

# Reclaiming public space

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## Abstract

Public space is partly what makes cities, and as such it has been at the core of urban studies and many disciplines ranging from sociology, geography, political science, anthropology to planning, architecture, design and philosophy. As one of the most multidisciplinary journals in the field, *Urban Studies* has been instrumental in exposing the controversies of public space during its 50 years of publication. A careful search through the archives of the journal, however, reveals that this interest has been rather uneven. While in the period before the 1990s a mere six articles dealt with aspects of public space, there has been a remarkable upsurge since then, which resulted in close to 300 articles. Somewhat paradoxically, the widely pronounced death of public space in the early 1990s thus marked the beginning of an extended debate on the topic of public space itself. This Virtual Special Issue (VSI) sets out to reinvigorate the debate once more in a critical synthesis of the important points that set the terms of the discussion and still reverberate in urban studies, by hoping to inspire new directions which touch on many disciplines. Using the death of public space as a counterpoint, the introductory article by Judit Bodnar reflects on the ‘life’ of public space, its cycles, forms and locations. It reviews the intellectual history of the main controversies that have kept discussions of public space alive, and further argues that attention to tensions, variations and comparisons can both reorient some of the fundamental questions of the debate itself and suggest research agendas for the future. The collection of 15 articles reflects first on the nature and specificity of public space, its historicity, its relationship to democratic politics, and then continues with the discussion of the most contested issues in the contemporary transformation of public space – privatisation, commercialisation and securitisation. Geographical diversity in the collection is not a mere gesture of politeness in a confessedly Western/Northern-dominated urban scholarship; nor is it simply driven by a desire to state that there are differences in the way public space is conceived of and operates in various places. Thinking about informality in Latin America, state and class in India, commercialisation in Vietnam, or security in other than North American ‘Western’ cities is meant to disrupt general urban theory and the public–private distinction.

## Keywords

commercialisation, differentiation, privatisation, public space, public sphere, variations

By the 1990s the mood of critical urban analysts once again became pessimistic and the end of public space was announced authoritatively. Mike Davis warned that Los Angeles was ‘inexorably [...] mov[ing] to

extinguish its last real public spaces, with all of their democratic intoxications, risks, and undeodorized odors’ (Davis, 1992: 180). In a similar vein, writing from New York, Michael Sorkin (1992) concluded that the

city was becoming a theme park. In the unambiguously entitled edited volume *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* Sorkin described how, along with non-place urban sprawls, the new urbanity was consciously and programmatically preserving and recreating the bare minimum of urban form devoid of the formal and social mix that had once made cities lively and political; 'there are no demonstrations in Disneyland' (1992: xv) he famously remarked. Traditional public space was being co-opted in the process of ageographical generalised urbanisation.

Although Sorkin pleaded for 'a return to a more authentic urbanity' (1992: xv) it has not happened; instead authenticity became scrutinised. But public space has not quite disappeared either: its pronounced end became the beginning of an extended debate on the topic just as the proclamation of the end of modernity (or, the advent of postmodernity) prompted a serious examination of modern times passed and categories still used. In fact, it was Sorkin's volume that started the process by pronouncing death but demonstrating change and co-optation instead, which only became extended in subsequent discussions: what exactly public space is; how its understanding varies by place and culture; why we should lament its perceived disappearance; and what forms the new urbanity epitomised by theme parks is taking. The original emphasis on disruption, ending and beginning led to inquiries into the nature of public space and its historicity. The institution of public space emerged at a certain point and even though it has not disappeared, it may have changed radically – whether it means a new form or not. A general understanding came to prevail that public space is not a given, it is changing and the fact that it is in principle accessible to all, and thus profoundly democratic, does not absolve it from political analysis – an awareness that gave a new momentum to the study of the politics of

public space. *Urban Studies* has contributed its fair share to the debates that followed. This Virtual Special Issue (VSI) sets out to reinvigorate the debate once more in a critical synthesis of the important points that set the terms of the discussion and still reverberate in urban studies.

## Public space and the urban condition

Public space is peculiar to cities; it is the clearest expression of the urban predicament, the tension between the physical proximity and moral remoteness of city dwellers. The exact nature of this condition and its consequences have been at the centre of debates from the classics of urban studies until today. The multitude of people living together, the necessities and the possibilities this entails have fascinated urban theorists.

Size, density and heterogeneity laid the conditions for the urban as a way of life for Louis Wirth (1938) – a 'relativistic perspective' and a sense of 'toleration of differences'. Georg Simmel (1971) saw this lead to a typical urban mentality – a fundamental indifference to distinctions, to instances of unfamiliarity or difference which he calls blasé attitude. Erving Goffman (1963) emphasised a more virtuous aspect of the same mentality by referring to it as civil inattention – a low-profile superficial sociality of co-presence rather than co-mingling. Building on the work of both Simmel and Goffman, Lyn Lofland (1973) struck an even more positive tone and claimed that the specificity of urban life was precisely this type of social psychological situation, living among strangers, that creates the very basis of public space where civility towards diversity and difference rules. As Richard Boyd points out, 'politeness, civility, and urbanity – with their etymological connection to the Greek *politeia* or city-state, or the Latin *civitas* and *urbanus* – became virtual synonyms

in the minds of Scottish moral philosophers' and have kept that association ever since (Boyd, this issue: 868). It is, however, only modern urban conditions with 'the constant and intense proximity of difference' that 'make civility a pressing moral and sociological requirement' (Boyd, this issue: 871). It often goes unsaid that the modern city means what Simmel referred to as a site of mature money economy or what Marx called capitalist economy. The blasé attitude, an indifference to distinctions, thus parallels the indifference of money to individual qualities as common denominator to all values in Simmel, or the abstraction that is entailed in the commodity form and the idea of value in Marx. One thus gets to see a more constructive side of urban mentality: 'what appears here directly as dissociation is in reality only one of the elementary forms of socialization' (Simmel, 1971: 332, cited in Boyd, this issue) – one that corresponds to the formal equality and thin sociality of the market.

Contemporary discussions of civility go further; Boyd claims that civility is more than the formality of manners with all of our fellow city dwellers: it 'presupposes an active and affirmative moral relationship between persons' (Boyd, this issue: 875). The moral equality it suggests is instrumental in the rise of a democratic public sphere (p. 866). Discussion on civility revived with the proliferation of policy discourse on incivility in England and elsewhere (e.g. Fyfe et al., 2006). Primarily middle-class citizens became concerned with the apparent spread of behaviour in public that they experienced as disrupting the conduct of everyday life and that they profoundly disapproved of. The broken window thesis seemed to capture and fortify their worries; it suggested that even a broken window that is left unfixed can give strong signals about the lack of informal order in a community, invite other more serious crimes and can push neighbourhoods down the slope of decline (Wilson and Kelling, 1982).

When elevated to policy level such interpretation of disorder set out a frontal attack on all kinds of incivilities, grouping them together and often focusing on the most minor ones.

The simplistic policy talk of incivilities devoid of the sensitivity to make distinctions or see incivilities against the backdrop of oppressive social norms prompted a debate on the virtuous aspect of civility in an extended sense as not merely safeguarding against incivility but making it possible to live with diversity and difference. The terms of the debate importantly shifted from a criminological perspective on incivility to a substantive meaning of civility and tolerance (Bannister and Kearns, this issue). A Special Issue of *Urban Studies* (2006) gave an important forum to this discussion (among others, Boyd, this issue). The theoretical and methodological (Phillips and Smith, 2006) treatment of incivilities helped place the cry of British and US middle classes over what they saw as the disgrace public space suffered in the post 1968 period by allowing all kinds of bothersome and annoying behaviour in a historical perspective. People had to be reminded once again that public space is gritty as Richard Sennett (1974) argued long before. Encountering strangers, which is what happens in public space, can be unpleasant and sometimes even frightening. Presenting the self in public always comes with certain anxiety similar to stage fright. Unknown and unassimilated otherness can produce cognitive and emotional shocks resulting often in avoidance of public space (agoraphobia), intolerant behaviour in public space (Bannister and Kearns, this issue) or incivilities (Boyd, this issue). Why would one want to experience anxiety and fear anyway?

First, because citizens have no choice: the business of everyday life for most involves 'going out' and mixing with others not of their kind. True, there have always been strong countercurrents. Car traffic can

reduce the social mixing of crowds that happens in pedestrian circulation normally, and the lack of streets also has that effect. Social segregation works against mixing, often aided by urban design which operates on conscious policies of reducing encounters with difference (e.g. Ellin, 2001; Smithsimon, 2010). These attempts became most explicit in the idea of garden cities when planners tried to segregate urban functions and limit frictions along class, ethnic and racial lines. But limiting involvement in public space on a routine basis has only become a possibility recently with individualised transportation, urban sprawl and the proliferation of virtual publics. One could say that being in public space may not be a necessity any longer; it happens by choice (Bodnar, 2001). Going out into public space means literally going out to socialise and do something enjoyable, which has consequences for the public one seeks and encounters.

Second, some of these frictions can lead to personal growth. The modern city can turn people outward, 'in the presence of difference people have at least the possibility to step outside themselves' (Sennett, 1990: 123) testing the limits of their personality, skills and creative powers.

Third, experiencing the diversity of the public is part of democratic practice and the foundation of democratic politics with nominal equality among strangers being the maxim of democratic politics. The scale and dimension of difference one can or has to encounter is vast and has been appropriately addressed in the urban studies literature, and clearly globalisation and neoliberalisation with the ensuing polarisation and diversification of societies and especially of global cities have only intensified these debates (Bannister and Kearns, this issue). The urban predicament is the same today as it was in the age of Simmel, but the scales are different in the contemporary metropolis. The intensity of global connectivity forces

continuous adaptation and change (Amin, this issue) bearing mixed outcomes. While many live amidst and engage with diversity, this intensification has also brought a tendency towards segregation and withdrawal from public space. Parallel to the withdrawal of social groups that can afford to, public space has become wildly politicised and contested. Where it was possible the middle class opted out of public presence; where it was not feasible, they tried to reestablish their grip over public space that was 'stolen' from them and had to be reclaimed in the revanchist city (Raco, this issue; Smith, 1996; Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008). Urban design that promoted gated communities or defensible architecture went hand in hand with urban policies of cleansing and policing public space to make it fit for a more select clientele.

Fourth, we want to experience public space with all its fear and grittiness not only because it is democratic but because we think it is something good (Amin, this issue). The urban habit of living with diversity can condition a habit of solidarity with others, which can make societies better: 'The good city might be thought of as the challenge to fashion a progressive politics of well-being and emancipation out of multiplicity and difference and from the particularities of the urban experience' (Amin, this issue: 1012).

### *Public space and public sphere*

Public space is relevant for political conduct, and public space and public sphere are related. In fact, the two are often used interchangeably even though both theoretical and historical arguments dictate otherwise. The brief cohabitation of urban sociability and political public in the public space of the agora has been replaced by an increasing divergence of urban public space and a public sphere that has neither a body nor a location in space any longer (Benhabib, 1996).

While public life is becoming ever more virtual and even the quintessential urban pastime, flâneurie is moving to virtual space (Featherstone, this issue), there are historical moments which punctuate this general trend, and bring urban public space and the public sphere together once more. This discussion has been reanimated by the recent linking of urban sites to political action and social change (Allegra et al., this issue). However, one needs to proceed with caution; politics that happen in urban public space do not necessarily fall under urban politics or urban movements, that is, 'movements that are organizationally grounded in cities and whose strategies focus on altering the urban' (Nicholls and Beaumont, cited in Allegra et al., this issue: 1680) even if they do not leave the urban unchanged.

Rebel city sites (squares such as Tahrir, Taksim, the Maidan or Zuccotti Park/Wall Street) may tell us about the limitations of the shift from a physical to virtual public sphere. 'What Tahrir Square showed to the world was an obvious truth: that it is bodies on the street and in the squares, not the babble of sentiments on Twitter or Facebook, that really matter' concludes David Harvey in his *Rebel Cities* (Harvey, 2012: 162). Is urban public space then a privileged site of political action? Clearly, the predicament of the modern city entails this possibility. Density intensifies action and numbers have sociological significance as Simmel would say. While Simmel and the proponents of urban civility see that great numbers and density instill the need to adjust to, or in a more optimistic note, to care for others (Amin), Hannah Arendt identifies an enabling moment that comes from numbers – the 'ability to act in concert', which she calls power (Arendt, 1970). It can make things happen that are beyond the capabilities of individuals, as power is created at the moment individuals come together as a group (Arendt, 1970). This is what happened

in Tahrir Square, Taksim, the Maidan or on Wall Street: the majority came to concerted action and exercised its power in public space. That public space suddenly became 'more public' was evident, ironical and liberating. Wall Street, which oscillates between an abstract idea of finance it had come to signify and being a concrete physical space, abruptly shifted the balance: 'The "street" in Wall Street is being occupied – oh horror upon horrors – by others' (Harvey, 2012: 162). It became a street of lively conviviality, of less transitory traffic of people and of a common cause.

A telling instance of the relationship of public space and the public sphere is a movement in Hungary heralded as a digital dissent, which emerged in late 2014 in reaction to the announced changes in the economic regulation of the internet: the introduction of a steep data mobility tax. A Facebook support group formed in defense of the economic freedom (affordability) of the internet with an unheard number of supporters – 200,000 – but culminated in a traditional demonstration – with around 10,000 participants – occupying prime public space. The Facebook group itself may be an impressive fact, but going to the streets is the 'real thing' even in the case of the Facebook generation. They seem to be aware of the political importance of physical space compared with virtual public sphere, which was nonetheless instrumental in organising the movement, even if only less than one-tenth of those promising to attend the rally showed up in the end. The regime was not overthrown but the multitude of cell phone lights in the night was a breathtaking and memorable sight, evidence of the capabilities of the multitude, and ultimately stopped the proposed legislation.

Public space is about thin sociality, 'rubbing along' (Watson, this issue), which in most cases does not even lead to interaction, let alone to social revolutions; in fact, one



can argue that its normal operation helps dissipate bigger conflicts. But the very same condition of proximity and diversity that conditions civility can trigger action in which urban public space becomes the location of public sphere. Public space is a provisional political community; its versatility and spontaneity carries the possibility of its own transgression. Public space is inherently political and potentially subversive; it is seen as both the manifestation of reigning political power but also as that of a more inclusive power that can reclaim it temporarily by occupying it for political purposes. Public space is not only instrumental in the social (diversity) education of citizens, it is potentially the place of political expression. The regular Sunday gathering of Filipino domestic workers on a square in Hong Kong grew into an important site of their political formation and action, and a prominent example of diasporic public sphere (Law, 2002). Public space obeys the general order of cities but its own logic entails uncertainty. Uncertainty, while it can be seen as threatening or disorienting (Bannister and Kearns, this issue) also means possibility; one can transgress the thin sociability of public space, engage with others, care for them, as vendors keep track of their often marginalised regulars at the market place (Watson, this issue), and become part of a concerted political action (Allegra et al., this issue).

The balance between diversity and vibrant use is not easy to find. The proximity of so many different people does not always work seamlessly. Historically, one can see concern over the public rise in waves; escalation of inequalities and democratisation make it more difficult to find a common denominator for an all-accommodating public space, and may lead to frictions, for the handling of which there are yet no established routines. Contemporary concern with the state of public space and public behaviour did not start because of liberal

attitudes towards difference, as conservatives would claim; it had more to do with the dictates of economic and urban restructuring and the growing polarisation of the public that public space was to serve and the diminishing resources that were to maintain public spaces. 'Cutbacks in local spending have left some of these places damaged and untended, furthering the image, if not necessarily the reality of a dangerous space' (Atkinson, this issue: 1830), which with increasingly diverging demands of people on public space made it excessively difficult to maintain the idea of an all-accommodating place. The yuppies and the ever more muscular bourgeoisie made different claims on public space than those by the misfits of restructuring – the homeless, the unemployed, and low-class immigrants – which proved difficult to reconcile.

## **Commercialisation and privatisation**

Commercialisation and privatisation were identified as the two main trends in the transformation of public space bringing its decline. Even though consumer culture did not emerge until the 1950s and became increasingly sophisticated with the advent of post-Fordism and flexible specialisation, commerce and consumption have been instrumental for the modern city, and treated as such by the classics of urban theory (Miles and Paddison, 1998), which certainly makes it worth revisiting the role of commercialisation in the decline of public space.

It is easy to forget that public space thrives on diversity and the lack thereof can kill it. Lisa Drummond (this issue) and Mandy Thomas (2002) demonstrate how the lack of commercial diversity in the streets of Hanoi in the 1980s eliminated public life, and how it only revived with small-scale commercialisation later. While characterised by a long-term co-habitation, the accents in

the relationship between the city and consumption did indeed shift. ‘The meaning of “urban lifestyles” has changed from a fairly stable prerogative of social status ... to an aggressive pursuit of cultural capital’ (Zukin, this issue: 825). This was both conditioned by and constitutive of new strategies of urban renewal by local governments. This move in the meaning of urban lifestyles was paralleled by the built environment and forms of sociability. The arcades and department stores of downtown in the modern period (1880–1945) gave way to the suburban shopping mall – the archetypal consumption space of the late modern period (1945–1975) – which became more heterogeneous and came to incorporate places of entertainment only to be somewhat shadowed by a renewed interest in urban mixed-use complexes to become the critical infrastructure of the city’s symbolic economy (Zukin, this issue) including the increasingly regular temporary change of function of urban public space in the festivalisation of the city (Smith, 2014; Weller, 2013). ‘By the end of the 1990s, consumption is understood to be both the means and a motor of urban social change’ (Zukin, this issue: 835). There is increased corporate investment in both consumption and urban renewal, and the stakes are high. Public space needs to be secured for the turnover of investment. Urban renewal becomes a business strategy which sorts the public as potential consumers according to this strategy. Consumers want to feel safe and comfortable, not forced to face the grim reality of a polarising city. Safety, which is more than feeling safe from crime, is translated into policy as the securitisation of public spaces, becoming a central element of urban regeneration (Raco, this issue; Samara, 2010). Safety can come at the cost of excluding groups defined as dangerous or simply non-consumers, so access and safety can clash, making the myth of the public difficult to maintain (Atkinson, this

issue). Technology and design both serve the increased surveillance of public space: what landscaping, architecture, and the organisation of space cannot achieve, direct policing and legislation (such as the famous institution of Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)) are thought to provide (Raco, this issue). Designing out the homeless by ‘bump-proof benches’ is an infamous example from Los Angeles (Davis, 1992) but how considerations of policing can drive the height of shrubbery and the crowns of trees that are not to hang down below 2.5 m, or why the elimination of climbable drainpipes, unnecessary access ladders to roofs, or skylights should be an imperative show the extent of the rearrangement of priorities in discourses and practices of urban regeneration (Raco, this issue).

Urban regeneration means business, and designing for business heralds increasing private influence. The commercialisation of public space goes hand in hand with its privatisation. Privatisation, however, does not translate into purely private control and we have quickly learned that a private public space is not a complete oxymoron. Partnerships of private and public players are promoted as the only effective way of not only securitisation (Raco, this issue) but of urban regeneration, and the various public-private constellations are testing the meaning and boundaries of public and private. The triad of private management, public ownership and public access has become the new recipe and norm for public space regeneration closely followed by the model of privately owned public space (Németh, 2009; Staeheli and Mitchell, this issue; Zukin, 2010). Such constellations of private ownership and public use or function are not without friction as the securisation of public space shows. This tension is most prominently captured in the genre of the shopping mall that was heralded as the new town square in American and, to a lesser

extent, in European cities (Lowe, 2000; Staeheli and Mitchell, this issue). Even though in many US cities shopping malls may very well function as *de facto* urban centres, they do not take over the function of the city square. It is not only that their main function is commercial and their clientele is filtered by private security guards, but also their political potential is different from those of public spaces (Staeheli and Mitchell, this issue). This was only confirmed by a 1972 Supreme Court ruling that found that the right of free speech only extends to activity on public property, where shopping malls do not fall. Realising the multiple meanings of public, however, the Supreme Court conceded in 1980 that malls are different from other private places as they are publicly accessible privately owned places, and relegated the protection of political speech to state statutes (Kohn, 2004).

Staeheli and Mitchell (this issue) see shopping malls and other privately owned public spaces as more interested in creating a 'community' rather than a 'public' with all the diversity and grittiness that the public entails. The dialectics of community building is such that accepting members comes at the cost of excluding others. Can public space then be thought of as an extension of social clubs where we look for relaxed sociability with our kind?

Public space has a social and a political function as well. As a social space it is grounded in the thin sociality of fleeting encounters across class lines but carries the remote possibility of those encounters growing into the thicker sociability of a community. The political function of public space as it gathers people from all walks of life is democratic practice itself, of liberty and equality. The ensuing diversity is not conducive to sociability or fraternity, and there is a tension between the political and social function. This translates into the conflict of diversity and attempts at homogeneity,

which runs through the history of public space. With the advent of shopping malls and their spread the balance between the social and political function of public space has shifted to the advantage of the former while reducing the importance of public space with a more radical public profile, the street. Public streets and sidewalks are the only remaining sites of public expression and 'unscripted political activity', and their main function is making poverty and inequality visible (Kohn, 2004: 3). Many, however, would like to avoid seeing a full picture of society and experience the consequences of it – homeless lives spilling over to public space; beggars, and vendors trying to eke out a living – and given the possibility, they sidestep such places. The alternative is there: comprehensive shopping and entertainment centres and theme parks which, Sorkin writes, strip 'troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work' (1992: xv).

These attempts, however, are nothing new. They stretch through the history of the modern city; the difference is in the effectiveness of the illusion that this can be achieved, that the 'sting' can be removed. Under increasing inequalities, fewer resources for maintenance and the lack of political commitment public space became a less tenable project, and the emergence of other options pushed existing public space from openness to the selective public of social clubs where their social function took over the political one. Streets were abandoned and lost their vital functions – as means of pedestrian traffic, as places to shop, as sites where the business of life was conducted. They became unnecessary. Of course, people still wanted some of the excitement of being seen in public, to see others and encounter controlled diversity, and this is what the shopping and entertainment centres came to provide. Their appeal is not so simple though: they simulate what their clientele wish to avoid,



the street, unpacking it and recycling only some of its elements leaving disorder, dirt, harsh weather and visible poverty behind. Public space becomes then a theme park in the mall, in Disneyland and at the sites the middle class is willing to attend. Disorder, dirt, poverty and danger are elsewhere in the city. The city is not a theme park; what makes part of it look like one is the distance from the rest, hence the unreal feel to it as a simultaneously arrogant and frightened endeavour.

### Variations on the public

The proclamation of the end of public space prompted debates about the meaning and form of public space: its historical transformation but also its variations by place and culture. Talk about the death of public space was influenced by the English translation of Habermas' seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989. The Habermasian inspiration continued along with its criticism: the examination of the public from a gender, class and racial perspective smashing the idea of a unitary public (Calhoun, 1992). The spirit of Walter Lippmann's unappreciated *The Phantom Public* (1925) which dared to dissect the progressive notion of the public into its multivalent elements, not devoid of interests, was revived and radicalised. A temporal and spatial sensitivity to variations of public space percolated into urban studies, and while a Habermasian analysis kept underlining studies of the public sphere and public space, a general critique of the Western idea of the public-private divide became more pronounced along with the critique of the more specific thesis concerning the death of public space. North-South differences in urban experience came to be noted more and more urgently.

Lisa Drummond points out a common feature of street life in the South, the

overflow of private lives into public space as citizens of Hanoi started to use public space again in the 1990s as 'an extension of domestic space, an annexation of commercial space and a space for personal expression' (Drummond, this issue: 2389). In Vietnam, among other places, one can witness both Western trends of the emergence of semi-public spaces and the invigoration of street life (Drummond, this issue). Some of these critical differences can shed new light on the analysis of Western cities: homelessness, which is widely perceived a major urban problem, can be seen as the spillover of private life into public space, making the experience of Southern cities suddenly relevant for Western urban theory. Studies of urban informality provide another interesting link between laments over the decline of Western public space and Southern urban life. While European and North American urban governments are trying to regulate street trading, it is good to be reminded that 'street trading presently represents one of the most visible and popular occupations in the global South' (Donovan, this issue: 29), and the current erosion of formal employment has made it a common escape route for those influenced by this shift (Donovan, this issue; Fernandes, this issue). The fierce fight about street vendors and especially their prevalence in Southern cities expose the harsh reality of the political economy of public space and show how much our understanding of public space still relies on middle-class perception of its idle use in contrast to those – vendors and beggars – who want to live off of public space and the encounter with people who may buy their services (see, for example, Ranasinghe, 2011 on squeegeeing – unsolicited windshield-washing at the stoplights).

These examples remind us that urban renewal does not simply mean commercialisation, but it promotes a select order of commercialisation of the corporate style

while it tries to eliminate or strictly regulate the small-scale commerce of street vendors. Public space recovery campaigns have involved an aggressive relocation of street vendors in most Latin American cities – to two newly constructed shopping malls in Bogota (Donovan, this issue) – and many Indian ones, among them Mumbai where the creation of legal hawking zones was attempted by the state but practically rebutted by local middle-class civic organisations (Fernandes, this issue). While this element is present everywhere, the scale and the stakes are clearly different in NYC, London, Bogota or Mumbai. Although the most prominent features of the transformation of public space are indeed commercialisation and privatisation, it is a specific form of commercialisation that marks the process: a more comprehensive, sophisticated, corporate type that is often directly connected to, or indirectly endorsed by the local state. There are, however, variations even within this model. As Regan Koch and Alan Latham (this issue) show the stakes of urban redevelopment are not the same in the Prince of Wales Junction of west London as in Bryant Park of Midtown Manhattan, which may allow aggressive business plans to adjust to the environment with the passing of time in the case of the Junction, resulting in a more local and less up-market commercialisation of the neighbourhood.

### **Differentiation of public space**

Public space should not be treated as an undifferentiated genre, all the more so as one of the historical trends is precisely its differentiation by function and audience. We have come a long way from Mumford's 'thrice usable space', his privileged genre, the multifunctional piazza (Mumford, 1961: plate 26). The multifunctional shopping and entertainment centre is a new form in this history, which ironically builds on a select

comprehensiveness of the piazza, and that is part of the reason why it has mobilised so much passion. But the mall is not the only form left, and their variety recasts the debate about the death of public space, and calls attention to their diversity and the continuity rather than the divide between public and private.

The privatisation of public space is a more productive concept if seen against the backdrop of the continuum running from the graduated privateness of the home to the graduated publicness of the urban realm (Bodnar and Molnar, 2010). The design of the house is built on this principle: the private space of the home starts with the inner circle of spaces that do not even have windows (bathroom), followed by the rooms (bedroom) which no visitor is to see, and continues with the living room with large windows to the outside, from where through the front hall one can reach the front porch, the garden, then the street. The street as the most public space leads to parks with or without gates, to the market place which is either temporary or permanent and which closes or does not for the night, to festival halls, cafes with wide open doors and chairs on the sidewalk, bars where one needs to ring the bell to gain admission, pubs, museums which are free on some days but charge admission otherwise, public swimming pools, private sports clubs, train stations, airports, 'indeterminate spaces' before redevelopment (Groth and Corijn, 2005), the exclusive shopping mall on top of the hill and the more pedestrian one in the city, whose publicness is determined in a complex system of design, regulation and everyday practice. The reality of graduated publicness clashes with the ideal of public space, the free and equal entry to which is the minimal manifestation of democracy. It is this maxim of democracy that keeps the public space debate alive, constantly testing the inclusiveness of the public. Pushing the publicness of

urban space towards becoming more public was always an urgent task of social revolutions as the most visible sign of democratisation. Promenades, parks and other public spaces initially restricted to the elites quickly became available for the masses following successful revolutions. The Louvre, for example, was transformed into a public museum during the French Revolution even though people had limited but regular access to parts of it before the revolution. Margaret Island in Budapest – declared a public garden for good in 1908 – could only be visited for a fee until 1919, when the short-lived Hungarian Republic of Workers' Councils in its most publicised move made it accessible for all. Reversed arrangements of restricting access by law are politically inconceivable today but the practice of designing out undesirable people and activities as well as regulating them (ASBO) are all the more widespread.

One could say that we have come a long way from designing inviting street furniture by adding the eternally repeatable module of 'a tree, a bench, a kiosk' to the boulevards as Haussmann did in the 19th-century reconstruction of Paris, which became a model for modern urban embellishment and order, to Davis' famously uninviting bump-proof benches and their implication for street life. It would, however, be untrue to claim that LA has only uninviting street furniture; benches and trees go where the urban economy and polity want to 'anchor' citizens, nowadays more to fenced parks and playgrounds, privatised and supervised sections of the streets – sidewalk cafes – and to the street-like interior of shopping centres than to the street itself.

### Disruptions in the model

The highly prescribed neoliberal urban landscape can easily accommodate its own disruptions, the sites of 'insurgent citizenship'

(Holston, 1999) where alternative discourses of urban space and belonging are experimented with and articulated by citizens. Guerrilla gardening – insurgent planting on underutilised, mostly public land – housing, cultural and commercial, or hospitality squats (Lugosi et al., 2010), and similar 'hacking' of urban order reclaim public space for uses that defy the dominant logic of the contemporary rearrangement of public space, and point to its countercurrents. Trees and benches thus can also go to places where they were not planned. Cultivating abandoned sidewalks is less radical today than guerilla gardening was in the early 1970s when people cut barbed wires to plant 'seed grenades' on land earmarked for redevelopment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Adams and Hardman, 2014); nevertheless, it signals that in the competition for the profitable use of urban space public space is instrumental, and there is a need and there may be room even (if only temporarily) for alternative grass-roots uses that define public space in a different manner.

There is an increasing understanding that neoliberal urbanism marks a distinctive set of policies, institutions and practices, in which some of the most important debates are waged around the idea of public against the backdrop of economic liberalisation and a comprehensive market logic. In fact, urban studies has been quite instrumental in pointing at the political nature of neoliberal changes, highlighting that the economic order of neoliberalism and the apolitical rhetoric of marketisation rely on a blatant class-politics of urban developers and politicians and the new entanglement of the state and private capital in large-scale urban projects (PPPs), blurring the division of public and private. Neoliberalism tends to be used as a shorthand description of urban change globally, but there is both a growing historicisation of neoliberalism and an awareness

of its unevenness, and its variations. The terminological shift from neoliberalism to neoliberalisation is the most telling sign of changes in the perception and analysis of neoliberal urbanism (Brenner et al., 2010). Not only are North–South differences pointed out more and more often in urban studies and in the discussion of the public–private distinction but the practical and theoretical significance of differences *within the North* contribute to the general questioning of urban models. While discussions on the transformation of public space are very much influenced and even driven by debates overseas, as Atkinson writes: ‘it is not immediately clear to what extent public space has been eroded in Britain in the way commentators from metropolitan North America suggest’ (Atkinson, this issue: 1830). Among others, ‘the shift to private spaces in regeneration areas is far less comprehensive than in the US’ (Raco, this issue: 1871). One should also note that it is difficult to identify unified policies as ‘national agendas and directives are far from coherent and unidimensional’ (Raco, this issue: 1884) and modes of urban governance are not entirely consistent either (Belina and Helms, 2003). While revanchist urbanism is a general phenomenon, there are marked differences between US and European cities in the target and intensity of revanchist politics but there are also fewer differences between reformist and revanchist government strategies than one would expect as they both focus on the *management* of urban marginality (Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008).

Local variations indeed can be as serious as challenging the hegemonic discourse about public space itself. John Allen holds that it is the North American bias in urban literature that makes us hastily conclude that public space is dying (Allen, 2006). This must come as a relief to researchers of public space but what does this recognition imply for urban theory? Have the terms of the

debate been miscast from the very beginning? Should the fact that the profound changes we have been witnessing do not warrant a death sentence stop us thinking about how urban change is related to the shifting idea of the public in a long-term perspective; why we insist on certain models more than others, and why we still fashion our idea of public space around the street and the agora?

## Agenda for future research

1. The dilemma whether variations on the condition of public space can allow us to conclude about the general transformation of public space and the urban condition introduces one of the greatest challenges urban studies is facing today. The multiplication of sites from where urban reports are filed and provocations are made to urban theory has the potential to go beyond merely seeking variations on a dominant theme and reconfigure the production of urban theory, the place and significance of its key concepts and to reorient research questions. What happens to debates of public space and the public sphere if analyses are increasingly inspired by contexts where the public–private divide is different from the dominant Western conception and in general less relevant? Where does, for example, religion fall in this divide, and do all religions occupy the same position?
2. In addition to answering some of the metatheoretical and epistemological concerns of urban studies, it is again time to take a mature critical look at the liberating and constraining potentials of commercialisation in light of the new entanglement of commerce, entrepreneurialism and alternative politics and culture. How do we think about the

consolidation, taming and celebration of street food, street art, ruin pubs, alternative guided tours, and other similar phenomena, which start as alternatives to mainstream urban development and quickly become integrated in the urban spectacle? Does the temporary commercial use of primarily non-commercial public space have implications for the nature of that space in the long run (Smith, 2014)? Can the temporary non-commercial use of urban space awaiting commercial redevelopment recast the redevelopment agenda in the end (Groth and Corijn, 2005)?

3. Public space is not designed equally for all. The infrastructure of public space together with legislation and practice frames the differences that particular public spaces encourage or tolerate. A critical examination of infrastructure tests our taken-for-granted definitions of the public, which has gained new ground by including such differences as disabilities or means of transportation in addition to class, race, ethnicity and gender. People live with different abilities but they do not have to live with disabling spatialities (Hawkesworth, this issue; Imrie, 2013; see *Urban Studies* Special issue on disabilities, 2001; Teo, 1997). If we are capable of designing certain groups out, we can learn how to 'design the marginalised in' and how to design better and more inclusive cities in general. Wildly interdisciplinary journals such as *Urban Studies* should have an edge in linking and studying the infrastructure and politics of public space.
4. To what extent increasing virtualisation reconfigures the public sphere and the importance of physical public space remain at the forefront of research. Mike Featherstone makes the point that simulation programs allow one to enjoy

'near full sensory involvement' of urban space in cyberspace (Featherstone, this issue: 922). While he does not say it, the qualifying part of his statement 'near full' (signalling that touching and smelling are not part of it) is truly important as full sensory involvement is one of the distinguishing marks of physical public space compared with virtual one, and as such it may become increasingly important in discussions of public space. One needs only to be reminded what is purged out of public space in Davis's verdict that led to the announcement of the end of the genre: 'democratic intoxications, risks and undeodorized *odors*' (Davis, 1992: 180; italics added). A full sensory experience of public space can move the discussion from a predominantly ocular understanding of public space (the gaze) to a more extended one by connecting to the study of the sensory experiences (sensorium). (For a few examples, see Gandy and Nilsen 2014; Śliwa and Riach, 2012.) A more full perception of urban space would ultimately follow in the footsteps of Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone* (1994), in which he makes a plea for building more sensate and arousing cities.

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