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Editors' Letter: Whither the Public?

Anita Berrizbeitia & Diane E. Davis

This issue of *Harvard Design Magazine* was born out of deep concerns for the status of our shared commonwealth in the wake of the multiple political controversies and social crises of the past two decades. As educators, scholars, and practitioners in a school focused on the design of the built environment—through urban design, planning, landscape architecture, and architecture—we are motivated by the very idea of the public. We are inspired by what it enables in the lives of individuals and their communities; by the spaces, places, and the objects it provokes and produces; by the systems and ecosystems from which it emanates; by the fights it arouses; by the aspirations it seeds in the imagination; and by the loss we collectively feel when it comes under threat. With this issue we want readers to think about the territoriality, the physicality, and the materiality of the public, and to grasp and comprehend where it is and where it is not in today's deeply divided world.

As a concept, "public" is easy to understand but not easy to define. In one sense, it is everywhere: public streets, public health, public parks, public transportation, public libraries, public schools, public security. Yet broad accessibility and availability of all things necessary for basic sustenance—medicine, education, connectivity, opportunity, shelter, clean air, and water—require sustained effort, processes, and politics. We must think about publics in the same way. If we seek to construct conditions that enable a better and more equitable life for all, producing a vibrant public realm is essential. Spaces, institutions, objects, grounded matter, private citizens, elected officials, the biological and ecological functions of the earth's systems—including human and non-human life of all types—are all part of that mission. And indeed, the plural form we're using in the title of this issue is a reminder: publics is spatial and material, it is the plurality of people, it is democracy, it is politics, it is the action of debate, it is the biological and the manufactured, it is manifested everywhere—it is never only one thing.

Even as we see the public everywhere, we also see evidence of the idea of a public being threatened, challenged, and contested. In a world of increasing polarization and boundary-drawing manifest at multiple scales, what has happened to the notion of the public? Is there evidence that collective understanding is changing in terms of who belongs in our neighborhoods, cities, regions, and nations? And to what extent have the planning and design professions enabled or constrained any such transformations, either by accommodating greater exclusivity, and perhaps even narrowing venues for public engagement, or by proactively challenging such trends?

In this issue of *Harvard Design Magazine* we address "the status of the public" in political and social discourse, in design thinking and practice, and in the built environment itself. We ask leading public intellectuals, scholars, and practitioners in architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, as well as in the social sciences and humanities, to join us in pondering the fate of the public in a world where xenophobic thinking and challenges to collective responsibility are becoming ever more dominant. We are interested in both analytical debate and propositional thinking, as well as in materialist inquiries into the empirical conditions that sustain a concern with the public.

A few key themes flow through the essays, interviews, images, and responses, regardless of the context or the scale of the place. The first and perhaps most relevant for the design fields is that ideas regarding the public need expression in physical space. Without that presence, they have limited or no traction. The second is that public spaces typically emerge through contestation and even conflict, and as such they are acts of will. Just because something is considered to be public does not guarantee it will always stay public. The struggle to create and strengthen the public realm is alive and ongoing, and we have tried to capture a wide range of approaches.

This is where *scale* fits in. Public space is inherently a space that belongs to everyone, but such pluralistic spaces can be miniscule or expansive, circumscribed or vast, whether territorialized in the form of a street, plaza, park, or national conservation land. To create a public good—at any scale—is an intentional act that needs oversight and enduring protection in the form of governance or collective action. This is especially the case in capitalist societies where the tensions between private ownership and public stewardship are common, and where economic development frequently fuels efforts to privatize spaces long held or believed to be public.

A third theme that emerges in this issue is that in the Anthropocene, society appears to be moving toward greater diversity in the types of public spaces that are desired, required, or at threat of disappearance. We are reaching beyond traditional forms of the public realm visible in the design of city spaces to those defined by collective access to trees, soil, and the air. In the context of severe and widespread environmental degradation, possibilities for a public can be realized in the ecological and the biological. Protecting elements that are essential to supporting the metabolic functions of all life forms produces new kinds of spaces, landscapes, and governance models through which to expand the realm of what constitutes the public.

At the same time, the climate crisis has exacerbated environmental inequities in the public realm itself. Green spaces are seen by many as necessary for thermal control, environmental justice, and our guaranteed collective future as a planet. Yet even as greening can counter excessive heat in neighborhoods, it also causes gentrification, displacement, marginalization of peoples, and fissures. Different populations will not always agree on which public must be prioritized, and race, class, ethnicity, and other identity matrices will play a fundamental role in the struggles over whose view of the public good should prevail.

All this suggests that defining—or realizing—a public is not about consensus; it is about debate and the necessity of interrogation, reflection, and ongoing struggle. We hope this magazine inspires you to join in this endeavor. We ask you to read these pages with an eye to the materiality and creativity of design, with an appreciation for the struggles involved in guaranteeing publics, and with compassion and solidarity for those who feel outrage when publics are circumvented or denied.