How Has the Pandemic Situation Changed Our Perception of Space?

The phenomenology of space in the light of COVID-19 restrictions

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ABSTRACT | The vast majority of people in countries affected by COVID-19 felt the radical change the pandemic brought about in almost all aspects of life. Social interactions were cut to a minimum and all cultural activities were banned. In this paper, I evaluate the following question: how did the pandemic situation change our perception of space? I assess what this situation offered us, and how the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 changed our perception of urban and public space. In order to dig deeper into these questions, I use the ideas of three philosophers who work with a conception of space emphasizing its perception. Through the chosen theories, I introduce public space as something beyond a simple materialistic interpretation. On the one hand, I use Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad to establish different layers of space. On the other, I argue that the material layer of public space could provide us with valuable experience, according to the phenomenological approach advocated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel de Certeau. Much of the argument in this paper is based on my own observations during the eight-month lockdown period in the Czech Republic during the spring of 2021.

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There is a beautiful cycle path outside my house, lined with benches and old trees. It usually serves as a meeting point where a lot of social interactions take place. I often see teenagers hanging around with their friends, parents with kids enjoying the ice cream from a nearby kiosk, or construction workers having a smoke break. These scenes from everyday life started to change, and eventually disappeared, as the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were put in place. Social interactions were cut to a minimum and all cultural activities were banned. What remained were the objects that typically fill public space in cities. Benches still lined the path and the linden trees were not trimmed, but they were orphaned from social gatherings and public activities. One particular bench became an object of study for me, as I was able to see it from my work desk and could observe it for hours each day. After a few days of staying at home, local residents started to use this bench in a different way and it gained a new importance. It began to be occupied by people from different social groups, and their doings were not connected with any particular activity – quite the contrary. People would sit and watch the street and, according to my observation, live in the moment. Some of them stayed for a couple of minutes, others for more than an hour. They wrapped their arms over the backrest. There were no other activities to distract them from the concentrated perception of space. This observation made me think about what this situation offered us, and how the COVID-19 restrictions changed our perception of the town or city.

The crucial point here is to understand the role space plays in our lives. Most of our activities are connected to spatial dispositions. It does not matter if we live in the rush of a city center or in the suburbs of a town; we enter public space nearly every day, on our way to work or when meeting our friends. We use squares for public gatherings, while parks serve as settings for cultural events or leisure pursuits. The structure or placement of various objects in public space, which I call the "material layer," creates the basis for our cultural and social activities. In this paper, I will examine what we lost during the pandemic in terms of public space, and what we gained. Although we might think primarily about the time we lost due to lockdowns, I would argue that this period was a chance to experience a different perception of space. This paper could be thus outlined as a philosophical reflection on the things we lose versus the things we (could) gain in uncertain times.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will draw on the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. Both philosophers, who were also sociologists and Marxists, focused on the practices of everyday life and their connection with spatial activities. Additionally, I discuss the ideas of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was concerned with how we perceive the world. What I consider a

crucial point is the connection between Lefebvre and de Certeau in relation to the material essence of space. From there, I will move towards the conditioned relations between our behavior and representation as advocated by de Certeau. And finally, the linking point will be to apply these concepts to a particular case: my own observation of the bench as a part of public space. This bench, I will claim, gained a new importance during the lockdown. My assumption is that the material layer of a town (the built environment) is taken for granted and does not receive sufficient attention from the inhabitants. I therefore argue for its importance as the base layer on which we build our other activities.

(Nadolny 2015) clarifies Lefebvre's perspective toward the town and reveals his consideration of space in general. Lefebvre assigns a great role to citizens as creators of space. His work relies on an active role and the participation of a creative class. He sees public spaces and towns as opportunities, as places where human life could be made to flourish. The role of the inhabitants is to create new products – public spaces. In other words, he puts citizens into the role of creators, not just consumers, of public spaces. This is a crucial point for the application of our right to the city:

> People who use the city – who live, trade, walk there – create it themselves, both at the mental and material levels. The city, he [Lefebvre] believes, serves only as a starting point triggering spatial situations which transform and create the diversity we need so much. It is this diversity which makes the philosopher believe that the modern city is a form open to changes brought about by modern times, even if he is critical of its consumptionism. (Nadolny 2015, p. 33)

However, in order to get to the idea of a town as a whole, it is necessary to dig deeper into Lefebvre's theory, in which he explores the different layers of space. Lefebvre's central interest is the conceptualization of the notion of space. To clarify, the notion of "space" features prominently in Lefebvre's work, for example the statement "in philosophical terms, space is neither subject nor object" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 92) or his claim that space "is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures." (Lefebvre 1991, p. 85) This broad definition, which sees space as a process, enables him to divide the notion of space into different categories. One should see the city not as a mere material structure but as a larger network that also includes the life within and the mutual relations and the syntheses of different phenomena.

This paper limits the observation of space to the city itself, whereas the city, and the life within it, also exists in space. This, according to Lefebvre, consists

of the synthesis of three different layers. I draw here from (Bertuzzo and Günter 2009), who describe Lefebvre's spatial triad as follows. The first layer that deserves our attention is the physical and material aspects of space. This includes houses, infrastructure and actions connected with daily routines. One could label this "perceived space," a space that one can explore through the senses. In contrast to this, the second layer could be called "conceived, abstract space," and is related to culture and formed by religion and rituals. It contains our perception of space that is occupied with theories, visions and ideas. The third layer is the social field, in which all interactions take place. This is the lived space created by the social interactions of the inhabitants. To relate Lefebvre's categories to my example, perceived space is the material essence of the bench—the wooden armrests and the iron legs. Conceived space relates to social and political practice, in this case certain urbanistic or municipal plans or visions for the bench. Lived space includes the interactions of inhabitants that take place on this particular bench.

These layers are mutually related and, according to Lefebvre, should be equal and balanced in order to maintain a good life. "The space" is understood by Lefebvre as the sum total of the intermingled phenomena and production processes that interact to create the city and the urban environment. To characterize the city, one does not merely describe a concrete shape, or list the traffic lights and the lengths of the streets. Mostly, one speaks about life in the city and all the interactions that take place there; for example, this is the place where I first fell off my bike, or this town is beautiful but a lot of young people leave for the capital to go to university, etc. It is a mix of our perceptions, memories, interactions, activities, and material dispositions. In other words, the essence of a good life within the city is linked to all these layers, which should not be perceived as separate elements but more like a kaleidoscope of constantly overflowing elements. Elisa T. Bertuzzo and Günter Nest aptly point out that we have a lot of experts (for example, architects, ecologists), but all of them focus on their specific field, whereas the city works as a system that must be evaluated from a multidisciplinary standpoint. What makes us citizens is the basic fact that we are capable of participation, which is, according to Lefebvre, nothing special. Quite the contrary, it is a natural part of living in society. However, this also raises the point that to become a full-fledged citizen, it is necessary to go beyond the material construction of a space, to the abstract and social sphere.

Lefebvre's theory introduces "the space" as a process consisting of various mutually conditioned parts, which enables the inhabitants to participate in its creation. However, during the pandemic this complete picture of what it is to be a citizen became fragmented. Social interactions were cut to a minimum. The

role of abstract space was diminished, since all political and power relations were focused on how to manage the pandemic.

In these difficult times, what we were left with was the material layer of space. And, in most cases, we were allowed to use only our immediate surroundings, since government restrictions strictly determined where we could go. As a result, benches were orphaned from social gatherings, though their material essence remained the same. The observation of the bench from my window become a small island of reassurance not only for me as a spectator but also for other local residents, as actors. This poses some new questions. How can we enjoy space without cultural activities, social contacts and abstract visions? Is there any way to benefit from this situation?

Our results-oriented society drives us to live so fast that we hardly notice the shape of the bench in front of our house, or the view we could enjoy from it. However, the pandemic has forced us to implement new ways of perceiving the town through personal engagement. This personal way of using space is projected onto a wide range of activities, such as the focused observation of architecture, the exploration of unknown places, or the use of our sensory perceptions to delve into our surroundings. The situation engages our awareness of spatial usage, which is present within the everyday practices as described by (De Certeau 1984).

De Certeau advocates a highly poetical framework for the perception of space. His background lies in cultural studies and philosophy, as well as in linguistic metaphors. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* he discusses the role of our everyday activities in relation to the imposed system in which we live. While de Certeau focuses on the different forms of our resistance to following prescribed paths, he also highlights the material and the visible layer of space. In this regard, his research question could be put like this: What do we, as citizens, do with given things, such as streets, squares. etc.? (De Certeau 1984)

The central point for (De Certeau 1984) is that different material layers evoke different kinds of behavior. He illustrates this by using the example of a TV broadcast: the images are a representation, something that is given to us, whereas the time spent in front of a television is a behavior. He asks how the images we receive condition our behavior. For the purpose of this paper, I ask: How does structure, that is, the material layer of a town, condition our behavior and thus shape our identities? Here it is worth emphasizing de Certeau's terminology. He asks what we do with the things that are given to us, and suggests that we take some things for granted. Some things around us exist as an inevitable truth, as a mere fact. Who wonders, during their morning jog in the park, why this bench is there, or who made this ridiculous pathway so narrow? What draws our attention is the sight of people having a picnic nearby, the fact that we are late for work, or what

we will have for lunch. But during the pandemic, most of those elements distracting us from a pure perception of space disappeared. And this fact opened up our capacity for a different kind of spatial awareness, forcing people to implement a mechanism of personal engagement and exploration of the conditioned relation between the structure of a town and our behavior. This raises the question of the role that space plays in our life. At this point, I would argue, people started to develop their relationship with the material layer of the town. The bench itself become our partner during the endless days, providing its visitors with new stimuli. It ceased to be only a place for other activities; sitting on the bench become a primary activity in itself.

(De Certeau 1984) considers the shape of a town, or a park, to be a representation – an image that we receive. And the way we deal with those images leads to certain behaviors. For example, if I see a street I have several options on how to behave. I could go straight on, I could jump on one leg, or I could start to dance. However, what is important is that this one image can elicit different moods and feelings, and evoke different kinds of behavior. During a pandemic situation, the opportunity to experience space in its material layers opens up and offers the possibility to perceive "anthropological space," a term de Certeau borrows from Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty sees space as something that offers "the spatial experience that an obviously interested subject might acquire of the world or the perceptual field itself." (Liu 2009, p. 137) This phenomenological approach leads one toward different ways of exploration. One could follow one's senses and acquire direct contact with a city, which, I argue, is something that usually lags behind the social and cultural layers. It parallels Merleau-Ponty's claim that perceived space is usually hidden under all the abstract layers that we use and consume in the first place.

Before the pandemic, the bench was used for various kinds of activities, such as social gatherings, which were disconnected from the perception of the bench itself. The new situation encouraged people to explore the material of the bench, the position of the armrest, etc. Some went further and lay down, while others spent several minutes trying to find the most comfortable position. Others adopted the bench as their daily ritual, and I saw that some people actually appeared at the same time each day.

What Merleau-Ponty suggests is that this certain "form of perception" (p. 138) plays a central role in our understanding of the world. De Certeau advocates something similar, and is concerned about our alienation from space itself (the built environment) in favor of mere consumption. The effect of consumption, de Certeau argues, is that we come to take spatial dispositions for granted. The alienation of people from their dwelling space leads to a disconnection from the world, in which

the material layer of space "works as a fundamental dimension of our being and acting in the world." (Turner and Davenport 2005, p. 221) De Certeau's argument in favor of better understanding and personal engagement with the material layer of space is aligned with our better understanding of the world.

All the philosophers discussed in this paper have different attitudes toward space. However, they all strongly argue for the role of space, in the sense of the built environment. For Lefebvre, space is a process consisting of a synthesis of different layers. However, on the account of perception, Lefebvre agrees with Merleau-Ponty when he claims that space consists of different materials, such as stones, wood, etc., and that people experience space through the senses. Both Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty consider this to be crucial for getting to know the city and developing the feeling of belonging in it.

(Lefebvre 1991, p. 40) considers perceived space to be "the practical basis of the perception of the outside world." As examples of direct contact, Lefebvre uses everyday activities such as sitting on a bench or exploring architecture, which involve interaction not only between human beings but also between oneself and perceived space. Without the ability to perceive our surroundings with a certain sensibility, continues Lefebvre, space will come to play a less important role in the context of human life. I argue that previously marginal everyday activities, such as going outside and sitting on a bench, became the highlight of the day during the lockdown. This implies a personal engagement with the bench itself – touching it and feeling its material and structure, thinking about its shape and spatial orientation. A similar kind of experience comes from directing our attention to architecture. Once, during the lockdown, I spotted a couple admiring a small statue that decorated the entrance to their house. Their conversation expressed amazement: "Wow, this is the first time I've noticed this facade. Isn't it beautiful?" Things that were usually overlooked gained a new importance as objects of our observation.

These facts, which may seem like small details, can play a crucial role in our perception of the town and the space in which we live, especially when restrictions on social interaction and cultural events increase our capacity to perceive a city in its material sense. And that is something, as de Certeau points out, that plays an important role in shaping our identity and influencing our behavior. The structure of a town thus plays the role of a foundation stone on which other abstract layers balance. What I see as really important is this: If we diminish the symbolic use of objects, we could come to focus on their essence, which would help us to develop their potential for better use. And sometimes simplifying things to their bare essence helps us to understand better the next layers we build on them.

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