INTRODUCTION

Space, Place and the City: Emerging Research on Public Space Design and Planning

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Our understanding of urban public space has evolved dramatically in recent decades. On the heels of urban race riots and civil strife in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the social sciences—in particular, the fields of social geography, urban planning and legal studies—began to take a more critical look at the role of space and place in understanding the city. The debate was framed by philosophers like Henri Lefebvre who argued that space should not be merely thought of as a physical place, a neutral container or backdrop for action, but as an entity actively produced by society. How space is produced and experienced, and by whom, became the question of the day. Works by Kevin Lynch (1960), Jane Jacobs (1961) and Gordon Cullen (1961) supported these notions, arguing that the urban environment shapes our behaviour, knowledge and disposition. This produced an unprecedented interdisciplinary interest in critically examining the role of power, race, gender, identity and representation in public space.

Chief among these attempts to theorize social space and its implications for the public sphere was Habermas's theories of communicative rationality, with which he argued that unmediated interaction was vital to advancing social justice in a true democracy (Calhoun, 1992). Although this work offered potential solutions to the growing fissures in urban society, some, including Iris Young (1990), were sceptical of communicative rationality, arguing that such theories assumed a homogeneous, universal 'public'. Instead, Young offered a version of a democratic ideal that emphasized diversity and difference. For her, socially just outcomes could only be achieved by creating universally inclusive spaces that embraced the needs and desires of a diverse citizenry. These truly public spaces encourage social interaction among individuals with diverse interests, opinions and perspectives. Groups and individuals thus assert their right to the city by making themselves directly visible in public space (Fraser, 1990; Németh, 2006).

That public spaces serve social ends is neither surprising nor groundbreaking; after all, urban reformers, city planners and municipal officials since the nineteenth century have claimed that public space serves a number of social and political ends, from public health to cultural assimilation (Schmidt, 2008). What is new, however, is that instead of serving as a means to an end, the production of public space is now interpreted as a normative goal unto itself. Nevertheless, much of this discussion

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has been removed from consideration of actual built space. Critics who lament the loss of public space are often more concerned with the diminution of the public sphere than they are with the reduction of physical space itself (Kohn, 2004). Most argue that public space takes on meaning only insofar as it is the site of the development of the public sphere, while conversely, the public sphere *requires* "the occupation or active creation of public space" in order to have one's claims heard (Blomley, 2001, p. 3). Thus, in order to understand how the social or political meaning of public space is affected by its actual physical environment, there must first be an examination of the context in which our public spaces are created and managed.

Public Space in the Twenty-first Century

Despite the academic discussion, the common perception of public space remains largely uncontested, and the provision of public space enjoys enormous broad based popular support, often from groups and interests that may otherwise be at odds. This should not come as a surprise as publicly accessible space simultaneously serves myriad functions and needs, and is incorporated into a number of planning approaches, from New Urbanism to Smart Growth to economic growth and development schemes, with the understanding that public spaces are necessary to create a safe, viable and sustainable urban environment. Proponents of public spaces argue that 'more is better', citing studies that show that public space (and open space more generally) is directly correlated with adjacent property values, increased physical activity and improved public health levels, especially among youth (RWJF, 2010).

However, recent political and economic shifts taking place in the mid- to late-twentieth century have accelerated changes in the way cities provide and manage public space. Most notably, economic globalization and the increased flexibility and mobility of capital, the rise in telecommunications technology, which allows transactions and communication to take place instantly and on a global scale, and the decrease in federal aid to cities, have all forced business and political leaders to assume an entrepreneurial role in promoting economic growth and expansion (see Logan & Molotch, 1987). In addition, deindustrialization and suburban growth have meant that cities must compete against one another to attract itinerant, or 'footloose', capital investment by making themselves as attractive as possible to potential suitors. Many planning departments now serve primarily as economic development agencies, intent on attracting the top firms and the best and the brightest residents. These fundamental shifts in the political economy of cities have resulted in a transformation in how public space is produced. Many metropolitan area planning and design strategies are organized around growth promotion, amenity creation, ensuring quality of life and providing safe, sanitary, business-friendly downtowns. These strategies often promote visual coherence, spatial order and aesthetic improvements over unmediated social interaction.

As a result, the traditional functions of parks, plazas, sidewalks and atria are frequently challenged by new trends in public space provision and management, and several important trends have emerged. First, the provision and management of public space has become increasingly privatized, with developers, property managers and local business associations taking the lead in providing and maintaining parks, plazas and atriums. Often, cash-strapped municipal govern-ments provide incentives, usually in the form of density bonuses, to the private

sector in exchange for the provision and management of public space. These privatized public spaces include the traditional suburban shopping mall, but also gated communities, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and festival market-places. Partially as a result, hybrid ownership and management regimes have emerged, involving both public and private sectors in complex relationships; exemplary cases include New York City's Bryant Park and Central Park, both owned by the City of New York but managed by the privately-funded Bryant Park Restoration Corporation and the Central Park Conservancy, respectively. Proponents of privately owned or operated spaces argue that the efficiency of the private sector in distributing public goods outweigh any potentially negative social impacts.

Second, planners and designers have placed increased emphasis on securing public spaces, especially after 11 September 2001. A general consensus exists among planners, developers and consultants that publicly accessible spaces must be perceived as safe in order for them to fulfil their potential. Real and perceived safety remains a top concern for the majority of the public, and a number of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have based entire park rehabilitation schemes on developing safer spaces. Usually this method is predicated on the 'eyes on the street' approach espoused by Jane Jacobs (1961). This approach involves not only an active security policy, but also the prioritization of natural surveillance techniques, based on the notion that creating safe spaces involves a critical mass of law-abiding, desirable users who can identify unlawful activities themselves. To attract this critical mass, these schemes rely on extensive programming and event planning.

Third, the increased reliance on the private sector to provide publicly accessible spaces has encouraged the creation of increasingly busy, heavily policed, highly programmed 'festival' spaces centred on the production of a consumption-based environment (Sorkin, 1992). Those who contribute by purchasing goods and services are welcomed in these spaces, while those who fail to contribute are discouraged; this latter group often includes children or youth, homeless persons, or just the general, non-consuming public (Turner, 2002, p. 543). In this way, the economic exchange value of a space is prioritized over its use value, as space is made available to those with "real or apparent ability to pay" (Flusty, 1994, p. 16). In addition, events such as Fashion Week in New York City's Bryant Park or Pepsi's sponsorship of Washington, DC's National Mall signal that public space itself is a commodity.

Finally, recognizing that some of the most vital and vibrant spaces are 'discovered' by users, some have questioned whether public space should even be rationally and formally planned. Recent work, especially in response to the recent economic downturn, argues that marginal, vacant, under-utilized or abandoned spaces—the 'cracks in the city' (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996)—can be reclaimed as recreational space, community gardens, temporary performance space, or even urban beaches (Stevens & Ambler, this issue). These spaces generally lie outside the formal planning or administrative structure and arise as a result of community- and neighbourhood-based initiatives.

We are left with a number of questions concerning the relationship between public space and urban society. First, how can city officials, urban designers and planners balance these concerns while still providing viable, accessible and inclusive public space? Second, in this increasingly fragmented urban landscape, how do we begin to define and catalogue public space, particularly as the public is constantly contested, redefined and reformulated (Németh, 2009)? Finally, how can

we conceptualize 'publicness' itself, given that a diverse population might have different interpretations of what public space is, or should be? Drawing on the work of a number of scholars, this issue of the *Journal of Urban Design* contributes to these and other related debates. Our aim is to look critically at the current state of public space design and planning in cities around the globe, from Bogotá to Belfast, from Paris to Phoenix.

Several papers in this issue examine the specific role of planners, designers and city leaders in creating and managing public space. Renia Ehrenfeucht and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris examine the difficulty in planning effectively for multifaceted, contested spaces like sidewalks. They note the paradox of planning for a diversity of sidewalk functions, especially since they are traditionally considered only as conduits for unimpeded movement. They outline traditional attempts to control, privatize and gentrify sidewalk space, but argue that planners must balance efforts for control and order with concerns for vibrancy and spontaneity. To do so, planners must reconsider their actions in three facets of sidewalk planning: sidewalks as infrastructure, sidewalks as spaces of everyday life and sidewalks as leisure destinations.

Emily Talen looks at the distribution of parks in Phoenix and Chicago to test an assertion by Jane Jacobs that what matters most about parks and open spaces is what surrounds them. She examines the 'spatial logic' of parks, with particular attention to proximity, diversity and social need of populations surrounding parks. Finding this spatial logic lacking in her test neighbourhoods, she offers a clear set of planning recommendations, as well as guidance on producing more innovative and proactive design codes.

Nonetheless, new forms and expressions of public space continually surface, especially when the appropriate use, or meaning, of that space is contested by multiple groups. Frank Gaffikin, Malachy McEldowney and Ken Sterrett examine characteristics of cities with history of conflict, contestation and division, focusing their empirical work on Nicosia and Belfast. Their paper offers a thoughtful set of design and policy measures that can facilitate a more integrated urban landscape in such disputed contexts. Quentin Stevens and Mhairi Ambler discuss the emergence of urban beaches in formerly disused or abandoned areas in non-coastal European cities such as Paris and Berlin. They argue that these informal spaces are created through post-Fordist placemaking, insofar as their production is flexible, mobile, complex, temporary and innovative. Rachel Berney then turns her attention to Bogotá, Colombia to examine the important role played by politicians in producing a comprehensive vision fulfilled by the city's planners and designers. She shows how public space was used as both setting and tool for reinventing a 'culture of citizenship' in the face of civil strife and endemic poverty. In this regard, public space in Bogotá has become a structuring force in the city's redevelopment efforts.

Theorizing the publicness of public space, Claudio De Magalhães moves beyond discussions of privatization and outlines the complex redistribution of roles, rights and responsibilities when public space is produced, managed or governed by the private sector. He proposes a useful framework for examining publicness in the context of privatized governance and then discusses the impact on ideals such as accountability and transparency. George Varna and Steve Tiesdell then problematize the notion of public space, locating publicness at the intersection of five dimensions: ownership, control, civility, access and animation. They draw on previous work to produce a new model of publicness with wide application to the field of planning and design. This model is not only useful in comparing public

spaces across these dimensions but can also serve as tool for organizing value-driven judgements.

In the Practice Paper, Nan Ellin laments the approach taken by Phoenix and other sprawling metropolises in producing disconnected suburban development patterns. She argues that urbanists must strive for a more integrated urbanism. She describes a progressive attempt by Phoenix's planners, designers and academics to produce a "desert urbanism", one that recognizes the indispensability of the desert landscape and in particular its canal system, which is more extensive than those of Amsterdam and Venice combined.

These papers demonstrate the continuing vitality of urban space, showing that new forms of space and spatial relations are indeed possible. The form and function of public space will continue to change, and further research will be needed to examine the evolving social, political, and economic context of public space. For example, our conception of public space is no longer limited to physical places: many of us spend significant time using web-based social networking such as Facebook and Twitter. Mobile technologies have also changed the way we interact in traditional public spaces, as users can physically be in a space, but mentally be elsewhere. These online public forums challenge the necessity for material or physical, space: do we really need public spaces anymore? While this question poses a fundamental challenge to our professions, we must engage with it more rigorously and earnestly.

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