

On Politics and Public Space

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Over the past several decades all major cities have undergone a series of linked yet often contradictory transformations. In response to waves of technological change, globalization and privatization, traditional kinds of urban public space are being eroded or transformed and new models are being created. These changes require re-thinking of the relations of politics to public space. What are the implications for democracy in the proliferation of spaces that couple public access with private control? Can freedom of speech be guaranteed without public space? What are the politics of the blurring boundaries between public and private space? In what follows this relation of public space to democracy is explored through two main dimensions: democratic action in public space and the democratic production of public space.

Urbanism and Democracy

To begin, consider an excavation of some of the language we use to define the city and the urban public realm. The term *City* stems from the Latin *civis*, “citizen”—the city is the “body of citizens.” The citizen is the denizen of public space and shares its root with *civic*, *civil* and *civilized*. You cease to be a *civilian* when you enter the military, because war is essentially un-civilized. The term *Urban* comes from the Latin *urbanus*, meaning *courteous* or *polite*. Courtesy and politeness, like civility, are not matters of friendship so much as peaceful ways of dealing with difference. “Polite” in turn stems from *Polis*, meaning *city*—the city is a place of politics, of policies that are policed. The final term is *public*, which stems from the Latin *publicus*, meaning “belonging to the people.” It shares this root with *publicity*—the public realm is defined by the circulation of news and information. It is where states of affairs become known, where points of view are published and products are advertised. The public realm is where the “public interest” is debated and constructed. The *public* is defined by its opposition to the *private*, which shares its etymology with the *deprived*, the *privy* (secret) and the *privileged*.

So where does all this lead us? One can make too much of etymology, but it can be a useful way of excavating meanings in an era when language is widely used as a form of propaganda and when private development so often claims to serve the “public interest.” These words—*city*, *urban*, *public*—circulate back onto each other to define the public realm as the space of citizenship, a space of civility and politeness—but not necessarily consensus. A comfortable consensus does not require civility; it is characteristic of the closed

community rather than the city. Good cities are multiplicities—places where differences are drawn into the open and mediated by civility. This encounter with difference, as Richard Sennett (1973, 1994) has long argued, is precisely the manner in which we become civilized. The city is the zone where we encounter difference and otherness, where we deal with it in a civilized and democratic manner.

For John Raulston Saul (1997), following Socrates, democracy is based in the capacity to exercise power through active citizenship and public debate. Such debate, however, has become reduced to the formalized propaganda of interests groups, where media images replace arguments and advertising replaces policy. Saul's major villain is “corporatism” —governance through managerial elites who do not participate as citizens because contracts and corporate loyalty forbid it. Such corporatism is rife across both public and private sectors (with a rather nasty strain doing quite well in the universities). Corporatism produces a rather virulent form of self-delusion in which the public and private interest become seemingly identical, and public servants serve the corporate state rather than the public interest.

So what does all this mean for the relationship of democracy to public space? First is the question of democratic action in public space. While the mass media have long been the dominant framework for public debate, civic space retains a key role in enabling the wonderful democratic tradition of “civil disobedience”—literally a form of “public mischief.” Public space as a site for free speech and political resistance has not been replaced by the mass media, but it has been transformed. Below, this theme is explored through several stories about public space under conditions of democratization.

Tiananmen

Tiananmen Square was built from the 1950s as a monument to the revolution of 1948. The vast space was to be a “square of the people”; its open space operated as a metaphor of freedom, the antithesis of the nested enclosures of the Imperial Forbidden City (Dovey 2008: Ch. 6). The center of the square has been dominated since the 1950s by the social realist “Monument to the People's Heroes.” It is etched with an inscription which reads, in part, “Eternal glory to the people's heroes who from 1840 laid down their lives in the many struggles... (for) the freedom and well-being of the people” (Wu 1991). This meaning of the monument as a site of resistance was utilized by the democracy movement throughout the 1980s. The response of authorities was that rallies, speeches and leaflets were banned and behavior was monitored on a grid of surveillance cameras. The people's space became forbidden space. The student protest of 1989 began under the camouflage of grief after the death of a reforming party leader (Hu Yaobang). The mourners who flooded the square soon became part of demonstrations of 200,000, including about 10,000 students who set up camp around the monument. Here the politics of public space can be seen within a framework of strategies and tactics (De Certeau 1984)—authorities frame a situation with a certain strategy, which resisters work within by exploiting its loopholes.

In the lead-up to a much heralded summit meeting between Chinese and Soviet leaders Deng and Gorbachev in May 1989, the number of foreign correspondents in the city brought unheralded access to global

telecommunications. Placards appeared in English to service this global spectacle; the media gaze in turn protected the protestors and built public confidence until numbers in the square reached a million. Gorbachev was hustled into the Great Hall through a rear entry. “I could not figure out who was in charge” he said later. It was an unprecedented loss of face for Chinese leadership. After Gorbachev left, martial law was declared, the press was banned from the square and all satellite links were severed. Electronic walls were constructed, but the telephones and tourists with videotapes went around them. Buoyed by their success, students erected a statue of the “Goddess of Liberty”—loosely modeled on the Western enlightenment figure and the Statue of Liberty. This was probably a tactical blunder since it was portrayed in the media as a direct confrontation of Mao's photograph on Tiananmen Gate, and Mao remained something of a god at that time. In fact it was about 200 meters away across a broad boulevard, but the image was everything.

The final military assault on the square came soon after, and at best estimate about 2,700 people were killed (Brook 1992). What is less well known is that only a small percentage of those killed were students and few if any were within Tiananmen Square. Those planning the assault went to great trouble to avoid violence in the square and negotiated a safe evacuation by the students. While there was a good deal of slaughter on the fringes of the square, the open center and the monument became a relative sanctuary during the bloodbath. Since that time, urban designers have been called in and the monument is now framed with large patches of grass to sanctify and protect it from gatherings. Large signs list the behavior that the people must not engage in, such as speaking, writing, assembling and walking on the grass (Fig. 1). Honoring the people's heroes with flowers now requires five days' notice. The political potency of this monument will not fade quickly.



[Figure 1: Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 2000]

Democracy Monument, Bangkok

The second example took place in Bangkok three years later, in May 1992 (Dovey 2008: ch.7). An all too familiar cycle of a growing democracy being shut down by a military coup led to rallies of over 100,000 people. In this case, a vast moving wave of people walked from the huge open space of Sanam Luang (the Royal Ground) to the modernist boulevard of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, centered on the Democracy Monument. Again the politics of public space needs to be culturally situated: since the 1930s Thailand has been a volatile mix of monarchy, military dictatorship and democracy. Constitutional power remains with the much-loved king, supported by the military. The Democracy Monument (Fig 2) was built in 1939 under a military dictator who was also a fan of Mussolini. The location is in the center of a grand urban boulevard known as the King's Road, so the location is a symbolic disruption to the order of the monarch. Its design is strongly influenced by Italian futurism, combining elements of social realism and art deco with coded references to Buddhism, democracy, militarism and nationalism. The centerpiece is a democratic constitution (the "book" supported on Buddhist bowls) that has always remained an ideal rather than a reality. It was designed to lend legitimacy to the contradictory ideal of a constitutional democracy based in military power—the monument reflects and reveals the contradictions of its time. In its early years, the monument became symbolic of fascism and false democracy. But these meanings changed as the potential of civil disobedience in public space was realized through massive demonstrations, first in 1973 and again in May 1992.



[Figure 2: Democracy Monument, Bangkok]

The early phases on both occasions had a playful sense of carnival as up to 200,000 people stretched along the grand boulevard. The chaos and pollution of the traffic was disrupted and everyday social norms were suspended as people from different classes mixed in a new public space where street theater and dancing mingled with free speech, music and food vendors (Callahan 1998). During the 1992 events, the changing

context of media and communications was crucial. While the military government controlled radio and television, newspapers remained a reliable source of news. Censorship of the electronic press ironically played a role in attracting people to participate in a spectacle—the only way to see the spectacle was to join it.

Middle-class demonstrators also brought a new communications network in the form of mobile phones, often linked through the organization of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), enabling the crowd to both organize and evade police; resistance became organized horizontally rather than hierarchically. These events led to a bloodbath with 50 to 100 people slaughtered, but also to a new round of democratization. The Democracy Monument and its surrounding spaces remain contested—saturated with the symbolism of King and country while haunted by the memories of the dead and the dream of a democratic constitution. Recent demonstrations in Bangkok have brought a new twist as pro-monarchist and anti-democracy demonstrators have focused on other parts of the city, closing down the Prime Minister's Office and airport. The principle remains—the urban framework of authority becomes the stage set for resistance in public space, and symbols and spatial opportunities of that urban setting are exploited through the tactics of resistance.

There is not time here to tell either of these stories in detail, but they speak of an ongoing importance of public space in the struggle for democracy. Genuinely public places, no matter how totalitarian their production may be, always embody a residual potential for democratic public mischief. Here the meaning of “public” as publicity comes into play—public space is free publicity. And issues of democracy in public space are thoroughly geared to mass media. No matter how controlled by corporate or state interests, the media has an insatiable appetite for imagery and the public realm remains a major source of that imagery. Democratic action in public space remains a primary mode of access to the mass media. The virtual space of the mass media both stimulates and transforms political action in public space. In both of these cases the media exposure of the site was necessary to prevent repression, but without the occupation of real space there was no media story. The spectacle becomes an intersection of real and virtual space, akin to what Castells (1997) terms a space of “real virtuality,” which is the primary site for the politics of legitimation in the information age.

Globalization

These stories are from cities where the struggle for democracy has been long and somewhat violent. And they are taking place in a context of a broader decline in civil society and in the power of the nation state. This leads to the second issue foreshadowed earlier—the democratic production of public space in a globalizing world. Globalization seems to me to be both inevitable and potentially beneficial; however, its current development has a range of problematic effects on urban form. The increasing flexibility and mobility of capital investment have stimulated competition among cities to secure a greater share of such investment. This has a major impact on the manner in which urban projects are conceived, designed and approved.

The competition between cities for large-scale urban projects lends power to global developers who extract concessions from city governments, based on the threat of taking their capital elsewhere. Primary concessions

include lowering taxes, making public land available for private control, by-passing planning procedures and agreeing to contractual secrecy. Globalization creates conditions under which cities seeking global investment are asked to suspend processes of democratic participation and to exclude public scrutiny under cover of “commercial-in-secrecy” agreements. If this is achieved then the public interest cannot be debated since these visions of the urban future, their costs and potential benefits remain hidden. Citizenship is impossible because the citizenry are rendered blind.

Such forms of global development can produce highly uneven urban development—polarized landscapes wherein islands of private privilege are juxtaposed with a broader public decay. Tax concessions traded to secure the investment may undermine the tax base needed for high quality urban design in the broader public domain. Large scale global projects often bring an erosion of public space and a tranquilization of public behavior. The spontaneous and authentic diversity of urban public life makes way for a commodified and ersatz version of the same thing. They construct “liminal” spaces—spaces between categories where the boundaries between public and private are deliberately blurred (Zukin 1991). Such projects often produce carnivalesque spectacles wherein commerce masquerades as carnival, consumption as culture, advertising as art. In one sense this is the familiar realm of the private shopping mall writ large in urban space—zones of broad public access under private ownership. Public meanings are coupled with private control in a zone where the ragged, the homeless and the political can be removed without loss of legitimacy to the state. The public interest is signified while the private interest is served, and the myth is constructed that they are identical.

Since globalization undermines local democracy and does so under the veil of commercial secrecy, this undermines the perceived credibility of a democratic state. Being less based on debates, plans or policies, the credibility of political authority needs legitimating imagery. The state then tends to negotiate forms of legitimation into the design of urban projects. These are the postmodern trappings of power and there is nothing new in the best of our architects, landscape architects and urban designers being asked to supply them. Designers are given a highly problematic, if not impossible, task: to reconcile the global/local tensions; to frame “public” space under new forms of private control; and to legitimate political authority in the face of an eroding democracy. And then they must lend their signature, their sense of “distinction” to the project, certifying it an authentic work of art which rises above the imperatives of the market.

On the Move

We now turn briefly to how these issues became manifest in urban form during the 1990s in my home town of Melbourne, where the image of the waterfront was transformed through a series of highly visible urban projects (Dovey 2005). An inner city park was spruced up to become a Formula One racetrack; a half kilometer of river frontage was devoted to a large casino with a row of fireballs exploding on the hour. Architects were called upon to produce the new iconography of the new corporate state and reflect the state slogan “*On the Move*.” Within this framework the design imagination was unleashed in the service of politics, producing some highly innovative work.



[Figure 3: Crown Casino, Melbourne]

While some of what has been built will be of long-term benefit to Melbourne, many of these projects fit the profile outlined above—the erosion of public space; the tranquilization of public life; and the dismantling of democratic control. And many of these projects blur the boundaries between public and private space and public and private interest. Crown Casino, on seven hectares of public waterfront land, was designed and approved in secret. It frames a “quasi-public” waterfront 500 meters long (Fig 3). Planning and urban design under this regime was authoritarian, secretive and often directed towards the private rather than the public interest. And there was a crucial connection between this production of progressive imagery and the decline of democracy. The new designs caught the public imagination and worked their political magic. Those who lamented the various erosions of democracy and public service often pointed to such projects and conceded: “But you've got to admit they get things done.” Democratic planning can indeed stifle both creative imagination and the fast-tracking of new projects, but it also stifles the proliferation of private control over public space.

In an interesting twist to this story, in September 2000 the casino complex served as the host site of a major World Economic Forum (WEF) congress. Attracting global events of this kind was precisely the goal of the waterfront strategy, drawing together global decision-makers and raising the profile of the city. Demonstrations against the forum were globally organized and encouraged by the success of Seattle and Washington demonstrations in broadening the agenda of the WEF. Expecting trouble, Crown sealed the entire complex with a concrete and steel barricade, forming a 17 hectare fortress encompassing the river and surrounding streets. The compound was defended by 2,000 police, encircled by tens of thousands of

demonstrators. The waterfront spectacle then turned inside-out as an informal public carnival of music, costumes and banners enveloped the casino in a festival of protest. In its attempt to provide a global stage for the WEF congress, the casino was effectively closed down and up-staged. Graffiti covered the barricades, and the carnival of demonstrators and police in riot gear produced powerful imagery that the mass media could not resist because of its capital value as media image. The media struggle was clearly won by the demonstrators as global imagery was semantically inverted and the casino became a global spectacle of a very different kind to that envisioned in the place-marketing strategy.

Enfolding Public/Private?

So to what extent does this critique apply to the cities of the current millennium? Is there a case for moving beyond dichotomous conceptions of public versus private space? In this view, with which I have a certain amount of sympathy, urban space must be rethought and reconfigured. What we call the urban “fabric” is not so much a network of public space connecting private projects, but rather a multiplicity of public and private spaces seamlessly enfolded into each other—and the liminal spaces between categories and identities become the most interesting (Dovey 2009). Inspired by philosophers like Deleuze and led by designers like Koolhaas, the city is seen as transformed by new experiences of space and time, new technologies of speed and virtual space (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Koolhaas & Mau 1995). Koolhaas embraces a globalized world of informational economies, virtual realities and space-time compression, which he claims liberates urban design from the constraints of traditional public space. The waves of capital investment that wash through cities are to be “surf” to generate new and liberating architecture and urban form. As a surfer I find this a pretty seductive vision, but I also value the beach as a fundamentally public space. For Koolhaas, the traditional public space is dead and the street becomes primarily a space of transition.

His most complete long-term urban project is the first stage of the Euralille project in northern France. This 12 hectare site is in many ways a wonderful experiment with some very skilled designers operating with highly innovative functional juxtapositions (Fig 4). It brings together a new train station, several apartment buildings, two office towers, a fairly lifeless open space and a shopping mall. There are many lessons from this project, but one of them is just how easily the desire for new forms of public space and public life are converted into little more than new images for the meaning market (Dovey 2008: ch.11). Euralille is highly complicit with the familiar forces eroding and tranquilizing public space, reducing social and political practice in public space to representations to be consumed. The publicity for the project suggests that: “Euralille's public areas are more than just thoroughfares... Artists can perform... in the walkways of the shopping centre... You may come face to face with a clown on your way out of a shop...” But this is the familiar face of the private masquerading as public; commerce as carnival; advertising as art. The major public space of the project was intended to become the setting for new forms of public life. Yet it has become relatively derelict, enlivened only by train passengers towing luggage across it. The only politics involves police keeping a watch over the homeless and local teenagers who live or hang out here. My point here is not to denigrate Koolhaas, whose work I find visually seductive and exciting, yet it is clearly not politically progressive. Koolhaas may “surf” the waves of corporate capital, but these are also waves of privatization and social control.



[Figure 4: Euralille 2008]

Walter Benjamin, that great philosopher of the city, suggests that a primary illusion of modernity is that the “always-the-same” continually recurs in the guise of the “ever-new” (Gilloch 1996:14). This is a lesson that must be learned over and over again. And there is another lesson from Lefebvre (1996) and others—that the new can be created out of the everyday. Public spaces we take for granted as “ever-the-same” can become transformed semantically, formally and functionally. The transformations of meaning in Beijing and Bangkok show how the “ever-new” can be revealed as “ever-the-same” and then transformed again into the “ever-new.”

There can be no conclusion to many of these issues, but a few points of summary. Debates over public and private space are the major cutting edge of urban design theory. By eroding and tranquilizing public space, we are eroding and tranquilizing democracy. Democracy is important, but certainly not sufficient, for the production of a vital public space. And even the most authoritarian and privatized urban spaces (fascist monuments or privatized waterfronts) are available for new appropriations. Vital public space is necessary, but again insufficient, for a sustained democracy. Democracy is based in citizenship, which is anchored and quite literally “embodied” in the flows of everyday life and patterns of behavior (including public mischief) in public space. It is also anchored in the ways urban design constructs meanings and frames certain approved “narratives” about history, society and progress. Urban form cannot generate democracy, but it can help to sustain and reproduce democratic forms of urban life. A vital public realm, with all its tensions, joys and even its public mischief, is the seed bed of democracy. In a democracy, citizens have a right to public space; in Lefebvre's (1996) famous phrase, “the right to the city.” We will all be judged by posterity on our degree of complicity in eroding this right.

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