Forma de citar este artículo en APA:
Serna Castro, Y. (2023). City and space: a hermeneutic perspective. *Perseitas, 11*, 475-500.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

CITY AND SPACE: A HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVE[a]

Ciudad y espacio: una perspectiva hermenéutica

Reflection paper derived from research
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

Received: February 6th, 2023. Accepted: July 10th, 2023. Published: August 9th, 2023

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Abstract

This paper presents a philosophical reflection on the city and the space. It proposes a different interpretation of the city, shifting the traditional focus on the historical and time-related aspects to a consideration of the space as a central category of analysis. This perspective seeks to define what a city is and to understand the different dynamics and processes that influence its constitution, development, transformation, or disappearance. In contrast to the traditional approach focused on the city with a temporal perspective, this paper highlights the relevance of the space as a fundamental element of analysis. The central premise lies in presenting an interpretation that highlights how the existence of the city is not only based on the processes of construction but also on the very act of inhabiting. This act, cemented by our relations with space, enables the existence of spatiality.

[a] This paper derives from the research carried out by the author as part of the doctoral project about the city and the inhabit.

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Keywords

Countryside; City; Space; Experience; Inhabiting; Territory.

Resumen

El artículo trata de una reflexión acerca de la ciudad y el espacio desde una perspectiva filosófica. Se trata de una interpretación de la ciudad en la que, en contraste con los elementos históricos y temporales con los que se ha pretendido entender y estudiar, se propone el espacio como una categoría de análisis que ayuda a entender mejor, no solo lo que es una ciudad, sino las distintas dinámicas y procesos que influyen en su constitución y desarrollo, así como en su transformación o desaparición. Se trata de una forma de hablar de la ciudad en la que, en lugar de predominar una mirada temporal de ella, se propone el espacio como una categoría principal de análisis. La idea central consiste en ofrecer una interpretación del modo como la ciudad es posible gracias al habitar mismo, y no tan solo a los procesos de edificación y construcción, desde los que suele entenderse esta. Teniendo en cuenta que el habitar es un proceso que se funda en nuestras relaciones con el espacio, en la medida en que este hace posible dicho proceso, y a que el habitar hace posible, a su vez, la espacialidad como tal.

Palabras clave

Ciudad; Campo; Espacio; Territorio; Habitar; Experiencia.

Introduction

Since its origins, the city, as a human construction, has been the subject of complex and diverse reflections that have contributed to how we represent and construct it. Its representation and construction contain heterogeneous elements that can enrich our conceptions of these places where many of us live and which have been populated by those who once inhabited other spaces and territories, such as rural areas or the countryside. Art, architecture, politics, economics, culture, and religion have been part of these and other dimensions through which we have historically tried to understand and organize those complex and intricate *mechanisms* called cities.

This effort to understand the place where we live is related to our need or interest in carrying out an exploration exercise that also helps us reveal many of the features of our social and cultural being. Although different in nature, we recognize ourselves in our creations, and by shaping them, we shape ourselves. It is a process that takes place throughout time, but also in space, and in a unique way.

Our condition as historical beings has led us to see temporality as a fundamental feature of our constitution and understanding. It is a condition determined by experience, but above all by mortality (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Thus, time emerges as an essential ontological category for talking about ourselves and what is related to us. Perhaps when we say that we are historical beings, we mean to imply that we are temporal subjects and that without this reference to temporality, any attempt at understanding is simply incomplete. The same applies to cities. The city in time: its origins, changes, triumphs, failures, mutations, and disappearances have mostly been seen from the perspective of the past, present, and future.

The temporal characteristics of cities can be clearly seen when we think of ruins, whether from war, abandonment, or some other social or natural force. The time elapsed from the birth to the decline of a city, characterized by

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

its abandonment or death,[1] reveals the obsolescence not only of things but also of places. Therefore, time is no longer an abstract category for talking about things but acquires concrete features materialized in space. As Prata (2017) would say, the city is a space in constant flux, oscillating between the drive of preservation and the drive of renewal. Moreover, to think about the city and its representations is to think about a space of conflict (p. 8).

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that spatiality, and the geographical aspect associated with it, is as fundamental as time since the temporal features are a constitutive part of who we are and what we do, and without them, everything we can say about the world will be partial, even more so than it already is.

Therefore, this paper approaches the city from a hermeneutic perspective of spatiality. It is an attempt to understand the relations human beings weave with the environment they build and inhabit, and that significantly influence their identity and social aspects. This work also aims to approach the city from a human or anthropological perspective and think of it as a place that, in addition to being built, is, first and foremost, an inhabited place.

We build cities because we are dwellers, beings that inhabit. That is, we built because we inhabit, and we do not inhabit because we built (Heidegger, 1954/2001). Here, the fundamental concept is *inhabiting*[2] and not *building*. It is about an inhabitation possible through forms of social organization materialized in space. Thus, the material forms the city acquires are part of the reflection of a symbolism and normativity that transcends the purely concrete aspects of the city. When we think about building a city, our genuine desire is to answer the challenge of how we can inhabit or *be* in it. This makes us think of the close relationship between space and way of life. Therefore, it can be said that the way a city is conceived is a way of knowing how its inhabitants live in it.

[1] About death of cities is discussed in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (1961), which "is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding (p. 3). These activities, according to the author, have become a threat to urban life and what it means to city dwellers. A city can also die, according to Richard Sennett (2018/2023) when "is hostile to people whose religion, race, ethnicity or sexuality differs from the majority" (p. 121). In the opinion of this sociologist, these aspects make the city a closed space instead of an open one.

[2] On the concept of inhabiting, we can refer to *Topofilia o la dimensión poética del habitar* by Carlos Mario Yory (1998), in which the author highlights how this dimension of human life has been losing its ontological value, to the point of being understood merely as the activity of occupying a space.

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It is a matter of talking about the city not only in terms of the material, the physical, which characterizes and even limits it, but also in terms of those layers or levels of experience without which the physical could not be called a city. To achieve this, an interpretation of how cities can be conceived physically, normatively, and symbolically will be provided. The goal is to explore the relations between built spaces and inhabited spaces. On the other hand, and in dealing with the subject of cities in time and space, we hope to be able to discuss a transition in our way of conceiving cities so that this may allow us to understand why we have seen the potentialities of space, and not only those of time, as a possibility to understand the events of urban life better[3].

Toward an understanding of the city

Despite living in them, it is not always easy to explain what a city is. We might think that is enough to say that a *city* is a set of houses, streets, parks, markets, and buildings where complex forms of social and cultural organization take place. However, there are reasons to doubt this is a good definition. Although a city is something visible, maybe not everything that may characterize it is tangible or quantifiable. There are intangible and immaterial aspects that are decisive for its constitution.

Among the many definitions of *city*, some just say it is related to buildings, parks, markets, and streets, along with its inhabitants. Similarly, given the significant differences among countries, it is stated that, for example, a city is characterized by a population of at least fifty thousand inhabitants. In comparison, towns and other areas of intermediate density have a population of about five

[3] By *urban life* we mean life that takes place in the city. However, this does not mean that those who live in *rurban* areas cannot live similarly to those who live in cities.

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thousand inhabitants.[4] Now, if we believed that these definitions were correct, we would have to say that other places with the same characteristics, such as towns, would be cities and not something different from them, as we suppose.

Of course, another complex problem is defining what exactly a city, a village, or a settlement is. Today, Tokyo, the world's largest city, is home to more than 37 million people, while Manizales, a small city in western Colombia, is home to just over 400,000. A town like Santa Rosa de Cabal in Risaralda (Colombia) has 60,000 inhabitants, and Hope in the United States has about 10,000 inhabitants. This seems to suggest that when talking about a city, it is necessary to go beyond the physical aspects to the political, cultural, and symbolic ones.

In Sudjic's (2016) words:

> If anywhere can be defined as a city, then the definition runs the risk of meaning nothing. A city is made by its people, within the bounds of the possibilities that it can offer them: it has a distinctive identity that makes it much more than an agglomeration of buildings. Climate, topography and architecture are part of what creates that distinctiveness, as are its origins. Cities based on trade have qualities different from those that were called into being by manufacturing. Some cities are built by autocrats, others have been shaped by religion. Some cities have their origins in military strategy or statecraft (What is a City, p. 2).

One way of trying to characterize what is distinctive about a city seems to be through the urban-rural distinction. Nevertheless, although urban life is life in the city, such a distinction is not very appropriate when we see today that the boundaries (or other characteristics) that could help differentiate rural and urban are becoming more diffuse every day.

[4] According to UN-Habitat, and thanks to the joint work of six international organizations, the degree of urbanization method can help develop a new global definition of a city. As Dijkstra et al., (2020) note, many countries employ diverse population thresholds to delineate urban areas. For example, the authors remark that in Denmark is 200, in Argentina is 2,000, in India is 5,000, in Japan is 50,000, and in China is 100,000. "Some countries don't use a statistical definition but designate urban areas by administrative decision. In other countries, the sectoral employment or provision of infrastructure and services is used to determine whether settlements should be classified as urban or rural" (Dijkstra et al., 2020, p.3).

The degree of urbanization method identifies three types of settlements: "1. Cities, which have a population of at least 50,000 inhabitants in contiguous dense grid cells (>1,500 inhabitants per km2); 2. Towns and semi-dense areas, which have a population of at least 5,000 inhabitants in contiguous grid cells with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km2; and 3. Rural areas, which consist mostly of low-density grid cells (<300 inhabitants per km2)" (Dijkstra et al. 2020, p.6).

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Desakotas or conurbations are, in this sense, an example of it. Certainly, this distinction would have been much easier to make when the urban and rural did not have the undifferentiated characteristics they have today.[5] It may be that the growth of today's cities, staggering as it is, has influenced this in many ways. Everything seems to suggest that it is an expansion that, at least in many places, has eliminated, if not a border, at least a transition between one place and another and also between complex ways of being and living. However, although the liminal territories associated with the borders and thresholds between one place and another are often difficult to distinguish, we should not ignore the fact that these exact thresholds accentuate the particular ways of life of those who live in one territory or another.

In this sense, if a city is not defined by the number of streets, parks, schools, or buildings, then it should not be defined by its borders either. Therefore, we can recognize that a city is not just an intentionally built environment that has been given a name. A city is also a normative construct in the sense that it is made up of rules and norms that manifest in its social organization, government, mobility, or aesthetics (Urban Studies Institute National University, 2017).[6] Nevertheless, this should not lead us to think that the concrete and the normative are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, it can be argued that while not mutually determining, there is at least a reciprocal influence between them since the normative is based on a specific spatiality[7] and the latter is materialized or manifested in normativity.

[5] Harvey (2012) understood this urban-rural distinction quite clearly, for whom "the fading of the urban-rural divide has proceeded at a differential pace throughout the world (...) Though there are plenty of residual spaces in the global economy where the process is far from complete, the mass of humanity is thus increasingly being absorbed within the ferments and cross-currents of urbanized life" (p. 15). This last point mentioned by the author may serve as a partial explanation of why it is said that there are currently more people living in cities than in places like the countryside, for example.

[6] Aesthetics can also be understood in terms of hygiene and normativity, as Girado Sierra (2020) shows in his book *Estetópolis: Fantasía de pureza y sociodinámicas de estigmatización en las ciudades*. According to this author, the aesthetopolis can be understood as a set of built-in structuring structures from which ideals of order are projected and pursued, from which one values and classifies according to binomials such as capable/incapable (surplus), normal/abnormal, familiar/foreign, advantageous/defective or, in short, pure/impure (p.72).

[7] As Stavrides (2010) says, "people experience space but also think through space and imagine through space. Space not only gives form to the existing social world (experienced and understood as a meaningful life condition), but also to possible social worlds that may inspire action and express collective dreams" (p.13).

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Moreover, for Sudjic (2016),

> in material terms, a city can be defined by how close together its people gather to live and work, by its system of government, by its transport infrastructure and by the functioning of its sewers. And, not least, by its economic potential (What is a city, p. 4).

In this sense, and even if we are talking about things that are present in every city, such as transportation or a form of organization, we cannot assume that these will produce the same results in one place or another.

If the physical and normative aspects are decisive for talking about a city, could it be said that if they are jeopardized, the city is also jeopardized? Think of cities destroyed by the consequences of war or the forces of nature, like Plymouth, the ancient capital of Montserrat. Undoubtedly, when such events occur, the collapse is not only physical but institutional in the broadest sense. Furthermore, it is precisely this collapse that can endanger a city or drive it into decline. The bombing of Dresden (Germany) in 1945, the seaquake in Lisbon (Portugal) in 1755, and the earthquake in Armenia (Colombia) in 1999 are examples of this.

The same thing happened in the ancient cities of the Americas at the time of the conquest through the plundering and destruction they faced. However, this does not occur only in such situations. Because of their characteristics and effects, there are others that can also endanger cities, even if their manifestations are not the same as those caused by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, wars, or invasions. Violence, loss of jobs, and the various deprivations experienced by its inhabitants (especially the poor), such as corruption or lack of investment, among many others, can also endanger a city, but so can our negative way of thinking about it. For example, while some believe that cities are "wealth-generating machines," as Sudjic (2016) argues, or that they offer a wide range of opportunities to the modern city dweller, as Adam Ford (2013/2017) states, others see the opposite and look at the city as a concrete jungle, a cradle of pollution, or a stage where corruption, unemployment, and poverty threaten the search for that wealth.

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Whether they come from outside or within the city, the conditions that threaten it represent the possibility that it will lose the qualities that make it a city. It is not just about conceiving a city as a collection of houses or buildings. Its qualities go beyond that. Thus, if a city wants to be successful, it has "to offer its citizens security, safety and freedom of choice" (Sudjic, 2016, What is a City, p. 26).

It is possible to think that when the inhabitants of a city protest, they do so not only because they need to protect, recognize, or defend their rights[8] but also to protect their city. Therefore, caring for the city is caring for citizenship and defending our right to it. This also happens in places like towns or settlements, where the goals may be similar.

This has been present in different ways and varying degrees of complexity in most, if not all, of the world's cities. Moreover, it usually takes the form of a protest or a political demonstration, which has to do with resistance, or more precisely with a spatiality of resistance, where the public space[9] is conceived as a scenario in which power is confronted, and the conflicts generated by power find their maximum expression in space. Blocked roads, occupied squares, streets full of demonstrators, or painted walls are some ways this is demonstrated. It is an expression or a claim on the city by those who are or feel marginalized.

Perhaps it could be said that when this happens, it is not the things that are violated but the people and their way of life. What is ignored, however, is that a city is also about the lifestyles of the people who live in it. There is a reason why cities are built the way they are and where they are. Although, in many cases, the location may be random, this is not always the case.

[8] It is about the right we have, according to Lefebvre (1968/1996), to the city, in the sense of manifesting it "as the highest form of rights: liberty, individualization in socialization, environs (*habitat*) and way of living (*habiter)*" (p.19).

[9] According to Isaac Joseph (1999), Hannah Arendt, for example, defines the public space as a site for *action*, in contrast to work and labor, and of non-identifying modes of subjectivation, as opposed to communal identification processes and territories of familiarity (p.11). It is an action that makes public space possible and allows people to live and participate politically. On public space, the book *La ciudad habitable: espacio público y sociedad* (Burbano & Páramo, 2014) mentions that the city is not something static, nor finished, nor has it ever been the same as what we have known (p. 3).

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Many cities are at the top of mountains, and others are in valleys or flatlands, near the sea or surrounded by roads. Without the sea, Cartagena or Havana would not be entirely what they are without their trade routes, and Athens, Rome, or Constantinople would not have become the magnificent cities they were in the past. However, location, climate, and topography are not the only factors that have an impact. Their architecture, distribution, spatial organization, trade, and political structures also affect them. These are essential traits in a city. Thus, as Adam Ford (2013/2017) argues, museum collections and art galleries, well-proportioned town squares and ancient architecture are not add-on extras for tourists, but have always been part of the essence of city life, their roots lying far back in history (p. 13).

It is possible to think that in order to understand adequately what a city is, we should be able to ask not only who inhabits it but also how they came to make it and why and how it has changed, developed, or disappeared. However, talking about who inhabits a city also requires discussing how they do it. Although most of us live in cities,[10] this does not mean that our way of inhabiting them is identical, nor that the spaces are the same. Space strongly influences the complex ways we usually live in places because of how it is constituted, understood or signified, and experienced. This can make life in inhabited environments (whether cities or not) different for each of us in the sense that we live and perceive these environments from our reference points, be they aesthetic, hygienic, ecological, or social. These references can help us understand what a city is and guide us on how to be in it.

When we talk about inhabiting, we usually establish a relation between inhabiting and permanence, presenting the inhabitant as a dweller. While true, it does not exclude the possibility of relating inhabitation to transience. Thus, the inhabitant can appear as an itinerant. As Nancy (2011/2013) argues,

> man inhabits as a passerby, not as a traveler who has set out for another world, but as a hurried or strolling passerby, who is busy or idle, walking alongside others passersby, so near and so far, familiarly alien, whose stops are only temporary, in the

[10] On the subject of the growth of the urban population as opposed to the rural population, the author of *Metropolis* (2020), Ben Wilson, discusses in the introduction how the growth of cities has influenced the changes in the lives of many people, which have been instrumental in their move to cities.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

> midst of traffic, routes, transport, and journeys, of doors endlessly opened and closed in the secluded dwellings and yet penetrated by the rumors of the street, by the noises and the dust of a completely transient world (pp. 48-49).

Although they emphasize someone's passage through a place, Nancy's words also seem to suggest that a city is meant to be moved through. Therefore, life in it would be characterized by movement, though not only in the sense of the simple displacement from one place to another, rather than by stillness and permanence.

If cities are things that grow and disappear, some sort of evolving or mutating organism, it makes sense to talk about them in terms of movement and transformation, making their evolution, growth, or disappearance possible.

If a city changes and transforms, and through the processes that make this possible, we can get an idea of what it is, would it make sense to talk about the *ethos* of a city? That is, we might be led to say that it is, for example, progressive, dangerous, luminous, industrial, dirty, university, or liberal. It is an *ethos* made possible by convergence, by the communication of encounters, but also of oppositions and conflicts. It is about how we imagine or believe cities to be, the images we make of them, and how we represent them to ourselves.

Much like the general perception people have of a country, we tend to do the same with cities. In the case of Colombian cities, for example, we see that the way many people represent some of them reveals what a city is for each person. Naturally, these representations may vary depending on the reference points used, making a representation problematic or incorrect. However, the objective is not to determine the value of these representations but to allow us to understand what motivates people to talk about a particular place in the way they do.

When we try to characterize a city and its identity traits, we may be revealing which of these aspects allow us to perceive it in a certain way. It is something that is, or can be, due to a dialectical relationship between the way of being and the built environment, in the sense that one and the other

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interweave the forms of urban life, in the words of Nancy (2011/2013), it is made up of non-totalizable coexistences (p. 78). These coexistences, through their openness, expansion, and projection, transform a city from a small settlement into a complex and immeasurable megalopolis.

When dealing with coexistences, the city reveals itself to us as a scenario where life is lived with others. That is why, as Sudjic (2016) suggests,

> A city without people is a dead city. The crowd is the essential sign of city life. A living city is the embodiment of the people who inhabit it. They fill its streets and its public spaces; they pour in every day to find all that a city has to offer. (...) Without the possibility of a crowd, a city is incomplete (Crowds and Their Discontents, pp. 1-7).

As would be the case if it were to become completely isolated, which, although rare at present, can happen.

Having said this, we find that, in our attempt to understand what a city is, the relationship between inhabiting and space (not only between man and space) is crucial in this sense. In the same way that a city does not only obey or is something related to just a built or constructed space, many of the imaginaries or referents with which we pretend to identify and recognize ourselves as the species we are (such as the family or the state), it would not be right to think of them without their relation to those scenarios or places where we are, among others, passersby, students, workers, strikers, or athletes.

Certainly, this does not mean human life is reduced to a mere spatiality. Although it might be objected that this would lead to ignoring other human or vital dimensions, such as the spiritual sphere, the point is to emphasize that a good part of the conditions that decisively influence our way of life are determined by space.

In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Edward Soja (2010), drawing on Foucault and Lefebvre, argues that "there are three rather than two fundamental or ontological qualities of human existence" (p. 70): the social/societal, the temporal/historical, and the spatial/geographical. For Soja (2010),

> despite this "triple dialectic," nearly all the knowledge that has been accumulated over the past century or so has been based primarily on a twofold ontology linking dynamically and dialectically the social and the historical dimensions of individual and societal development, with the spatiality of our sociohistorical being relatively neglected (p. 70).

Although the social/societal and the temporal/historical are such qualities of our existence, so is the spatial/geographical, as Soja (2010) himself warns, insofar as

> we are thus inescapably embedded in the geographies around us in much the same way as we are integral actors in social contexts and always involved in one way or another in the making of our individual biographies and collective histories (p. 71).

Regarding these fundamental or ontological qualities of human existence, we will say that they apply to what we have said so far about cities. Rather than a particular place, they enable concrete ways of being that, in their relationship to the geographical, allow the birth and transformation of cities and other inhabited environments.

In this sense, the following section will explore this third fundamental quality, with the aim of understanding the reasons for the gradual (but not definitive) shift in our way of understanding cities from an essentially temporal perspective to one which is particularly centered on the spatial, without this implying an intentional disregard of the other two qualities.

In our attempt to explain what a city is, the ontological question about it is unavoidable. Thus, to ensure that what is said about the city adequately reinforces and expands the ideas we have about it, it is necessary to consider various elements that help us in our analysis and interpretation. From this point of view, it makes sense to go beyond the physical or material elements, which are necessary, to the symbolic, normative, and experiential, which are also fundamental prerequisites to a proper understanding of the city.

By drawing attention to the symbolic, the normative, and the experiential, the aim is to suggest that a city becomes a city when diverse and complex ways of being, with their networks of meaning and supported by the material, make

life in a city possible. This explains why a city is not a city if there are no inhabitants to walk, transform, endure, or enjoy it. The physical scenario alone is not sufficient to make this possible.

From the cities in time to the cities in space

According to Michel Foucault (1984/1986), the 19th century was dominated by a historical view of human events. A view in which the temporal seems to have been a key element for understanding or explaining the social reality that the human sciences wanted to carry out. This can be seen in German historicism, where reality can only be understood as the outcome of historical progression in the sense of being subject to temporal flows or processes, without which historical facts could not occur and be adequately understood or explained.

In philosophical thinking, for example, history has played a significant role in our representations of freedom, human development, or descriptions of nature. The German thinking in the 18th and 19th centuries illustrates this. In the tradition of German philosophy, the concept of history developed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* (1820/1978) is of particular interest. For Hegel, history "is the necessary development, out of the concept of mind's freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of mind. This development is the interpretation and actualization of the universal mind" (p. 216). History as the last moment of development of the mind, where the reality of the Absolute Mind will be expressed.

The concerns and interests regarding temporality and the metaphysical explanations associated with it, as articulated by Hegel and other modern philosophers, underwent a transformative shift. This development meant that the interest in new ways of conceiving reality would be linked to a different ontological[11] conception of the world and a way in which new forms of understanding language and its relation to things would come to the attention of later philosophy. Such is the case of the so-called *linguistic turn*, in which our way of

[11] Among these conceptions is that of Martin Heidegger (1954/2001), for whom human existence must be understood in terms of inhabitation, because, according to him, to exist is to inhabit. Thus, when speak of an ontological sense of the city, we do so on the basis of what the lifestyles of its inhabitants represent for the city.

speaking about facts becomes important, as opposed to pure facts. In other words, it is a shift from things to ways of talking about them. The philosophy of the second Wittgenstein and the pragmatism of Richard Rorty had a decisive influence on this way of doing philosophy.

Now, what we say about philosophy is also correlated with studying the city and the territory. It is no exaggeration to say that these studies, like philosophy, considered time a privileged category for explaining urban and rural phenomena. However, although there is still an interest in the temporal ways of talking about these phenomena, the truth is that there has also been a shift towards the spatial. Therefore, in the same way, we speak of a linguistic turn in philosophy, it is possible to speak of a spatial turn in the social sciences.

That is to say, just as the analysis of language and the ways of using it have been important for philosophical work, the ways of talking about the city and the territory have seen in space, and not only in time, a possibility to understand better human events and, especially, the forms of human inhabitability. However, this is not to say that the spatial and temporal are mutually exclusive. Instead, they can be better understood as a dialectical relationship that allows the urban and the rural to be conceived in terms of time but also in terms of space and territory.

On this subject, Colom González and Rivero (2015) argue that the new perspective brought about by the spatial turn no longer takes time and chronology as the primary dimensions for the study of political relations but pays special attention to their *topological* constitution, that is, to their *space* and *place* as normatively constituted spheres. In this way, space is taken as the primary object of study, and some of the classical problems of political philosophy are approached from eminently spatial categories. It is important to understand that such a shift is not due to an intellectual whim or a mere exercise in theoretical sophistication but to the need to conceive certain social and political phenomena in constitutively spatial terms (p. 7).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

The presupposition on which this new perspective is based has to do with the recognition that places and territorial contexts, as Colom González and Rivero (2015) argue, are crucial for our understanding of social relations and the generation of knowledge. Thus, it is essential to talk about the spatial dimension because being aware of *where* things happen is fundamental to knowing *how* and *why* they happen one way and not another (p. 7).

Moving from talking about cities in time to cities in space has to do with an interest in offering a reading of how we have interpreted the constitutive relations that make life possible in inhabited environments differently. It is about understanding the motives behind the spatial turn.

In *The City in History*. *Its Origins, its Transformations, and its Prospects* (1961), Lewis Mumford makes a statement that explains the importance of history for a proper understanding of the city, without which our images of what a city is would probably be incomplete. In Mumford words:

> If we would lay a new foundation for urban life, we must understand the historic nature of the city, and distinguish between its original functions, those that have emerged from it, and those that may still be called forth. Without a long running start in history, we shall not have the momentum needed, in our own consciousness, to take a sufficiently bold leap into the future; for a large part of our present plans, not least many that pride themselves on being 'advanced' or 'progressive,' are dreary mechanical caricatures of the urban and regional forms that are now potentially within our grasp (p. 3).

We could say that without history, according to Mumford, we cannot adequately understand what a city is. However, the historical reference to what a city is should not make us forget that this historical view cannot be based on the idea that the city has always been, from its origins, something like a mature unit lacking a previous path.

What preceded the city? If we consider our first forms of organization (once we were nomads and then we settled down), we will see that before cities, we lived in caves or hills; later, we lived in camps and villages. Then we lived in hamlets, which over time became small towns and, in many situations, became cities. Although in different shapes and sizes, the organization of these

spaces also represented the birth of cultures and civilizations. Many of these buildings and settlements were located in the high mountains, such as Machu Picchu, Kuelap, or Teyuna (Lost City); or in the middle of lakes or wetlands, such as Tenochtitlan; and others in the middle of the desert and along rivers, as in ancient Egypt. A journey around the world could help us better understand the wide variety of these processes that have led us to the colossal territories we live in today.

Although our purpose is not to narrate the history of the city, we cannot ignore the fact that its evolutionary process has been decisive for the current development of our cities. Cities that, in perspective, give an account of how humankind has established itself in the societies and groups to which it belongs today. Cities can grow over time, but they may have had a different appearance in their origins than the one perceived by their current inhabitants.

How might the present cities have looked when they were founded? It is possible that many cities began as small communities devoted to rudimentary forms of trade, animal husbandry, food cultivation, and worship and veneration practices. Perhaps another way to put it is to say that the city began in the countryside or what we consider to be rural. From then on, as commercial relations became more complex and exchanges (of various kinds) between people also became more complex, the structures and inhabited spaces, in turn, acquired other dimensions and characteristics that marked, if not a rupture, at least a transition to the urban, that space in which commercial relations and social dynamics were no longer centered on the work of the land.

This transition to the urban has been permeated by a whole series of subsequent changes that have allowed for processes of transformation and even the disappearance of cities over time. It is not without reason that we speak of the ancient city, the medieval city, the pre-industrial city, the industrial city, the capitalist city, or the postmodern city.[12] We are not talking about labels or designations that simply refer to some cities or others, but about events that have influenced our way of understanding moments in time, as well as those

[12] On the topic of the postmodern city, the book *La ciudad postmoderna. Magia y miedo de la metrópolis contemporánea* by Amendola (1997/2000) can be consulted. In this book, the author proposes that this city is new compared to the traditional and old, because its spaces and social relations are different, which has led its inhabitants to see it as a city of fears or dreams, depending on the contexts and social situations in which we live.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.4647

complex forms of social organization that, through things like trade, war, agriculture, or the arts, among other human activities, have made possible forms of life that allow us to speak of cities in this way.

After the Spanish conquest, for example, the cities of the New World were not only different from those that existed in the Americas before the Spanish arrived, they almost disappeared.[13] Cities were no longer associated with agriculture, massive pyramidal temples, or built in terraces. Instead, they adopted the forms of the Portuguese or Spanish cities. That is, the squares and churches dominate their surroundings. Cities like Quito, Lima, and Mexico City are recognizable to us because of the changes they have undergone since the arrival of the colonizers. We can no longer think or live in them as we did in pre-Hispanic times.

In addition to being a place of tourism and exploration, Tenochtitlan will no longer be for us the city of the ancient indigenous peoples, where ball games were played, where diverse ways of life of mythical and brave individuals took place, and where calendars, sacrifices, and extraordinary cleanliness and order gave way, despite their will, to a city that over time became a model of modern life, with all that this implies. Although it seems that we can no longer speak of Tenochtitlan without referring to the enormous city of Mexico City, we can say that what it is may not have been possible without what happened in the great lakes and wetlands before the arrival of the white men from Europe. Although they are two different cities, the vast metropolis that is Mexico City traces its origins to the territory that Hernán Cortés came to rule. As Suárez Mayorga (2020) says, the city of today always has features from yesterday, but at the same time, even if the change is practically imperceptible, it is different from the city of tomorrow (p. 30).

In addition to wars and expansionist projects, population growth and new social relations brought about important changes in the organization of small settlements. This created territories where, in addition to agricultural activities, commercial processes and new forms of economy began to develop more

[13] To learn more about the cities of the New World and their impact on the processes of the Spanish conquest, see Romero (1999), *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas*, a work that attempts to answer the question of the role of cities in the Latin American historical process (p. 21).

intensively in the new urban centers. Thus, the direct relationships that initially existed with the land (and with the rivers and seas) were supplemented by relationships with institutional orders different from those previously known.

The study of these relationships has been fundamental to our understanding of the origins, dynamics, and evolutionary processes of cities. A study that, in its origins, recognized the importance of temporal elements for theorizing the city but now admits that its spatial characteristics cannot be excluded entirely from any explanatory and comprehensive attempt to make the city its center of reference. To return to Soja (2010), it is a dialectical relationship between the temporal or historical and the spatial or geographical.

When speaking of space, it is worth noting that it is no longer seen as a "relatively fixed and dead background" (Soja, 2010, p. 70) or as a simple surface on which things are found but rather as a dynamic socio-cultural construct that makes social realities possible but is also enabled by them. This does not mean, of course, that the distinction between natural space and social space should be forgotten as if the latter contained the former. On the contrary, the transformations and changes that man has made in natural spaces have led them to be conceived in different ways, such as when the landscape becomes an advertising product, or a green area becomes a commercial zone. Therefore, although our inhabited environments owe much to the natural world, the changes introduced to it have allowed us to construct or give meaning not only to objects but also to environments and places. Thus, although a city occupies a geographically delimited space, it also makes space itself possible; a space that, more than a vessel or container, is a generator of social phenomena.

If, in the 19th century, time was seen as something dynamic, today, space is no longer seen as something immobile and without the potential for change. Space's capacity for transformation and its ontological support of the city have allowed the city to be studied and conceived spatially. As Mejía Pavony (2020) says, we could affirm that the city is always a spatial expression of social relations. In other words, the city is not a container of social relations. On the contrary, it is always a mediator of social relations (p.14). In the city, human tensions of various kinds arise, are experienced, and take place.

The aim of discussing space in the terms mentioned above is to create a distance from the view of space that conceives it as essentially architectural and urbanistically constructed. Talking about the city in the space also has to do with those tensions and ways of life that, in the broadest sense, make the city itself possible.

In his book *Human Space*, Bollnow (1963/2011) proposes a way of understanding space in which it is part of our essence rather than us merely being located in it. Thus, space is no longer conceived from a pure exteriority, as something foreign or external to us, but as a feature of our intentionality. According to Bollnow (1963/2011),

> one commonly says, without giving it very much thought, that man is located in space. But this objectivizing statement already conceals the actual dubiousness of the state of affairs and must be released from its apparent self-evidence. For this reason Heidegger pointed out emphatically that being-in-space means something different from what we mean when we say of an object that it is in a container. The difference lies in the fact that man is not a thing among other things, but a subject that reacts to its surroundings and which to that extent can be characterized by its intentionality. Man is, to the extent that he reacts to space–or, more cautiously, to the extent that he reacts to things in space–himself not something inside space, but his relationship to things is characterized by his spatiality. Or, to express it differently, the way in which we are located in space is not a definition of the universe that surrounds us, but of an intentional space with reference to us as subjects (p. 254).

The constitution (or possibility) of intentional space occurs around the human subject and through their relationships with other people and objects. Thus, when we speak of the geographical location of a house, we are referring to the space in which it is located. In contrast, when we speak of the house as a built and inhabitable place, we are speaking of space from a symbolic and social dimension, which makes it have a political connotation in the sense of the distribution and organization of communities or human groups. This consideration of space, however, does not exclude talking about it in terms of location or position, that is, geographically and physically.

According to Bollnow (1963/2011), "human spatiality as a whole is understood as dwelling" (p. 259). In the words of this phenomenologist, dwelling refers to the idea of having one's own space. It is a space that will need to be

referenced for experiences and insights, for without it, the flow of time could hardly be adequately appreciated. There is a strong bond between space and time.

When we talk about the city in space, we are referring to a city whose events could be *spatialized*. A city as "a space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period" (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 73). Thus, as a created space, the city is generated and reproduced thanks to forces that shape and modify the different life dynamics of its inhabitants. These forces have significantly influenced how we understand and approach the study of urban phenomena. Although the studies have focused on the built space, they have also considered the inhabited space. It is a space whose construction is always political due to the struggle of ever-present and emerging powers. This is reminiscent of the Aristotelian idea of the *polis*, the political community; the way, according to Aristotle himself (ca. 330-323 B.C./1998), the city should be understood. It is about understanding space as a set of physical, symbolic, and social spheres or dimensions in which we live and socialize with those who are part of our communities as we are. According to Lefevbre (1974/1991),

> vis-a-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere "frame", after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. To picture space as a "frame" or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than to preserve what has been put in it–this is probably the initial error (p. 94).

It is an error because seeing space as a container deprives it of the qualities that make it precisely a mediator of social relations. This is why it is crucial for Lefevbre to look at it in morphological terms rather than purely dimensional terms.

Therefore, the city, understood spatially, has to do with a particular way of understanding the complex dynamics that make it possible and that are permanent from a geographical or territorial point of view. That is, to recognize how

these dynamics have consequences in space, just as space has consequences in these dynamics. In this way, the physical or tangible aspect of the city can be understood as a result (not permanent, but variable) of the different practices that characterize us as spatial beings and that have to do simultaneously with forms of socialization, communication, struggle, and conflict.

All of this has to do with the behaviors that we could jointly conceive as characteristics of inhabiting, even if, between the transience and the high speeds to which we are subjected today, they seem to jeopardize the possibilities of dwelling itself. These are the possibilities offered by the characteristics of those complex scenarios we call cities. Cities whose environments have allowed us to build, inhabit, redefine, or forget them.

Conclusions

One of the purposes of the text was to think about the city not only in terms of its structural characteristics, but also in terms of what it can represent as an inhabited and inhabitable place for human beings. According to Duch (2015), the city and life should be seen as an always culturally determined construction of anthropological spaces and times that are, in reality, part of the citizens (p.11). Therefore, as indicated above, in addition to dealing with a physically constituted spatiality, it is also important to understand the city as a normative and symbolic construct whose interrelation of spheres (social, economic, political, religious, among others) leads us to see it as

> the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community (...) The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning (...) Here is where the issues of civilization are focused. (Mumford, 1995, p. 21)

With this in mind, the article addressed questions such as: What can it mean to talk about the city in spatial terms? How does spatiality emerge as a category for analyzing the city? In other words, how important is space when we talk about a city?

Discussing the city in these terms is also an attempt to understand the cultural, social, and political aspects that determine the creation of these inhabitable spaces and the ways of life that take place there. Similarly, if a city is not only the built environment but also the entire complex network of social relationships that occur in that environment, then these relationships must be part of our analysis and reflection when it comes to understanding the city, not just philosophizing about it.

Conflict of interest

The author declares the absence of any conflict of interest with any institution or association. Likewise, the Luis Amigó Catholic University is not responsible for the management of the copyright that the authors carry out in their articles; therefore, the authors are responsible for the veracity and completeness of the citations and references.

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