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WOMEN RECLAIMING THE CITY

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON URBANISM, ARCHITECTURE, AND PLANNING

Chapter 20

EVERYDAY URBANISM

Public Spaces and Beyond

Margaret Crawford with Jennifer Mack

In 2014 Tigran Haas invited me to a conference in Buenos Aires dedicated to public space.[1] This event was the origin of this lecture and subsequent lectures I have given about contemporary public space debates. Seeing a large number of professed and professional "experts" present their concepts of public space led me to reconsider what public space means in both its narrowest and broadest senses. To me, their presentations pointed out the enormous gap between these public-space designers and advocates and another group, also concerned with public space; activists seeking social justice in space. This led me to try to span this gap by comparing the history and current practices of public space design to larger issues of spatial justice.

The Buenos Aires conference brought together several groups of people claiming expertise in public space design, including The Project for Public Spaces, many New Urbanist designers, and employees of Jan Gehl Architects. Their presentations were remarkably similar in both their designs and their assertions. They repeated slogans such as "our work is beneficial for all," "new urbanist streets are designed for people," and "public spaces should be comfortable, engaging and sociable." Their projects featured pedestrianized streets, sidewalk cafes, bicycle lanes, farmers markets, and plazas with renderings full of happy people. I call this approach "feel-good" public space. If the designers' goal is to design nice public spaces, this is what they get paid to do, so they are simply doing their job. What alarms me, however, is that their discourse now dominates discussions on public space in arenas far beyond professional practice. For example, UN Habitat which has partnered with The Project for Public Spaces to develop public spaces globally. More than thirty-nine countries from Argentina to Kazakhstan to Zambia have hired Jan Gehl to redesign their public places in the image of Copenhagen. And Gehl just opened an office in my own hometown, San Francisco (Gehl n.d.).

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1 Future of Places Conference, sponsored by the Ax:son Johnson Foundation, held in Buenos Aires, September 1, 2014.

nature of what could be considered public. Their actions significantly redrew the boundaries between private and public. The 1960 sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, where activists occupied stools at a lunch counter waiting to be served, made the important claim that public laws against discrimination should prevail even in the private spaces of commerce. Other protests transformed buses, sidewalks, streets and even the Washington Mall into discursive sites where the physical presence of large numbers of people assorted demands for equal citizenship.

This is a very different approach to public space than that of Jacobs, a much broader idea based on contestation to achieve rights. Yet, Jacobs's ideas have endured, becoming foundational to "feel-good" public space rhetoric. Adopting her ideas without recognizing the omissions and exclusions embedded within them, it becomes easy to believe that public spaces are for everybody, that they bring people together and that providing public space automatically fosters equality and democracy. But reducing highly diverse populations to a single universal group of users ignores the reality of the American society. Ignoring the fact that many whites automatically associate Black people with danger and criminality, and Latinos with gangs and illegal immigration, allows racial tensions, when they emerge, to become a problem to be solved rather than a fundamental condition of American life.

What happens when you remove race and ethnicity from public space discourse? One outcome is Michael Bloomberg's New York. Michael Bloomberg served as mayor of New York from 2002 to 2013, and was so popular that voters changed the law to give him a third term. Bloomberg initiated widely acclaimed urban planning and public space projects. His initiatives demonstrate the absences and inequities contained in this model. The Bloomberg administration added bike lanes, closed off streets to make pedestrianized zones, and added street furniture and many urban amenities. Amanda Burden, the city's planning commissioners, a close associate of the mayor, was a direct link to Jane Jacobs and earlier public space advocates such as William H. Whyte (Digital n.d.). With a background in animal behavior, Burden accepted Jacobs and Whyte's environmental determinism as central to her understanding of the ways that spaces shape human interaction. Under her direction, the city legalized sidewalk cafés, oversaw the design of corporate plazas, redeveloped the waterfront, added esplanades and parks, and accomplished numerous streetscape improvements, including such high-profile projects as the High Line, primarily in Manhattan. Burden's policies meshed with those of Janette Sadik-Khan, the city's transportation commissioner. In 2007, Sadik-Khan hired Jan Gehl to reimagine New York city's streets for pedestrians and cyclists. His work directly informed her new urban planning and design policies and projects. These made major changes, discouraging commuting by car by installing three hundred miles of bike lanes and closing parts of Broadway to traffic to install new pedestrian plazas with tables and chairs (Peteritas 2013; *New York* 2008; Project n.d.).

But those who praise these new urban improvements rarely mention another signature Bloomberg public space initiative: Stop and Frisk. Still controversial, this policy allowed the New York Police Department to stop, question, and search any suspicious pedestrian. In 2011, police stopped nearly 700,000 people, nearly all Black or Latino men. Most of these stops occurred in boroughs far away from Manhattan's new public spaces. To these citizens, literally being on the sidewalk made them into potential criminals. The wide use and Bloomberg's continuing defense of Stop and Frisk demonstrates how easily "feel-good" public spaces coexist with polices that essentially deny the right to be in public to large numbers of the public. In fact, the policy was intended to represent safety to some publics at the expense of others. Although the Bloomberg administration claimed that the policy improved public safety, in fact it produced few arrests. The public spaces created by "Stop and Frisk" are the literal opposites of "feel-good" public spaces,

since, according to psychologists, they produced symptoms of stress, anxiety, and, in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder in those who were stopped.[5]

In response to the disparities between these two concepts of public space, I want to introduce another, more expansive concept of public space, focusing on its connection to actual issues of democracy, rights, and social justice. I have identified six rights that I consider to be fundamental to reconceptualizing public spaces not as orchestrated safety and conflict-free zones but as central sites for ongoing struggles by different publics to obtain the right to public space.

The Right to Access

"Stop and Frisk" is just one demonstration of the fact that, although multiple laws in the United States formally acknowledge universal access to public space, this law is not observed in many American public spaces, and the actual content of public space is not universal. In particular African American and Latino men occupy far more restricted public spaces than other races. For them, behavior that is deemed normal for others becomes questionable and even threatening. A series of events beginning with the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man, in Ferguson, Missouri, followed by a succession of similar police killings of Black people mobilized demonstrations around the country. These incidents, and the lack of punishment for the police involved made it very clear how access to public space depends on your race. These repeated events led to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which currently dominates public discussions in the United States, along with dramatic demonstrations. These protests create an entire cycle of activities in and about public space, beginning with events in public space that are then publicized through news reports, which then become the motivation for other public space events such as demonstrations and protests, which are then further publicized. BLM is clearly a struggle about the right to public space that uses public space to demand the right and for African Americans to exist in public space. Discussions of unequal access to public space have expanded further. After incidents where a white woman called the police to report African Americans barbecuing in the park, a Starbucks employee reported two Black men waiting for a friend, and many others, CNN compiled a list of all the ordinary activities that led white people to report them, titling it "Living while Black" (Griggs 2018).

These events dramatically highlight the unequal public status of African Americans and clearly demonstrate that Black people do not have the automatic rights to public space guaranteed by law but, instead, have to prove that they belong there. Black Lives Matter doesn't mean that other lives don't but simply asks that Black people have the same spatial rights as other groups. Any discussion of public space needs to confront this fact. It is not easy or painless but as long as African Americans remain unsafe in public space, the right to real access needs to be in the forefront of any discussion of public space.

The Right to Difference

The flip side of the right to access and closely connected to it is the right to be different in public space, allowing different publics to claim public space with their specific identities rather than part of a larger generic public. If white people perceive a single Black body as threatening, congregations of these bodies are even more alarming. Beyoncé's 2016 halftime show at the 2016 Super Bowl, which made explicit references to Black Power, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther

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5 On August 11, 2013, Federal judge Shira Scheindlin declared that Bloomberg's "Stop and Frisk" policy was unconstitutional (Goldstein 2013; NYCLU n.d.; Rivas 2014).

Party, generated national controversy. Protests included an anti-Beyoncé rally. Trump advisor Rudy Giuliani, expressed outrage that she would use the Superbowl as a venue for racially specific performance (Rogers 2016). A more extreme example is Freaknik, a spring break gathering of college students from historically Black colleges in Atlanta. This yearly social event, attracting large numbers of young Black people, caused a moral panic to break out in Atlanta. Alarmed citizens demanded a police presence that became increasingly oppressive with numerous arrests for simply being present. Finally, the restrictions became so overwhelming that the event just died, to the satisfaction of the city, the police, and large numbers of white residents. Comparing Freaknik with other spring break events around the country, typically regarded as "kids letting off steam," makes it clear that gatherings of large numbers of minorities in public inevitably produces alarm. Even the symbolic presence of otherness is disturbing and often punished. Tagging is always associated with minority youth and often, incorrectly, with gang activity. Many people define it as an extremely troubling transgression of public space. Signs in other languages are sometimes seen as indicating an invasion. In Asian areas in the San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles, cities outlawed signs in Chinese without English translations or Roman lettering. The right to difference acknowledges that different publics exist and they have the right to be different in public and to represent that difference. Although a person's understanding of public space is clearly linked with their identity, "feel-good" designers consistently ignore this, part of their belief in the universality of their own concepts.

The Right to Participate

This right ensures that citizens take part in creating public spaces. Public space advocates like Jan Gehl claim to be "people centered" but their relationship with the users of public space remains paternalistic, emphasizing expert knowledge obtained though data collection rather than collaboration. According to Sherry Arnstein's famous "Ladder of Citizen Participation," even the most participatory "placemaking" methods such as surveys, public inquiries, and neighborhood meetings rank very low in terms of participation (Arnstein 1969).[6] Arnstein sees them as "tokenism," using consultation to disguise top-down plans that actually maintain power. Democratizing public spaces would require completely new planning and design processes. To satisfy Arnstein's highest levels of participation would require partnerships that allow citizens, public officials and planners and designers to negotiate or even to offer citizens full control. The last may seem implausible but a Danish example, the autonomous "free town" of Christiania in Copenhagen, comes close to satisfying her criteria. In spite of ongoing struggles over outside control, the settlement, now forty years old, remains self-managed (http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/2013/09/christiana-forty-years-copenhagen. Accessed Dec. 3, 2014). Adjacent to Jan Gehl's carefully choreographed pedestrian streets, its' anarchic spaces suggest that genuine participation is likely to produce multiple and highly differentiated versions of public space. At a smaller scale, places like self-built skateboard parks hint at the possibilities of public spaces generated by their own users.

The Right to Livelihoods

This right acknowledges the function of public space as an economic space and as a workplace. Numerous occupations from beggars to street performers to day laborers use public space as their main economic venue. All of them have to struggle to establish their rights to pursue their livelihoods. Their success varies widely from place to place. Food vendors are a key example.

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6 Arnstein points out that the ladder is oversimplified and real situations of top-down/bottom-up interactions are far more complex.

In New York food vending is legal, but licenses are limited, so police still harass, and fine, the large number of unlicensed vendors. Los Angeles vendors have struggled for more than twenty years to finally legalize widespread street vending. But even though laws no longer criminalize them, an estimated ten thousand vendors have not received permits for legal vending. Vendors are highly responsive to their customers. In New York, the second rain starts, you can buy a five-dollar umbrella on the street. In Los Angeles, popular fruit vendors get rave reviews on Yelp (Vallianatos 2014).

Another important sidewalk-economic activity are day laborers lined up for casual work. Through the concerted efforts of advocates and their own efforts, they have managed to change their identity from loiterers who should be arrested to a legitimate part of the labor force of the city. The connections between vendors, day laborers, and human rights are obvious. Since most of them are immigrants, supporting their rights is closely connected to larger issues of race, ethnicity, and social justice. As users of public sidewalks, they need to defend their rights to public space by expanding its legitimate functions to define them as workers and economic citizens rather than loiters or vagrants.

The Right to Make Demands on the State and the Economy

This important right is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution and it constitutes a central right in most democracies. It can range from picketing employers for wages or working condition to the many protests and the enormous demonstrations that have taken place over the years. At the Buenos Aires conference, I was surprised that no one mentioned Occupy, surely one of the most potent uses of public space in recent years. In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement began in lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park. Soon after, protestors took over public spaces in key locations across the country to raise awareness of growing economic inequality. Highly organized around consensus-based decision-making, the occupation galvanized public discussion and debate, introducing new concepts such as the 1 percent and the 99 percent into the public vocabulary. Events in the physical spaces of the protest were amplified by print, broadcast, and digital media to a broad audience, prompting a national response. However, in spite of its public significance, the occupation also demonstrated the limits of public space. After several months, city governments across the country evicted the protesters in all of the publicly owned sites. Ironically, Zuccotti Park survived the longest because it was privately owned. This made it clear that the right to public protest was clearly bounded by legal restrictions on time and space (Barron and Moynihan 2011). Similarly, current BLM demonstrators have brought hundreds of thousands into the streets in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Occupy, such public appearances have produced national discussions not only about issues of the rights of Black people in public spaces, policing, and racism but also about the rights of protesters to demand change in public places. Rather than discussing the causes generating the protests, many political figures chose to focus on the demonstrations themselves, curtailing, at least rhetorically, the right of citizens to make demands on the state.

The Right to Make Your Own Spaces

This right, often discussed as "the right to the city," allows people to create the spaces they want and the spaces they need rather than simply consuming spaces that others have created for them. This kind of agency changes them from consumers to producers of public spaces. If we look around us, there are numerous examples of such bottom-up public spaces. Such efforts and spaces are often invisible since they are temporary, depending on borrowing rather than

owning space. Their transitory nature represents a new attitude towards the use of owned space. In spite of their ephemerality, these spaces can potentially create the most effective places for different publics. In Oakland, California, skateboarders constructed their own skate park at night under a freeway overpass, bringing in concrete by hand. It became a popular venue for more than ten years before the state transportation authority destroyed it. Ron Finley was fined when he decided to plant flowers in the curbside strip outside of his house, which is owned by the city. Outraged, he created an entire program for neighborhood kids, including a popular TED Talk, to promote what he called "gangsta" gardening. Guerilla gardening, when people take over and garden in empty spaces, has become a widespread activity (Finley n.d.).

A particularly transformative example is the "Buddha of Oakland." A resident who lived near an empty area in a low-income, high-crime area in California was disturbed by all the trash dumped there. At a hardware store he bought a stone Buddha and glued it to the curb, hoping that, somehow it would stop the dumping. His Vietnamese neighbors saw it and began to use it as a shrine. They built a platform around it, then a roof, then decorated it with offerings. After they started using it for worship, not only is there no more dumping, but crime has also decreased in the area, drug dealers have left, and many different people in the neighborhood stop by to spend time there. This is a particularly exciting and inspirational example of the way in which people can collectively make their own public spaces in unexpected ways (Lewis 2017).

I hope I have demonstrated the centrality of public space in the struggle for greater equality and social justice and the ways in which incomplete and inequitable concepts of public space undermine this project. In order to realize the rights I have outlined as definitions of public space, we need to move beyond just feeling good in public. Public spaces can be an important part of democracy, but only if we redefine our current practices, understand them in their broadest sense, and continue to struggle to realize them.

Jennifer Mack, KTH, Respondent

Thank you so much. I want to start by saying that Margaret was my dissertation advisor. I have known her for a long time and she has been very influential on my own work. So, it's a pleasure to comment on her talk. Thank you for this much needed perspective on how we think about public space and how we can think about inclusion and exclusion in public spaces not only in American examples but also in the Swedish context and beyond. The examples that you have shown are very relevant for the discussions that we have about social relations in relation to design here in Sweden today not only these ideas about design and "feel good" public space but also similar ideas such as the "walking city" or "the pedestrian city" that are very much in play and in discussion today. Our terms require rethinking in relation to questions of equality. What you are showing here is how this discourse also becomes a mode of practice for many designers. Such normative ideas can easily become powerful and important. In the case of the designers that you discussed that they see publics and public spaces as based on specific best-practices for creating "feel good cities." Yet these urban spaces and public spaces are not open to everyone. I have three questions or three themes that the talk raised for me.

The first is the idea of understanding publics and how we think about equality. Many people in this room are designers or future designers. How do we think about equality and how do we get designers to think about what Nancy Fraser called "counterpublics"? We have also heard from Michael Warner about alternative publics that are excluded when people talk about something called "the public." Maybe we can simply call them "other publics" that are nonetheless part of

a larger public. How do we get designers to think more about other or alternative publics, counterpublics, as an integrated part of this larger idea of the public "at large"? In my own work, I've been wondering for a long time: how do we design for social inclusion where everyone is equal, but for difference at the same time? I think it's a very difficult issue and question because, as you have shown, when you design for equality—as people like Jane Jacobs seemed to want to do—it's never equal for everyone. There are different publics with different needs. I wanted to start with a question about practitioners. How can they think through the issues of equality and inequality in their work? Your presentation has so clearly shown that they have not successfully done so in the past. It's a very big question, but I think it's something that your presentation raises that is very relevant for many people in this room.

One of my other questions is about participation because it is one of the trickiest issues for practitioners. It's something that I have been looking at a lot in my own work. I like it so much in theory, but then when I look at how it's practiced, I find a lot to criticize and critique. For instance, I looked at one ambitious attempt to include participatory planning in a landscape design project intended to address the lack of inclusion of women and young girls in a public space. The idea was that a participatory process with young girls would somehow resolve this spatial imbalance. But the landscape architect designing the project was only able to recruit eight girls to participate. She ultimately redesigned the entire park based on conversations that she had with these girls, and radically changed her design based on those conversations. Now the park is well used and is definitely operating more successfully than before, but, even so, I wonder about the validity of that kind of participation. Here in Sweden, participation is often called *medborgardialog*, citizen dialogue. It's interesting to ask what we mean by that term, or that practice. In my work, I've also looked at participatory processes historically and have seen how they've been interpreted in very different ways. You can say participation and mean an eighteen-month process where they have an office open every evening to collect ideas from residents who can stop by anytime, or you can mean three conversations that you had with eight girls on a couple of occasions. How do we deal with those qualitative differences? You mentioned Sherry Arnstein who asked how to avoid tokenism, or as she calls it "consultation" and "informing." What does participation need to include, and what would a more inclusive participatory process look like? Nazem Tahvilzadeh, here at KTH, and Lisa Kings have discussed it as a "neutralizing" process, where participation is just a forum where you gather information, but without any intention of doing something with the information, or without knowing what to do with it once you have it. This is a key question for our times, for researchers and designers alike. What do we mean by "participation" if we want to really open up our concepts of public space and to think about other kinds of publics in those spaces?

That question raises the third point that I wanted to address today. I was listening to a keynote speech by the anthropologist Shahram Khosravi a few weeks ago. He was talking about the materiality of borders and the idea that borders actually create the idea of the Other. He argued that, even if the material border disappears, the idea of the Other—the prejudices and assumptions that have developed around that materiality—remain in place ideologically and symbolically. I was thinking about this in relation to your talk because there seems to be a similar kind of border between designers and the publics for whom they are designing or with whom they are designing. Often, there is a deep lack of contact between these groups. As you know, I did research in Södertälje, a city outside Stockholm. I found that many of the people working in the planning department would ride the commuter rail from Stockholm to go to their office, which was located under the tunnel across from the train station. From there, they would work on plans for the city but rarely go out into the city. Then, at the end of the day, they would return to Stockholm. They

were interested in my work because I was spending a lot of time out in public in Södertälje, and talking to many people. I found it interesting that contact between designers and publics is so limited. This may be due to budgetary or time constraints, but it's typical of the way that planning practice is set up and of the methods that planners use. I am wondering how we can get more lived experience into the actual practices of designers. A lot of people are designing behind a "border." They're designing based on assumptions about how other people live or about the idea of "feel good" and what they think that means for the public at large. But they don't know very much about people who are not like themselves or even how to get better information about them. Their limited contact with inhabitants means that their ideas about how people live are folded into the mix of the planning process, but don't necessarily reflect reality. Instead, they may just be ideas that planners already have, based their own positions and experiences. So again, this is a big question, but how do we deal with this problem? How do we get designers to meet people and engage across that "border"? And I don't mean a neocolonial pursuit where you land in the village and just quickly gather information. How do we find ways to have more meaningful dialogues? Many of these projects that don't involve designers may pave the way for understanding these issues and suggesting something new and different.

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