

# Heterotopia and the City

Public space in a postcivil society

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Fragment of the 18th century Map of Rome by Giambattista Nolli (1748) with the churches of Borromini prominently surrounding the Piazza Navona, the Pantheon a bit further to the east. The church interiors are drawn as cavities within the solid built mass of the city, making for an elegant visual expression of the ambiguous status of these 'sacred' spaces that defy easy categorization within the private-public/black-white binary logic of the map. The Piazza Navona was built on the vestiges of a stadium, the circus of Emperor Domitian, which demonstrates that heterotopias can over time develop into public spaces.

# Heterotopia in a postcivil society

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The last decades of the twentieth century produced a vigorous debate in architecture and urbanism on the transformation of public space: on the one hand discourses that lamented the ‘end of public space’ (e.g. Sorkin 1992) and, on the other, contrasting opinions that advocated new forms of public space located in private spaces for collective use (shopping malls or sports centres) or in alternative spaces such as wastelands or parking lots (e.g. Chase *et al.* 1999). Some authors voiced warnings against the alarming developments in society at large, which seemed to threaten the basic assumptions on which democracy and the welfare state are founded, while others tended to take a more optimistic position in accepting the challenge to design for new programmes in the realm of leisure, sports, shopping or transportation.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, in the face of the war on terror, global warming as a planetary disaster and the obscene spreading of poverty turning our world into a ‘planet of slums’ (Davis 2006), this debate and the terms under which it was conducted increasingly sound like a requiem for a civil culture. The concomitant proliferation of urban studies, and discussions on such vague notions as ‘urbanity’ – the celebrated attribute of metropolitan life – seem to accompany the difficult farewell of an urban civilization and the brutal awakening to the emergence (and emergencies) of a postcivil society – a term we gratefully borrow from Frederic Jameson (1990). This requiem for the city, the lament of public space, placed the public–private dichotomy at centre stage, but has at the same time worn out its analytical force. The contemporary transformation of the city displays a profound redrawing of the contours of public and private space, bringing to the fore an equally treacherous and fertile ground of conditions that are not merely hybrid, but rather defy an easy description in these terms. It is on this treacherous terrain that Foucault’s notion of *heterotopia* can shed a new light. The concept seems to offer the opportunity to both recapitulate and redirect the ongoing debate.

Michel Foucault introduced the term ‘heterotopia’ in a lecture for architects in 1967, pointing to various institutions and places that interrupt

the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space. Because they inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society, Foucault called these places ‘hetero-topias’ – literally ‘other places’. When we review all the examples mentioned – the school, military service, the honeymoon, old people’s homes, psychiatric institutions, prisons, cemeteries, theatres and cinemas, libraries and museums, fairs and carnivals, holiday camps, hamams, saunas, motels, brothels, the Jesuit colonies and the ship – we get an idea of the vastness of the concept. But one also gets the feeling that it lacks definition and is perhaps too encompassing. The term ‘heterotopia’, since it entered architectural and urban theory in the late 1960s – more as a rumour than as a codified concept, for the lecture remained unpublished until 1984 – has been a source of inspiration in urban and architectural theory, but also one of confusion. The task of this book is to try and clarify the concept somewhat. We see heterotopia as being at a crossroads of the conceptual flight lines that shape public space today:

*The reinvention of the everyday: the ordinary and the extraordinary.* The reinvention of the discourse on the everyday, largely coinciding with the English translation of Lefebvre and de Certeau, is inspired by a discontent both with the elitism of contemporary neo-avant-garde architecture and with the shameless commercialization of popular culture. At the same time, the discourse on the everyday is an attempt to counter Foucault’s emphasis on the extraordinary by mapping the vital potentialities of the ordinary (McLeod 1996). The question to be asked, however, is whether the discourse on the everyday does not remain an aestheticization of urbanity and whether any attempt towards an ‘architecture of the everyday’ or ‘everyday urbanism’ (Chase *et al.* 1999) does not merely reinforce the ever more encompassing simulation of normality. Or, in other words, can the everyday of today survive outside heterotopia?

*The privatization of public space: ‘oikos’ versus ‘agora’.* While often particularly exclusive, heterotopias belong to the inclusive character of the *polis*. The *polis* – the ideal of the city-state – tries to realize the good life via equilibrium between *oikos* (private sphere, household, hence economy) and *agora* (public sphere, the place of politics). ‘Economization’ is the erosion of the distinction between these constitutive terms of the *polis*, as is clear in the term ‘privatization’. It is a sure sign of a crisis of ‘politics’. The rise of the term ‘governance’ instead of ‘government’ is a symptom of this crisis, and ‘management’ its apologetics. In this context the evident embrace of the language of governance within urbanist discourse appears far less innocent. In the ‘postcivil society’, the heterotopia resurfaces as a strategy to reclaim places of otherness on the inside of an economized ‘public’ life.

*The rise of the network society: place and non-place.* Foucault’s concept opened up a new field – an insight into a simultaneously archaic and modern way of organizing space. In the introduction to his lecture, Foucault evoked a history of space and pointed explicitly to the rise of network space: after

the hierarchical space of the Middle Ages and the space of Cartesian extension in early modernity, the third stage is the ‘space of emplacement’, the grid, the network. One could venture to say that today Foucault’s analysis reaches its obvious conclusion. Within network space, heterotopia has to a large extent changed its function. Rather than interrupting normality, heterotopias now realize or simulate a common experience of place. Because of its special nature, heterotopia is the opposite of the *non-place* (the famous concept coined by Marc Augé). Today heterotopia, from theme park to festival market, realizes ‘places to be’ in the non-place urban realm of Castells’ ‘space of flows’ (De Cauter 2004: 59–63). In other words, heterotopia embodies the tension between place and non-place that today reshapes the nature of public space.

*The postcivil society: heterotopia versus camp.* Besides the proliferation of heterotopias that provided normality in the (atopic) network space, we now see a proliferation of camp-like situations. The camp properly speaking is, according to Giorgio Agamben, not an extension of the law like the prison, but rather a space that is extraterritorial to the law – a space where the law is suspended (Agamben 1998). While the encampment emerges out of the nature-state and moves towards the city, and therefore fulfils a proto-political role, the camp marks the disintegration of society in the state of exception. The camp is, in other words, the situation in which the division between private and public is suspended. It is the space where the city is annihilated and the citizen reduced to ‘bare life’. Today, more and more people are exposed to the conditions of bare life: the homeless, illegal immigrants, the inhabitants of slums. From military camps via refugee camps and from labour camps to detention centres and secret prisons, the camp is the grimmest symptom of a postcivil urbanism, which follows the disintegration of the state.<sup>1</sup> Heterotopia, so we argue, is the opposite of the camp and could be a counterstrategy to the proliferation of camps and the spread of the exposure to the conditions of bare life.

All these conceptual polarities determine heterotopia and make it crucial to understand the urban reality of today. In our contemporary world heterotopia is everywhere. Museums, theme parks, malls, holiday resorts, wellness hotels, festival markets – the entire city is becoming ‘heterotopian’. Heterotopia has, indeed, become very obvious and central in our society. This central position of heterotopian space is not new. Most of Foucault’s examples are important institutions of the city: the graveyard, the museum, the library, the theatre, the fair. This centrality is most elegantly represented on Nolli’s famous map – a representation of Rome in the eighteenth century: the churches of Borromini prominently surrounding the Piazza Navona, with the Pantheon a bit further to the east.

The Nolli map figures on the cover of this book for yet another reason: the black and white contrast of the original map is a graphically eloquent representation of the description of the city in terms of the public–private

binary opposition. The interior spaces that have been drawn as white appear on the map as part of the continuous matrix of urban public spaces, and have been conventionally interpreted as an extension of the outdoor public spaces. This reading misses an essential point. The interior spaces that are left white – the churches – are not public or private, but heterotopian. What this map so eloquently shows is the necessary connection and partial overlap between public space and heterotopian space. Heterotopian spaces are necessarily collective or shared spaces. Their heterotopian character, as Foucault clearly explained in his fifth principle, was contingent upon a precise mechanism of opening and closing. That closing means excluding the public, a delineation of otherness and a closure vis-à-vis public space, while the opening is an opening unto the public domain.

The observation of the centrality and semi-public character of heterotopia runs counter to the dominant treatment of the concept within architectural circles, which have often understood it as synonymous with the marginal, interstitial, subliminal spaces that, by their eccentric position, defy the reigning logic of a dominant culture. In this common interpretation, we believe, the essential function of heterotopia within the city is obscured.

In placing the emphasis on the centrality of heterotopia in the contemporary urban condition, however, we have to overcome an equally problematic pitfall that travellers in heterotopia have to face: when putting on heterotopian spectacles, everything tends to take on heterotopian traits. The following axiom, therefore, has been our guide: not everything is a heterotopia. At stake is to find out whether the concept of heterotopia could be made consistent or whether it should, on the contrary, be given up altogether because its vagueness has only brought confusion and continues to do so.

The book is structured in seven parts of three chapters each.

*Part 1: Heterotology: 'a science in the making'.* The book opens with a new and annotated translation of the text that is its prime source of inspiration: Michel Foucault's 'Of other spaces'. In his radio talk of 1966, which was the embryo of the text, he dreamt of 'a science in the making', *heterotology*, which would be concerned with the study of 'other spaces' (Foucault 2004). James Faubion's contribution situates this (for Foucault) rather atypical essay within its biographical and historical context. Heidi Sohn focuses on the reception history of the (in origin) medical concept and ventures to reread the term from the viewpoint of its appearance in *The Order of Things*, a book that was published a year before the text was written.

*Part 2: Heterotopia revisited.* The chapters of the second part present a commentary on Foucault's concept in light of its contemporary relevance

to a discussion on architecture, the city and public space. What constitutes the otherness of these other spaces? What is their role in society and their place in the city? Heterotopia appears to be open to very different readings: a first perspective retraces within the oeuvre of Foucault heterotopia's representational, mirroring role and goes on to speculate about its consequences for the production of architecture, finding in the *Exodus* project by OMA a rare but pertinent example (Christine Boyer); a second approach situates heterotopia in the tradition of de Certeau and Lefebvre, in the subliminal, infra-political margins (Marco Cenzatti); and a third reading views it as a central, if often 'eccentric', institution of the *polis* (De Caeter and Dehaene).

*Part 3: The mall as agora – The agora as mall.* The mall has clear heterotopian characteristics. However, in spite of all its phantasmagorical qualities, the mall seems profoundly embedded in everyday culture, in the commodification of everything, the reproduction of conformity and consumerism, rather than being a celebration of alterity. In the different contributions of this part, heterotopia appears as a helpful concept to understand the mall as a newly emerging (semi-)public space type, supporting old and new practices of public life. Kathleen Kern focuses on a case where the street, the mall and the theme park merge. Clément Orillard investigates the mall as paradigm for public space in the French post-war New Towns. Douglas Muzzio and his daughter Jessica look at the mall in its most phantasmagorical version: the mall in the movies.

*Part 4: Dwelling in a postcivil society.* Home is the place of everyday life. Today, however, the private sphere, the place of intimacy and invisibility, is changing: there is a deep-rooted logic of gating and fortressing in our society, caused by the sharp dualization of society, the fear that comes with it, and a tendency towards individualism and social distinction (Setha Low). Gating as social defence, however, is redressed with the attributes of Disneyfication: themed holiday living (Hugh Bartling). Beyond the well-known phenomenon of gated communities, we see the rise of all-in heterotopias – of, for example, the themed condominiums in Singapore (Xavier Guillot). In a society in which the icons of leisure hide a neo-liberal work ethos, it seems inevitable that dwelling takes on heterotopian overtones – paradoxically at the moment when home becomes for an increasing number of people a workplace.

*Part 5: Terrains vagues: transgressions and urban activism.* Following the sociology of Lefebvre, the activist practices of the Situationists, the Bataillan notion of transgression and the social critique of Michel de Certeau, the contributions in this part look for heterotopia in the margins, in the *terrains vagues*, the zones, the wastelands, the urban voids. The authors focus on that dimension of heterotopia that resists representation: its subliminal side.

In the case study of the Tel Aviv shoreline, Yael Allweil and Rachel Kallus explore heterotopia's potential as a 'pocket of resistance'. Gil Doron's contribution on the *terrain vague* and the 'dead zone' and 'transgressive architecture' insists on the categorical distinction between heterotopian spaces in which otherness is positively affirmed and those spaces on the margin, where a dominant code has been relaxed or partly effaced. In the chapter on Stalker, Peter Lang, himself a member of the group, argues that the tradition of artistic urban activism has a new relevance in the context of global mass migration.

*Part 6: Heterotopia in the splintering metropolis.* Integral urbanism was an attempt to control the tools for welfare within the state under the aegis of the plan. In the network society, 'splintering urbanism' has to rely on the creation of heterotopias to sustain its integrating gesture. Heterotopia holds the promise of a city in which the other is accommodated – a city of plurality and heterogeneity. The chapters in this part investigate the possibilities of 'a heterotopian urbanism'. This is well represented in Maureen Heyns' case study of London's eastern fringe. According to Lee Stickells, network society has produced a new heterotopia: the heterotopia of flows. D. Grahame Shane shows how art institutions have proved to be almost magic levers to revitalize entire neighbourhoods, from Beaubourg to Bilbao, but they seem to become, as Baudrillard pointed out early on, simulations of the third kind.

*Part 7: Heterotopia after the polis.* The contributions in the last part try to tackle the place and function of heterotopia in the postcivil society – a society that embraces its own brutality. The cases show samples of heterotopias in the megacities of the 'Global South'. In Robert Cowherd's case of Jakarta we see the ways in which the heterotopian logic of the colonial order serves in refashioned form as an excellent support for the reproduction of the asymmetrical power relations and social dualism that structure the city. In Alessandro Petti's case of the grandiose, grotesque offshore urbanism in Dubai, heterotopia appears as part of an archipelago of well-connected and privileged islands – as opposed to the labour camps in which those who build this artificial paradise live. Here the theme of camp and bare life becomes visible as a counterpart to high-security heterotopia. The last case by Filip De Boeck is the grimmest: the graveyard taken over by youth gangs in the totally dysfunctional city of Kinshasa – a disintegrating society in an imploded state: 'heterotopia after the polis'.

To close, we make space for some *Afterthoughts* (Hilde Heynen). With this wide-ranging book, which brings together theoretical pieces and concrete case studies written by both established scholars and young researchers, we hope to have contributed not only to an assessment and repositioning



of heterotopia as a crucial concept for contemporary urban theory, but also to the current debate on the transformation of the city at the dawn of the new millenium.

## Note

- 1 We intend to make a book on camps as a second volume in this heterotopia project, to be followed eventually by a third volume in which heterotopia and camp merge in the global context of the new spatial order. Although the camp is not at all the focal point of this book, it provides a point of reference for some chapters.

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