Some municipalities have already come to classify the surface as a green zone, like Parla, Toledo, or Castellón. These are not eccentricities, but, on the contrary, subtleties employed to reach the required minimum surface of green space per inhabitant.

The sense of the islet has been misdirected. By definition it is inaccessible, with constant traffic and, besides, especially dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists. They are not plazas

with zones for pedestrians, nor circles, that have central areas and also pedestrian crossings and traffic lights. In spite of the public ownership, they lack the aesthetic, social or functional qualities common to the public space in the European urban tradition. It is not a space for sociability and collective conviviality, and neither can it assume functions of centrality and urban qualification or identity reference. We should not permit this imposition; it is an irrelevant public space compared with the traditional public space.

Nor can we consider the intervention in the islet as public art, because of the connotations that this possesses. At best it is a question of a kind of *drive-in-art*, similar to drive-in-movies or fast food that is accessible from the car that, in the maelstrom of contemporary consumerism could develop into a kind of *drive-around tourism*, dedicated to drivers and not pedestrians (Alonzo, 2005: 111). It is an art that is to be appreciated from the car, with the limitations that this implies: one observes rapidly and from a certain distance, and besides it should not constitute either a means for distraction or an obstacle faced with the perspective.

These limitations have been ignored because of the opportunity these new and profuse sites offer for the acceptance of artistic manifestations in full praise of public art or local identity. The chance to develop identifying roundabouts, marked by symbols of the rural world or that of the disappearing artisan or by grandiose works of art, has been too great a temptation to avoid.

The rise of the monumental roundabouts provoked by the *roundabout fever* that affects so many Spanish municipalities is the product of a prosperous confluence of interests. In the first place, artists have clearly taken advantage of the opportunity to *redecorate* roundabouts while the city disappears from their eyes. Generally they are conscious of the fact that their works are *pure makeup destined to praise the powers that have granted them the charge* (Delgado, 2002), but still they consider it an important source of work. Few artists refuse to fulfill a task and, at least, the protests center on the uncertainty of the concession of the commission.

Politicians, managers, and public representatives in the administration are those who have most understood the opportunities offered by this vacuum with an enormous potential for visibility. Under their control, they can combine their desires to promote the corresponding city in the world market with their personal promotion or that of their party, besides sending messages to the populace. These aspirations do not always materialize with such little effort in traditional public spaces. The roundabouts offer an immediate opportunity that has also been denounced along with the arbitrariness of the concessions. The confrontations between members of outgoing corporations and the new politicians just elected are the most patent example of the spurious utilization of these sites.

The concessionary companies dedicated to highway construction are also interested in the opportunity offered them with the roundabouts to augment their business and their connection with public powers. Some autonomous regions now count on a specific amount of money for the decoration of roundabouts, using the cultural one per cent that all public works are taxed (Durán, 2006). The promotion of art and culture is converted, for these companies, therefore, into a common objective along with other agents.

On the other hand, and given that they are the first affected parties, it is also necessary to understand the perception that citizens have of the profusion of what we could call

monumental roundabouts. The most critical opinions can now be easily accessible through personal blogs in the Internet: the roundabouts are too numerous and the large sculptures that adorn them are very expensive, ugly, selected with no criterion and controlled with an iron hand by the mayors. Above all, many people ask if such a cost is necessary, especially given the poverty of the budgets and the great shortages in the municipalities.

II. EXPANSION IN SOME MUNICIPALITIES IN THE COMMUNITY OF MADRID

In the eight municipalities that have been selected for this analysis we have inventoried 651 roundabouts. Their distribution is very irregular as a function of diverse factors: the dominant design of the promotions, the chronology of the construction, the use of the ground, the size of the new developments, the continuity of urban spaces, and the presence of large roads.

The evaluation will concentrate exclusively on the roundabouts with access to urban areas, from autoroutes, highways, and roads. These roundabouts, a total of 203, allow transition between continuous and discontinuous circulation, between elevated and reduced velocity. They also function as an entryway to cities and distribute itineraries toward the interior of the city. In this sense they constitute the preferred environment for formal interventions that pretend to add adornment and symbolism to this element of the circulatory infrastructure, responding, as we have shown, to pretensions that are not always clear.

Almost one fourth of these roundabouts have no ornamentation, but a similar proportion disposes of a treatment more common to traditional public spaces: fountains and monumental structures. We can not avoid mentioning that, in spite of the domination of vegetal compositions, a priori more adequate for these spaces, the designs in many cases are not always appropriate. On occasions they show a complicated design, with a species with enormous color that ends up very costly to maintain besides being practically inappreciable from the automobile.

Only two essential questions will stand out: the exaltation of the roundabout as a space for the exhibition of contemporary art and the semantic cacophony that the analysis as a whole of the works, which lack common values, generates.

In the two municipalities where the roundabouts are most numerous, Leganés and Getafe, the diffusion of sculptures in roundabouts can be considered integrated into the politics of promotion of public art that both develop. Leganés, since twenty years ago, has proposed to convert the city into the *cultural center of the South*, with its Museum of Open Air Sculpture as the centerpiece of the project. What is most curious is that it consecrates the roundabout as a site equivalent to other locations, gardens, plazas, and the Museum itself, as far as the quality for the installation of sculpture is concerned. The acquisition of the works has realized through different means. The deposit is the dominant one, although other mechanisms have been utilized, such as contracts signed with businesses that do construction projects in the municipality or with the Compensation Committees that are in charge of new developments. This last means is the one responsible for the recently inaugurated work by the sculptor dEmo (the monster of Leganés or Nensi, as the neighbors call it) in the roundabout from Madrid across Partial Plan 3, «The Carabanchel Door,» next to the Plaza Nueva Commercial Park.

Getafe, years later, has also initiated a similar trajectory, multiplying sculptures especially in the historical center that contains an ample pedestrian zone. Still just seven large roundabouts have these elements in the city. The oldest of them, installed in 1999, represents a large blue bow, symbol of peace in the Basque Country. The most modern is an airplane, surely donated by the Air Force, which is located in the roundabout adjacent to the Corte Inglés. The recent agreement signed to transfer the Aviation Museum from Cuatro Vientos to the city could lie at the base of the aeronautical claim that introduces the new *monument*. The authorities of this municipality, contrary to the previous one, have not considered it necessary to inventory correctly the sculptures or carry out a documented diffusion of their entirety.

In the remaining municipalities, sculpture in the roundabout is an exclusive policy, with no contact with other cultural projects. We must understand that this association as a product of punctual decisions and it is where one best perceives that it responds to complex interests that affect all of the parties involved. Rivas, controlled by successive leftist governments, does not dispose of much public art; however it has permitted itself the luxury of spending more than a million euros on a colossal sculpture in the form of a great monolith of 52 meters in height in the roundtable that is located at the principle entrance to the city. Its main attraction is the illumination, variable according to the time of day, commissioned to the Phillips company, that allows it to be distinguished from many kilometers away. As in so many other cases, the local administration hopes to convert it into the entryway and a symbol of the city.

The second aspect mentioned, the difficulty in interpreting the exhibited works and, therefore, in appreciating their meaning and value, is directly related to the scarce adaptation of the sculptures to the demands of rapid visibility and from different angles of the roundabout. Besides, there are too many parts, and too diverse to be taken in from a rapidly moving vehicle.

The analysis of the work of Fernando Capa, in the roundabout that gives access to Arganda from the Valencia highway, across the AR-30 highway, is exemplary in this sense. The apparent simplicity of the cubes that are placed above the islet of the Plaza del Progreso, that were not initially designed for this installation, contrast with the interpretative complexity that the author himself maintained in its inauguration. Capa identified his work with *the different stages and elements in the evolution and progress of towns and bridges that is necessary to project toward another series of intellectual, cultural and fundamentally intercultural developments*. The pressure which we see the sections submitted symbolizes *the double tension exerted by our ancestors toward their descendants and vice versa. The imbalance of a disproportionate progress unleashes the tension of the piece that always gives the sensation of being about to fall*.

When they are figurative, like the Boadilla Bear, the Oasis or la Menina y el Menino in Leganés, the structures are not always diaphanous, so that they end up interrupting the vision of drivers in the entrances and during the circling trajectory. All types of sculptures can be found in the roundtables. The most traditional also, forming scenes without the necessary scale to be seen from a distance, like El Majorero in Majadahonda. In its entirety, besides, mechanisms are lacking for the correct appreciation of the works and the comprehension of their meaning. Placards, when they exist, are only visible at a notable risk for drivers.

It is definitely necessary to formalize a serious plan with respect to this expanding phenomenon. The monumental roundtable cannot be allowed to be converted into the new privileged space for the cities, a symbol of the triumph of the automobile over the urban scene, isolated, inaccessible, standardized, dehumanized and exclusive of all relations with the city. It is logical that one should consider the decoration of islets a good practice, but we must not grant it greater protagonism. Beginning with its repetitive character and linked to traffic, we will have to treat it consequently. We have to be capable of critically analyzing all the discourse and activities that we find in these spaces.

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