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Public Space
and Private Life

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Public Space and Private Life: Blurring the Boundaries

This investigation originated in my dissatisfaction with a critical position that emerged in architectural discourse a few years ago. Critics and historians began to see multiple versions of the theme park in the increasingly spectacular and centralized zones of leisure and consumption – gentrified shopping streets, massive shopping malls, festival market-places. According to Michael Sorkin, one of the primary theorists in this arena, these ersatz and privatized places of the city – pseudopublic spaces – were distinguished by consumption, surveillance, control, and endless simulation. I include my own work among this body of criticism; I contributed a chapter concluding that the entire world had become a gigantic shopping mall to Sorkin's book Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space.¹

What concerned me more than the emerging theme-park sensibility as depicted in these studies was part of the book's subtitle, 'The End of Public Space.' This summarizes a fear repeated by many other critics, urbanists, and architects; in his essay in Sorkin's book, Mike Davis expresses alarm at the 'destruction of any truly democratic urban spaces.'² It is easy to find evidence to support this argument. Los Angeles, for example, is often cited as an extreme demonstration of the decline of public space. The few remaining slices of traditional public space (for example, Pershing Square, historically the focus of the downtown business district, which was recently redesigned by Ricardo Legorreta) are usually deserted, while Citywalk, the simulated cityscape, shopping, and entertainment center collaged from different urban elements by MCA and Universal Studio, is always jammed with people.

The existence and popularity of these commercial public places is used to frame a pervasive narrative of loss that contrasts the current debasement of public space with golden ages and golden sites – the Greek agora, the coffeehouses of early modern Paris and London, the Italian piazza, the

town square. The narrative nostalgically posits these as once vital sites of democracy where, allegedly, cohesive public discourse thrived, and inevitably culminates in the contemporary crisis of public life and public space, a crisis that puts at risk the very ideas and institutions of democracy itself.

It is hard to argue with the symptoms these writes describe, but I disagree with the conclusions they draw. This perception of loss originates in extremely narrow and normative definitions of both 'public' and 'space' that derive from insistence on unity, desire for fixed categories of time and space, and rigidly conceived notions of private and public. Seeking a single, all-inclusive public space, these critics mistake monumental public spaces for the totality of public space. In this respect, critics of public space closely echo the conclusions of social theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Sennett, whose descriptions of the public sphere share many of the same assumptions.³ Habermas describes the public sphere as overwhelmed by consumerism, the media, and the state, while Sennett laments in his book very title 'the fall of public man.' The word 'man' highlights another key assumption of this position: an inability to conceive of identity in any but universalizing terms. Whether as universal man, citizen, consumer, or tourist, the identified subject posit a normative condition of experience.

Not surprisingly, the political implications that follow from the overwhelmingly negative assessments of the narrative of loss are equally negative. Implicit is a form of historical determinism that suggests the impossibility of political struggle against what Mike Davis calls 'inexorable forces.'⁴ The universal consumer becomes the universal victim, helpless and passive against the forces of capitalism, consumerism, and simulation. This tyranny is compounded by the lack of a clear link between public space and democracy. The two are assumed to be closely connected, but exact affinities are never specified, which makes it even more difficult to imagine political opposition to the mall or theme park.

This universalization, pessimism, and ambiguity led me to seek an alternative framework – a new way of conceptualizing public space and a new way of reading Los Angeles. This essay represents an account of my attempts to rethink

our conceptions of 'public,' 'space,' and 'identity.' The investigation revealed to me a multiplicity of simultaneous public activities in Los Angeles that are continually redefining both 'public' and 'space' through lived experience. In vacant lots, sidewalks, parks, and parking lots, these activities are restructuring urban space, opening new political arenas, and producing new forms of insurgent citizenship.

Nancy Fraser's article 'Rethinking the Public Sphere' provided an important starting point for my quest.⁵ Her central arguments clarify the significant theoretical and political limitations of prevailing formulations of 'public'. Fraser acknowledges the importance of Jürgen Habermas's characterization of the public sphere as an arena of discursive relations conceptually independent of both the state and the economy, but she questions many of his assumptions about the universal, rational, and noncontentious public arena.

Habermas links the emergence of the 'liberal model of the liberal bourgeois public sphere' in early modern Europe with the development of nation-states in which democracy was represented by collectively accepted universal rights and achieved via electoral politics. This version of the public sphere emphasizes unity and equality as ideal conditions. The public sphere is depicted as a 'space of democracy' that all citizens have the right to inhabit. In this arena, social and economic inequalities are temporally put aside in the interest of determining a common good. Matters of common interest are discussed through rational, disinterested, and virtuous public debate. Like the frequently cited ideal of Athenian democracy, however, this model is structured around significant exclusions. In Athens, participation was theoretically open to all citizens, but in practice the majority of the population – women and slaves – were excluded; they were not 'citizens.' The modern bourgeois public sphere also began by excluding women and workers: women's interests were presumed to be private and therefore part of the domestic sphere, while workers' concerns were presumed to be merely economic and therefore self-interested. Middle-class and masculine modes of public speech and behavior, through the required rational deliberation and rhetoric of disinterest, were privileged and defined as universal.

Recent revisionist histories, notes Fraser, contradict this idealized account, demonstrating that nonliberal, nonbourgeois public spheres also existed, producing their own definitions and public activities in a multiplicity of arenas.⁶ For example, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, middle-class women organized themselves into a variety of exclusively female volunteer groups for the purposes of philanthropy and reform based on private ideals of domesticity and motherhood. Less affluent women found access to public life through the workplace and through associations including unions, lodges, and political organizations such as Tammany Hall. Broadening the definition of public to encompass these 'counterpublics' produces a very different picture of the public sphere, one founded on contestation rather than unity and created through competing interests and violent demands as much as reasoned debate. Demonstrations, strikes, riots, and struggles over such issues as temperance and suffrage reveal a range of discursive sites characterized by multiple publics and varied struggles between contentious concerns.

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Fraser's description of multiple publics, contestation, and the redefinition of public and private can be extended to the physical realm of public space. First, these ideas suggest that no single physical environment can represent a completely inclusive space of democracy. Like Habermas's idealized bourgeois public sphere, the physical spaces often idealized by architects – the agora, the forum, the piazza – were constituted by exclusion. Where these single publics are construed as occupying and exemplary public space, the multiple counterpublics that Fraser identifies necessarily require and produce multiple sites of public expression. These spaces are partial and selective in response to the limited segments of the population they serve from among the many public roles that individuals play in urban society.

In order to locate these multiple sites of public expression, we need to redefine our understanding of 'space.' Just as Nancy Fraser looked beyond the officially designated public to discover the previously hidden counterpublics of

women and workers, we can identify another type of space by looking beyond the culturally defined physical realms of home, workplace, and institution. I call this new construction 'everyday space.' Everyday space is the connective tissue that binds daily lives together, amorphous and so persuasive that it is difficult even to perceive. In spite of its ubiquity, everyday space is nearly invisible in the professional discourses of the city. Everyday space is like everyday life the 'screen on which society projects its light and its shadow, its hollows and its planes, its power and its weakness.'⁷

In the vast expanses of Los Angeles, monumental, highly ordered, and carefully designed public spaces like Pershing Square or Citywalk punctuate the larger and more diffuse space of everyday life. Southern California's banal, incoherent, and repetitive landscape of roads is lined with endless strip malls, supermarkets, auto-repair facilities, fast-food outlets, and vacant lots that defeat any conceptual or physical order. According to Lefebvre these spaces are like everyday life: 'trivial, obvious but invisible, everywhere and nowhere.' For most Angelenos, such space constitute and everyday reality of infinitely recurring commuting routes and trips to the supermarket, dry cleaner or video store. The sites for multiple social and economic transactions, these mundane places serve as primary intersections between the individual and the city.

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The riots [of 1992, eds.] underlined the potent ability of everyday spaces to become, however briefly, places where lived experience and political come together. This realm of public life lies outside the domain of electoral politics or professional design, representing a bottom-up rather than top-down restructuring of urban space. Unlike normative public paces, which produce the existing ideology, these spaces help to overturn the status quo. In different areas of the city, generic space become specific and serve as public arenas where debates and struggles of economic participation, democracy, and the public assertion of identity take place. Without claiming to represent the totality of public space, these multiple and simultaneous activities construct and reveal an alternative logic of public space.

Woven into the patterns of everyday life, it is difficult even to discern these places as public space. Trivial and commonplace, vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards, parks, and parking lots are begin claimed for new uses and meanings by the poor, the recently immigrated, the homeless, and even the middle class. These spaces exist physically somewhere in the junctures between private, commercial, and domestic. Ambiguous and unstable, they blur our established understandings of these categories in often paradoxical ways. They contain multiple and constantly shifting meanings rather than clarity of function. In the absence of a distinct identity of their own, these spaces can be shaped and redefined by the transitory activities they accommodate. Unrestricted by the dictates of built form, they become venues for the expression of new meanings through the individuals and groups who appropriate the spaces for their own purposes. Apparently empty of meaning, they acquire constantly changing meanings – social, aesthetic, political, economic – as users reorganize and reinterpret them.

Temporally, everyday spaces exist in between past and future uses, often with a no-longer-but-not-yet-their-own status, in a holding pattern of real-estate values that might one day rise. The temporary activities that take place there also follow distinct temporal patterns. Without fixed schedules, they produce their own cycles, appearing, reappearing, or disappearing within the rhythms of everyday life. Use and activity vary according to the seasons, vanishing in winter, born again in spring. They are subject to changes in the weather, days of the week, and even time of day. Since they are usually perceived in states of distraction, their meanings are not immediately evident but unfold through the repetitious acts of everyday life.

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This brings us back to the question that started this investigation: how can public space be connected with democracy? Individual garage sales might not in themselves generate a new urban politics, but the juxtapositions, combinations, and collisions of people, places and activities ... create a new condition of social fluidity that begins to break down the separate, specialized, and hierarchical structures of everyday

life in Los Angeles. Local yet also directed to anyone driving or passing by, these unexpected intersections may possess the liberatory potential that Henri Lefebvre attributes to urban life. As chance encounters multiply and proliferate, activities of everyday space may begin to dissolve some of the predictable boundaries of race and class, revealing previously hidden social possibilities that suggest how the trivial and marginal might be transformed into a kind of micropolitics.

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The public sites where these struggles occur serve as evidence of an emerging but not yet fully comprehensible spatial and political order. In everyday space, difference between the domestic and the economic, the private and the public, and the economic and the political are blurring. Rather than constituting the failure of public space, change, multiplicity, and contestation may in fact constitute its very nature. In Los Angeles, the materialization of these new public spaces and activities, shaped by lived experience rather than built space, raises complex political questions about the meaning of economic participation and citizenship. By recognizing these struggles as the germ of an alternative development of democracy, we can begin to frame a new discourse of public space, one no longer preoccupied with loss but instead filled with possibility.

Notes

1. Michael Sorkin (ed.), Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space (New York, Hill and Wang, 1990).
2. Mike Davis, 'Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space,' in Sorkin, Variations on a Theme Park, p.155.
3. See Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1989); and Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York, Vintage Books, 1974).
4. Davis, 'Fortress Los Angeles,' p.154-80.
5. Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,' in Bruce Robbins (ed.), The Phantom Public Sphere (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
6. Joan Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880 (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
7. Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life (London, Verso, 1991).

Colophon

This text is composed of fragments from the chapter 'Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life' that Margeret Crawford contributed to the book *Everyday Urbanism*, John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski (eds.), (New York, The Monacelli Press, 1999), pp. 22-35. It is published at the occasion of the conference 'Constructing the Commons' at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the Delft University of Technology on March 3rd and 4th, 2016, where Margaret Crawford is one of the keynote speakers.

Constructing the Commons

The conference is part of the project 'Constructing the Commons', which is organized by the Chair of Methods and Analysis of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the TU Delft. This project is initiated at the occasion of the visiting professorship of Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of the Tokyo based architectural office Atelier Bow-Wow. The project investigates the commons from an architectural point of view, first as tangible architectural and urban figures, and second as the rituals and politics of co-operation that articulate architectural projects.

Organization

Visiting Professors Atelier Bow-Wow,
Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto
Chair of Methods and Analysis, Tom Avermaete
and Hans Teerds
With the help of Soscha Monteiro de Jesus

Registration

If you wish to attend the conference, register on www.constructingthecommons.com

Contact

For more information on the project and conference 'Constructing the Commons', please visit our website: www.constructingthecommons.com or contact Hans Teerds: p.j.teerds@tudelft.nl

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