

Democracy and the Necessity for Spaces of Last Resort

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In debates over the privatization of public space, designers are torn between competing claims, and yet held responsible by both sides. On the one hand, they must make decisions about physical space while being held accountable to clients and an intended program; and, on the other hand, serve to satisfy the symbolic function of public space as embodying either an open democratic realm and/or the image of the city. I suggest this occurs because of two fundamentally different conceptions of 'public space', with one group striving for a metaphorical ideal of democratic participation, and the other promoting a vision of material space.

For proponents of privatization, material public spaces symbolize the larger civic entity. There is an ideal of representation. Their arguments are often grounded in terms of appropriate citizenship, economic progress and the image of the city. Conditions incompatible with the shared conception of the civic ideal, such as panhandling, loitering or aggressive behavior, are seen to detract from the symbolic value of public spaces.

Access is understood as an issue of fairness: unrestricted access to public spaces often results in their monopolization by marginal elements, whether directly through occupation or indirectly through their presence. Therefore, some degree of control is required in order to balance access for all.

Meanwhile, advocates for access to public space promote social justice, defending a 'right to the city' set forth by Henri Lefebvre¹ and developed by others, including Don Mitchell². There is a political and democratic ideal of participation. Public space is understood in a metaphorical sense as

a discursive *public sphere* for democratic debate to which all should be admitted. Their narratives of the decline of public space due to privatization describe a concurrent loss of democracy.

I suggest that these positions are irreconcilable: one view advocates for a metaphorical ideal of participation through access; the other seeks a material ideal of representation. It is no wonder, then, that designers find themselves in such a hapless position. Designers are confronted with pressures to satisfy open access to public space, but also to preserve the symbolic value of these spaces as representative of the image of the city. The act of design which brings public space into existence sits at the very intersection of metaphorical and material ideals of participation and representation.

The rhetorical case of the Greek agora serves well to illustrate the irreconcilable nature of the metaphorical and material ideals of the public sphere. The argument typically follows this pattern: the agora is presented as an ideal public sphere of participation: the common, open place where democratic decision-making is carried out. Critics then point to the agora's historic shortcomings: only a limited portion of the populace was recognized as citizens and allowed to debate; and the commercial nature of the market space. This counterargument serves to discredit the notion of the fully public space by casting it as an unattainable ideal. It follows that since the material space cannot be fully public, it is futile to discuss the public sphere as a space for participation.

The resulting stalemate reveals two problems. First, the example of the agora is so far removed in time and experience from our contemporary

situation as to be rendered abstract. Using the agora as the singular, defining exemplar of either a political process or a material space is unrealistic; we can easily summon numerous examples of public spaces and arenas for discourse, and our own experiences with democracy as a political process tell us that no single decision creates finality.

Second, while both sides use the term 'public space', one refers literally to material space, while the other intends it to represent a political sphere. The issue of access is simultaneously used to denote two different things: the degree of publicness of a space and a political mechanism of participatory decision-making.

I propose that far from removing the notion of the public sphere from debate, a closer look at these two issues – of design and democracy, and of material spaces as instances, rather than ends – will reveal opportunities for resolving the designers' conundrum.

DESIGN AND DEMOCRACY

We now turn to a brief discussion of the mechanisms of decision-making in light of the metaphoric ideal of participation and the material ideal of representation. Advocates for the 'right to the city' equate access to material spaces with access to "the right to politics and the public sphere".³ Their concern is with participation in decision-making, and they assume that the decision is yet to be reached. By contrast, those who value the symbolic role of material space assume that the decision has already been taken, and that the issue at hand is how best to represent the outcome.

Both sides deal with decision-making, though from differing perspectives on its timing. In the United States, democracy is the mechanism for decision-making in the public sphere. Its ideal characteristics include access and transparency, which are, not coincidentally, the qualities we associate with ideal public spaces.

Our popular notion of democracy is one of *deliberative democracy*. The underlying assumptions of this model are grounded in Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere⁴ as an institutionalized arena distinct from the state and utilized for

public debate and consensus. This model makes several assumptions: a unified public; the capacity to reach a rational consensus; and the existence of a collective space in which to deliberate.

We have seen that the historical myth of the agora leads to the dismissal of the ideal of an open and accessible public space as an achievable material entity. Similarly, critics contend that there is no unified public, but rather multiple publics, and that Habermas was able to define his ideal only by refusing to recognize competing public spheres.⁵ The idea of multiple publics is seen as appropriate for egalitarian, multicultural societies because it engenders multiple public arenas for participation.⁶ In terms of public space, these arenas may be allowed, as in the case of temporary occupations such as protest marches, or more permanent enclaves such as gated communities or ethnically defined neighborhoods. Under certain conditions, they may also be taken, or claimed.

Critics further point to the impossibility of achieving an inclusive rational consensus. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe proposes an alternative – *agonistic democracy*⁷ – which seeks to place opponents in adversarial, as opposed to antagonistic, roles. She seeks a perspective of democracy as a process of contestation which avoids the endgame of domination inherent in emphasizing victories in individual decisions. In this way, we may begin to redefine our view of public spaces as evidence of 'things in the making', rather than as individual 'things made', so that they may be seen as material artifacts of an evolving and messy democratic process.

MATERIAL SPACES

If designers are to find a way out of this bind, we must first turn our attention to material spaces. These are, after all, our focus, rather than the political sphere of deliberation.

A central problem is the indiscriminate use of the term 'public' to describe a range of material spaces. We may best understand this to refer to degrees of public and private, yet grounded in ownership. In the contemporary American context, we can safely assume that all space has some degree of ownership, whether it be seen as public when under state, and thus common, ownership;

fully private; or some mix of the two. Collectively used spaces such as parks, shopping malls and corporate plazas are regarded as public, despite their varying degrees of democratic access.

Furthermore, the poles of 'public' and 'private' are abstract neutral characteristics. The consideration of the agora as both a gathering place and a market revealed that no material public space may be pure in its public function. Ownership and control are not good or bad in and of themselves, but may be given value when considered as manifestations of power. Mitchell (2003) argues that the ways in which ownership and control are implemented illuminate 'the processes in which the necessary contestation of privacy and publicity is played out'.⁸

Conflicts over privatization do not occur because of disagreement over goals; presumably, everyone desires safe, sustainable and enjoyable public spaces. Rather, it is the means and ends which are the subjects of disagreement.

We must therefore be aware of the motives which underlie the production of material public spaces.⁹ Carr *et al* (1992) provide a useful collection of motives: *concerns for public welfare*, including the desire to socially condition or reform; *visual enhancement*, which may challenge or reinforce symbolic meanings of space; *environmental enhancement*; *economic development*, by attracting both customers and businesses; and *the public image* of the corporate or governmental patrons. For the last, corporate sponsors desire to project a positive self-image and be regarded as good public citizens, while governmental entities seek to reinforce an image of the city and create 'points of pride'.¹⁰ Underlying all of these motives is the political dimension of empowering individuals and groups while seeking to minimize or manage potential conflicts between them.

Proponents of privatization enounce pragmatic goals: to achieve a higher degree of public safety, deal with decreased public budgets, and benefit from the private sector's record of accountability and effectiveness. Meanwhile, advocates for access and social justice are wary of the private sector's statements about publicness, seeing their democratic rhetoric as simply a means to cloak redevelopment efforts with a sense of legitimacy.

These critics also see the pragmatist position as concealing a sinister normative agenda. They see the making and remaking of public space as a form of social production by dominant actors who seek to reinforce the *status quo* power structures. Limits on public space such as private controls and commercial functions are seen as threats to the American conception of democracy and full participation. This viewpoint is typified by the following statement: "When some people are denied access to certain areas and when different groups are not allowed to interact in public space, then references to ideals of openness, equality and freedom as organizing principles for social life are no longer possible, even as ideals."¹¹ Of course, their own agenda is for a different sort of social conditioning in which the interaction of all strata of society in public spaces will lead to greater mutual understanding and respect.

A TAXONOMY OF MATERIAL PUBLIC SPACES

In order to better define material public spaces, we must develop a neutral taxonomy which takes into account both agendas: one which agitates for social improvement based on the metaphoric ideal of participation; the other which seeks to reproduce dominant structures by normative forms of representation in material terms.

With motive and ownership established, we may now consider public spaces by their respective disciplinary mechanisms: the intended social function as well- or ill-defined; and control, ranging from weak to strong. Social function refers to the formative or normative role the material spaces serve in defining social relations. Spaces with well-defined social functions clearly signal their social and spatial role; spaces with ill-defined social functions are thus more open to appropriation or untended uses. Control refers to the degree to which normative standards and the social functions of space are enforced. Spaces with a high degree of control tend to function more closely in alignment with the dominant functions set for them, hence the public welfare argument for safety through privatization.

Corporate plazas, the subject of much debate over public space, are clear examples of spaces with a well-defined function and strong control. Treated primarily as front yards, they serve a greater

symbolic than functional role. As such, they are policed to deter any activities which might detract from their role as the representation of business's public image. From this arises conflict over the private control of what is considered by some to be public space (since, in principle, anyone may access the space), and others to be a private amenity allowing limited public use, such as arcades in traditional Italian cities.

Civic spaces and major city parks have well-defined functions but weak control. They often serve a symbolic and formative function – to establish the presence of city government, and to provide restorative contact with nature and healthy recreational opportunities. Yet the state's perceived accountability for all citizens discourages overt control of access, leading to conflicts about fairness and equity in the use of public spaces.

Some local parks exhibit the problems of ill-defined function coupled with strong control. Representing a civic resource for a local area, their function is often vague: some sort of recreation, perhaps a historic site. The presence of a strong community who views the park as 'theirs' and enforces their values brings the space into conflict with the civic ideal of open access.

Some apparent exceptions turn out to be examples of the above categories. Community gardens represent a peculiar private use of public space, and often have restrictions on public access. Yet they perform a deliberate social function for the city (gardening is an appropriate, reform-minded activity) while still allowing it to maintain strong control (the space is not misused). Downtown Los Angeles's Pershing Square, named for the Anglo commander of the U.S. force which invaded Mexico, was redesigned by Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta, evidencing a deliberate decision by the city to embrace – and thus negate the threat of – a significant political and cultural entity.

Most revealing, however, are public spaces with ill-defined functions and weak controls. Often disused or marginal spaces, they sometimes become public 'spaces of last resort' when marginal populations, having no place else to go, take them for their own purposes. This claiming of public space overwhelms the state's control mechanisms, and

their continued presence forces accommodation or action by the dominant power structure.

Following the closure in the late 1980s of the Allen Parkway public housing complex in Houston, members of the local Vietnamese immigrant community established market gardens in open spaces between the buildings; this activity was allowed to continue until the razing of the site. A longer term example from the European squatting movement is the establishment of the counterculture enclave of Christiania in a disused military barracks in Copenhagen. Established in 1971, Christiania perseveres today and has been popularly accepted (or tolerated) as a part of the city fabric. It should be noted that these examples must be distinguished from ghettos, which represent spaces where strong control but ill-defined civic function serve well to deliberately isolate marginal populations.

RESOLVING THE DESIGNERS' CONUNDRUM

The intent of this article is to examine the problems of the debate over the privatization of public space in order to help resolve the designer's conundrum of being caught between competing claims. One new understanding is of the distinction between the political realm of the public sphere and material spaces which make those processes manifest. A second is of the existence of multiple publics, especially when the production of space is viewed through a critical lens of power. These understandings suggest that the public sphere's value lies not simply in mutual reform: the assimilation of the marginal and building respect for differences within the dominant. Rather, they serve to reframe our view of material public spaces as sites which serve as agonistic counterpoints and material markers in the long view of the democratic process.

We may now consider the strategies available to designers, particularly those of social justice orientation. One strategy is *accommodation*, making clearly defined spaces for multiple publics to coexist. Sleeping in public, for example, can be seen as a profound act of trust, and the problem may lie not in the fact that someone is asleep on a bench, but rather that there are not enough benches for everyone to feel comfortable. It may be illuminating to reconsider our mental picture

of the sleeper as an office worker rather than a homeless person. The work of landscape architect Walter Hood is instructive: his designs for public parks include spaces for different park uses as well as the variety of users he observes on site¹². He defines his strategy as improvisation, juxtaposing distinct elements with one another in a reference to jazz compositions. Essential to his project is reframing through language; a 'beer garden' hints at the popular German definition, but is meant to accommodate those with drinks in paper bags.

A second strategy is to use *participatory processes* to challenge power relations. Participatory processes seek to formalize inclusionary decision making. Rather than present information ("the bulldozers will arrive tomorrow"), those with power are challenged to provide access to the traditionally excluded. While the goal of participatory processes is full inclusion in the determination *whether* to take action, they are more often used as a democratic counterpoint to decisions already taken by opening the question of *how* to act – often the designers' focus - to public discussion.

The strategies of accommodation and participatory processes assume that designers are in a privileged position on the 'inside', even as they may be playing a subversive or empowering role. The identification of *spaces of last resort*, those spaces claimed by marginal or 'outside' groups, most often without the formal help of designers, presents a new 'site' of opportunity outside of conventional power structures.

Shane (2005) describes these types of spaces as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".¹³ Applying Foucault's concept of heterotopias to urbanism, he describes the value and function of these "contained sites of difference" as provoking change within the dominant structure¹⁴.

Applying this concept to our desire to relieve designers of their burden, we see that the spaces of last resort serve two important functions. First, they accommodate difference by creating material spaces in which alternative forms of citizenship and identity may be realized, and thereby entered into the public conversation. Secondly, the

establishment of these physical spaces provides a symmetrical participatory footing for those on the outside because their claims are, in essence, the same as the isolation and fortification of the dominant class.

Claims from those on the social and cultural margins may be enacted in the spaces of last resort, providing material affirmation of ethnic and cultural identities. They embody a viable critical perspective on established structures, and through the material and metaphorical space they create serve as catalysts for urban change.

The designer's conundrum in the debate over the privatization of public space is that they are caught between with a metaphorical ideal of democratic participation and a vision of material space. By framing public spaces as the material artifacts of an evolving contestation over the image of the city, mediated by the public decision-making mechanism of democracy, we are able to identify a vital role for designers through accommodation, participatory processes, and engagement with the spaces of last resort. While design alone cannot resolve the conflicts inherent in democracy, designers make a critical contribution through the production of the material public spaces vital to the process of democracy. While the spaces of last resort usually emerge initially without the aid of designers, recognizing their value as conceptual and physical counter-sites provides an opportunity for designers to engage multiple publics, deepen democratic processes, and open new avenues for ethical practice.

ENDNOTES

1. Lefebvre, Henri (1991) "The Production of Space"; Blackwell; among other writings
2. Mitchell, Don (2003) "The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space" Guilford Press
3. Deutsche, Rosalind "Democratic Public Space"; p.81, in *The Pragmatist Imagination*, Princeton Architectural Press; New York.
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5. Fraser, Nancy (1992). "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Craig Calhoun, ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

6. *ibid*, p. 213
7. Mouffe, Chantal. (2000) "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism", Political Science Series #72, Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna.
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10. *ibid*
11. Caldiera, Teresa (2000) "The Making and Unmaking of Democratic Spaces"; p. 233, in *The Pragmatist Imagination*, Princeton Architectural Press; New York.
12. Walter Hood (1997), "Urban Diaries"; Spacemaker Press, Washington, D.C.
13. Michel Foucault (1964) "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", 1964; quoted in Shane, *Urbanism*
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