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Dissertation opponent's report

Mgr. Aneta Kohoutová - *The Ethics Of Public Spaces: In between the lived and built environment*

General Opinion

I want to begin my report by thanking for getting the chance to get acquainted with Mrs. Kohoutová's dissertation in such detail. The thesis delves into a topic that, in my human and professional opinion, is not only necessary and topical but also a fresh perspective that is not widely discussed or academically analyzed (in the Czech environment) from the perspective of philosophy.

The topic of public space is of increasing importance in contemporary urban studies, especially as cities confront issues of inclusivity, accessibility, and the role of public spaces in fostering community engagement. Mrs. Kohoutová's thesis significantly contributes to this discourse by delving into the ethical dimensions of public spaces and highlighting the crucial role of active citizenship. The thesis is enriched by references to a diverse range of influential thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and others, indicating a robust theoretical foundation that draws from both philosophical and sociological perspectives. Furthermore, the author's personal reflections and application of the theoretical background to concrete case studies add depth and relevance to the thesis.

The thesis is carefully constructed, and the author layers the theoretical foundations and arguments sequentially so that the thesis functions as an argument. The author works with sources in such a way that she not only cites them but also critically analyses them and builds her own position based on the sources used. This is slowly "revealed" throughout the thesis through personal examples and finalized at the end of the text.

Mrs. Kohoutová's work is significantly enriched by her experiences (mostly) in the United States and Estonia, which bring added value to the Czech academic context. Beyond the academic rigor of the thesis, the author infuses it with her unique perspective, thereby personalizing the discourse and offering distinctive insights.

Personally, I am very pleased that the author addresses the topic of the ethics of public space from the perspective of philosophy in the Czech environment from a female perspective and draws attention to gender inequality in the urban environment. The feminist critique of urban planning is a very important topic, and I am glad that such a prominent academic has emerged in our environment to address it. By talking about this topic, I, as a man, am unfortunately only underlining a sad reality.

Ethics of public space is a very broad topic, so I would like to use this report and the subsequent defence to ask a few questions that can further develop this interesting topic. The questions are not intended as reproaches but as opening up the space for further dialogue.

Stimulus for discussion

1) Source selection methodology

The author clearly acknowledged the influences that led her to the thinking she has demonstrated in this thesis. At the beginning of the thesis, in the Acknowledgments section, she lists her sources of inspiration. How does the author justify focusing only on this "Western" view of public space ethics, and could she mention any authors outside the Euro-Atlantic space with whom she is familiar and justify why they were not, in her eyes, relevant to this thesis?

2) Cultural differences

Related to the previous point is this next one. Is there actually such a thing as one universal public space ethic? How does it account for (possible) cultural differences in the perception and use of public spaces? In what ways might these cultural contexts limit its findings, and how does it propose to address these limitations? Can one even aspire to any universal "handbook" on the ideal public space?

3) Informal settlements and their public spaces

How does the author's perspective on the ethics of public spaces deal with the phenomenon of so-called Informal Settlements and their public spaces (Nagati, 2020; El Ghmari and Zabadi, 2021)? Is this a completely different type of urban space than the one discussed by the author cited in this thesis, or can the thesis be applied to these spaces where state/central authority is absent?

4) Individual differences

Cultural differences aside - the author presents a particular view of how the ideal public space should function. In practice, however, we see that all do not accept this view (which I agree with) as self-evident; it is not a trivial matter. I have not seen a deeper justification in this thesis as to why, for example, inclusive planning or active citizenship is a value that is necessarily better than, for example, a city that consists of gated communities and exclusive public spaces that are only for the "chosen few." The author mentions, for example, Sennett when she says, "Inclusion helps one to acquire meaning in the place and community that one lives in." However, again, this does not justify why "meaning in the place" should be something everyone should want. This question asks about the very nature of the "city for all" trend. What are the main arguments for why this should be the this way?

5) Open political space

The author mentions the notion of the so-called Second Birth (p. 49, p. 55, f.e.) - the moment when we become full citizens by engaging in public life. So, if the citizen is to express himself in public space and at the same time the space is to be inclusive, how would the author deal with cases where crowds of, for example, Neo-Nazis are walking through the city, spreading hatred, but just the kind that is still within the law? Is public space supposed to include these political views, or is there a line where public (political) space is no longer supposed to be for everyone?

6) Stakeholders and power dynamics

In chapter 1.9 (Who owns public space), the author discusses who actually owns public space in the context of "NIMBY." I want to avoid going into a deep political science answer. However, I would be interested in the author's view on the extent to which public space, the city, really belongs to

citizens and to what extent it "belongs" more to politicians, officials, security forces, and private investors. Can we even talk about a public space when the rules are set by an often unelected group of officials or police officers? To what extent is there even a fundamental division in the motivation of politicians (of power) to put this power over public space in the hands of citizens?

7) *Definition of spatial division*

On page 145, the author redefines her interpretation of spatial division as follows: "I shaped the initial triangle of spatial division, which I outlined in my introduction (active citizens - passive citizens - politicians), into the following categories: I - others - the built environment." → can the author explain this new division with a concrete example?

8) *Change in behavior/speed*

In chapter 4.5 (The Story of One Bench), the author gives an example of a bench that changed its meaning for the inhabitants of a city during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, she gives an example where people suddenly notice a detail on the facade of a house due to too much time. Some psychologists argue that today's hectic society has become bored. Moreover, slowing down when one is bored can lead us to start noticing the details around us. Does the author think it takes such an extreme situation (pandemic) to bring about such a "change in perception," or are there some architectural/design tools that can take us away from the daily rush and apathy to experience the present moment? This phenomenon is nowadays often attributed to the use of mobile phones and the addiction to the so-called fast dopamine. Sometimes, it is interesting not to take your phone out of your pocket when waiting for, say, 10 minutes at a bus stop but to look at the city around you. Does the author think there is any way to eliminate this habit, at least when waiting for public transport?

Minor remarks

p. 128: "Or, as architect Michael Arad contends, "architects and planners rarely discuss emotions." → Emotions in urban planning (architecture) are a big topic for me, and I try to present this topic at the Faculty of Architecture. However, the feedback from students and teachers is that it is not a new thing for them, and they, of course, think about emotions (and the emotional impact on users) in their designs, and it is part of their work. So perhaps this is a kind of "confusion of terms" - I would be happy if the author would join me in my efforts to explain in more detail to urban planners and architects what we mean by this as philosophers.

p. 130: "By "city life" I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers." → at what qualitative level does the author mean "being together"? In the Czech environment, I often find that authors/students often automatically and uncritically use the term "community," which is clearly taken over from the Western environment. In the Czech environment, this concept does not (unfortunately) have a clear place, and people tend to lean towards the "work-at-home" model, where third-place people are practically indifferent to them. Does the author perceive this cultural difference in the same way?

p. 135: "As I argued throughout this thesis, we can change society through space and the city." → I believe in the same ideal, and I wonder if the author thinks it is possible to write a "cookbook" that would serve as a guide to achieve this change? I still think that a society has to want to change, and only then will change be possible. However, only if we talk about positive change. Negative change is certainly possible through space and the city, but that is probably not the goal of the author's efforts.

p. 142: "As stated in Chapter 1, universal consensus is not the purpose of public spaces." → I have already commented on this issue above, but at this point, I would be interested in a very academic and hypothetical question: What does the author think is the best form of political establishment for urban life?

Conclusion

The thesis clearly fulfills the requirements for a dissertation and has been an interesting source of inspiration for me, even as a dissertation opponent. If the defence is successful, I recommend awarding Mrs. Kohoutová the Ph.D. degree.