



Rethinking public space: between rhetoric and reality

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Abstract

The idea of public space has moved from a critique to an orthodoxy, embraced by most stakeholders as an important part of urban development. In this process, however, it has been co-opted in ways which may be at odds with its earlier ideals. This paper develops a critique of this process of transition, showing how the rhetoric of the public space as a multidimensional space of interaction may be used, but practically targeting the creation of a space of attraction, an instrument of delivering investment and maximizing rewards. The paper examines four areas of this transition in the broad processes of political, economic and cultural transformation, and the gaps between rhetoric and reality in the provision and character of public spaces reflect these processes in concrete ways.

Keywords Public space · Inequality · Diversity · Access · Interaction · Attraction

Introduction

The public space has become a subject of growing academic, professional, and public interest, as reflected in a growing literature (e.g., Carmona et al. 2008; De Souza et al. 2012; Hou 2010; Low and Smith 2006; Orum and Zachary 2010; Parkinson 2012; Sadeh 2010; Watson 2006). The idea of creating new, and enhancing the existing, public spaces has been widely praised by various decision makers and design professionals; as such, the notion of the public space appears to enjoy a common consensus about its roles and benefits. It has taken centre stage in architecture and urban design, to the extent that some have associated urban design with the creation of public spaces, and some major architects, such as Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, have placed the public space at the core of their visions of urbanism. In parallel, municipal authorities and private developers often refer to the public space and public realm in their policies and marketing documents. The rising attention to the public space is a welcome development, as few people would doubt its value, but we may also wonder whether all these different actors have the same idea of public space, and if so why they have come to such a view. Public spaces have always been an

integral part of the city, a key component in the vocabulary of urbanism; so what are the reasons for the renewed interest in something as old as the city itself?

A city is made of a dense collection of diverse people and objects in a limited area, which cannot function without the development of a shared infrastructure of institutions and spaces that would make collective life possible. The remains of the earliest cities in Mesopotamia show a range of private household spaces that are linked together through the common spaces of streets, markets and temples (Benevolo 1980; Morris 1994). Although the form and meaning of these spaces have largely changed over the millennia, the overall composition of a city remains somewhat similar, where a common spatial infrastructure links the separate realms of households and institutions. If this is a continuing feature of cities, and if the skills of making and remaking cities have developed over the centuries, what are the reasons for a new emphasis on the public space? Have we not learnt the lessons of millennia and can we not confidently design and develop them? By examining the ancient ruins, archaeologists reveal some of the main cultural features of the societies that built and inhabited them. By examining our contemporary urban spaces and how we approach them, can we open a window into our current society?

The political, economic and cultural significance of the public space has been known since ancient times. The agora in Athens is often mentioned as the prototype of the democratic public space, although spaces for some

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form of collective communication and deliberation can be found in all cultures. In the literature on public spaces, there is almost always a reference to this prototype as the ideal model towards which the modern public space should aspire, even if the scale and size of our cities means that these processes take place in many different forums and no longer in a single central place. Democracy has long been based on the idea of an active public sphere, in which citizens are able to participate, communicate freely, and develop opinions about the affairs of their society, enabling them to make informed decisions in democratic governance (Habermas 1989; Arendt 1998). However, this public space is now defined in a much wider sense in both physical and institutional forms. A gap, therefore, exists between the idealized image of an integrated society with public spaces at its heart, such as the agora in polis, the ancient city-state, and the modern global urban conditions, with completely different scales and forums. The public space literature, nevertheless, continues nostalgically to use an ancient image to judge completely different circumstances.

Major structural shifts in technological and economic arrangements have radically transformed the role of cities in the national and global economies and their form and spatial organization. The technologies of transport, information and communication have transformed the spatial and social organization of cities, the processes of structural economic change have altered the way urban populations live and work, and the concerns for environmental degradation have demanded remedial action. These changes have direct implications for the social, economic, and environmental aspects of the public space, creating the spaces of attraction and interaction.

In this paper, I aim to develop a critical examination of the idea of the public space, in the sense of looking for the reasons for the popularity of the idea, for the variety of its roles and meanings for different groups, and for the limits of the idea in some of its current applications. The primary method of investigation is to analyse the broad contextual changes which have brought about new concerns and incentives for the development of public spaces. The paper examines four reasons for the emerging interest in public spaces: the changing balance between the public and private sectors; the structural economic changes that transform cities; the technological changes that disperse the space of cities; and the diversification of the urban population. Within these broad contexts, I will examine how the diversity of professional and disciplinary views, as well as the social positions of the people for whom the public space is intended, would generate different, and at times contradictory, meanings for the public space. It is here that we can test the limits of the idea by identifying a gap between rhetoric and reality. While the rhetoric of the public space often portrays it as a space

of interaction, in practice it may be developed and used as a space of attraction, with inevitable implications for the urban society.

Shifting boundaries and roles

Perhaps the primary reason for the rising concern for public spaces lies in the changing relationship between the public and private spheres; that urban spaces are increasingly produced and managed by private agents for private use. As a critical response, it has been argued that public spaces should be produced and managed by the public authorities (Madanipour 2003). The question, however, is—are the public authorities the same as before, and how public are the spaces produced by public authorities?

For a generation after the Second World War, a model of development emerged that was based on the Keynesian ideas of a stronger presence by the state in the economy. It included a tighter regulation of the market by the state, stimulating demand through a better distribution of resources, and improving the conditions of life in cities. The state was directly involved in the provision of public services and the production of the built environment, which was reflected in the large-scale urban development projects and comprehensive planning in many cities. This period of the height of welfare state, which the French call ‘The Glorious Thirty’, could combine prosperity with a degree of equality; but it ran out of energy by the 1970s (Aglietta 2008; Lipietz 1987). The *laissez-faire* phase which followed, and has been going on for the last 30 years, aimed at reducing the size and scope of the state, now seen as bureaucratic, clumsy, unaffordable and ineffective. Instead, the methods of the market were embraced, radically changing the balance between the public and private spheres. The Keynesian accord between the state and the market was broken, transferring the production of the built environment to the private sector.

The spaces produced in the first period were often modernist spaces, designed from inside out, paying more attention to the buildings rather than the spaces outside. In a famous sketch by Le Corbusier, public spaces are pleasant and plentiful, where a panorama of towers and roads set in parks and trees can be visible from the comfort of a resting place with chairs and tables served by food and drinks (Le Corbusier 1987). The modernist manifesto, the Charter of Athens, had paid specific attention to public spaces as breathing spaces in the overcrowded and badly built cities, but in their design philosophy, the public space was essentially at the service of buildings, enveloping and supporting them. Open spaces were listed as the places of ‘recreation’ within the functionalist scheme of the Charter, but they were thought to be ‘generally insufficient’, and



'difficult of access to many people', especially to those living in the 'unhealthful central districts' (Sert 1944, p. 247). The solution, according to the Charter, was 'razing of slums and other buildings' and devoting the cleared site to recreational purposes (Sert 1944, p. 247). Public spaces were therefore envisaged to be as near as possible to the residential spaces. When these buildings and neighbourhoods went into decline, however, public spaces surrounding them became a huge problem (Castell 2010). The close connection between housing and public spaces was broken, as local authorities started to abandon their role in housing provision, and emphasis on public space was a rather convenient substitute for this shortcoming.

In the following period, the resources of the private firms were mobilized, which had access to productive capacities that could transform large parts of cities and regenerate declining areas. But these firms had a limited remit, responsible towards their shareholders, rather than delivering services and spaces for the general public. Urban development projects still needed common spaces, but these new spaces were more functional intermediate spaces rather than publicly accessible ones. In an increasingly unequal society, the intermediate spaces they produced were privately controlled, sometimes with the help of guards, walls, gates, and cameras, setting boundaries that would limit access to these spaces. This reduction in supply and access opened up a crisis of confidence and a rising sense of anxiety about public services and spaces, and by extension a crisis for the city as a whole. So much of the debate about the public space reflected anxiety about this changing relationship, which is a mirror of the broader relationships between the market and the state, and between the individual and society. When these fundamental relationships change, the features of society and its spaces change. The campaign for the public space, in this sense, is a campaign for the integrity of the city and society.

The early phase of criticizing the privatization of public spaces was based on the idea that the lines between the public and private agencies are sharply drawn. In political theory, the public sphere is often the sphere of the state, as distinctive from the private sphere of individuals and households. The two spheres are kept apart, as the intervention of the public sphere into the private sphere would result in the loss of privacy and individual freedom, while the encroachment of the private sphere into the public sphere may create individual gain and collective loss (Nolan 1995; Wacks 1993). Political systems have always been shaped by this interplay between the public and private spheres, even though their meanings differ in different times and places. These lines, however, are increasingly blurred, as the public authorities adopt private sector approaches and enter partnerships with the private developers. Publicness, even when

produced and managed by the public authorities, becomes a relative concept.

The early concerns about privatization of the public space, therefore, have been compounded by concerns about the character of the public institutions, which has direct implications for the public spaces that they produce and manage. The rhetoric of the public space has been widely adopted by the public authorities, but these authorities now operate on a basis that is far closer to the way private companies function with their motives of risk and reward. The issue has changed from the relationship between the public and private institutions to a metamorphosis of the public institutions. The outcome would therefore be a transfiguration of the public space that would be produced.

As non-state actors have proliferated, the challenge of urban governance has included setting up frameworks for cooperation and the formation of collective actors. Strategic plans and large urban projects have become a prominent form of urban development, based on partnerships between the public sector and these non-state actors, and revolving around a series of public spaces. Focus on the process of design and development of these projects would allow for the development of a shared vision and a spatial focus of attention. In such collaborations, however, the character of public spaces, their location in the city, and the extent of their accessibility may become problematic. Particularly after the global financial crisis of 2008, and the dwindling budgets of public authorities, their attitude towards public spaces has become far more entrepreneurial, using them as a source of much needed income (Cheshmehzangi 2012)

The character of public spaces, therefore, is a continuing concern, even if it appears that all the stakeholders have subscribed to its provision. The urban spectacle is supported by events and festivals set up to support commercialism, dominated by commercial messages and control of large corporations, to the extent that campaigners in the UK complain about the emergence of cloned towns, whereby all high streets are dominated by the same companies, making them all similar to one another. The production and management of public spaces by private companies continues to cause similar complaints. Even a former, business-friendly mayor of London, in his manifesto for public space, announced his concern, and the London Assembly, in its report, suggested tighter controls are needed to ensure public spaces remain accessible and in public hands (London Assembly 2011). Similarly, the viability of many public services, such as public transport, libraries and museums, may be under pressure in the period of economic austerity. Austerity is not experienced everywhere, and many cities around the world continue to grow in size and prosperity, and carry on investing in their public spaces. In unequal cities, however, the character and nature of the public space may be profoundly changing.



Reinventing cities

A second reason for the emerging interest in public spaces is their perceived contribution to economic outcomes by being used as a means of attracting attention and investment. As economic considerations become a primary motive for public authorities, the question becomes: how far does this emphasis on economics shape the content and character of public spaces?

Facilitated by technological change, the major economic shift in recent decades has been the globalization of industrial production, relocating the manufacturing industries from their old centres to new ones. Rather than creating a post-industrial economy, it has globalized the industrial economy, creating a new division of labour in which some regions have industrialized while others deindustrialized (Madanipour 2011). This was not an accidental shift, but initiated by the companies that looked for cheaper factors of production, and for being free from labour disputes and environmental regulations (Bell 1973; Touraine 1995; Esping-Andersen 1999).

This fundamental economic change has had considerable impacts on the social and spatial organization of the city. It has fuelled urbanization in industrializing cities, like in China, which is experiencing what may be the largest wave of urbanization in human history. It has also fuelled transition to services in deindustrialized cities in the West, which have been looking for alternative economic rationale to fill the gap. It has led to the emergence of a knowledge-based economy, developed on the basis of 'the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information' (OECD 1996, p. 8), which was a shift 'from metal-bashing to knowledge generation' (Stiglitz 1999, p. 15), from the accumulation of physical capital to the economic application of knowledge (UNESCO 2005, p. 46). In almost all cases, public spaces play a mediating and facilitating role in these economic transformations, in the forms of attraction and interaction that would stimulate innovation, investment and consumption.

In globalized economies, cities are engines of economic development, where the production, exchange and consumption of goods and services take place. A key driver of economic development in the knowledge-based economies is innovation, which is the 'fundamental impulse' of the market economies and comes from 'the new consumers' goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization' (Schumpeter 2003, p. 83). Innovation is often thought to be enabled through the encounters between different perspectives, where the minds meet and are able to develop new ideas and products. Such a meeting of minds, it is thought, would be partly facilitated by the composition of

the urban environment and support from a vibrant public sphere. Clustering the new companies in science parks, technopoles and cultural quarters has become the holy grail of local economic development, thought to generate the critical mass and the space of interaction that is needed for such innovation. International organizations such as the UNESCO (2010), advocate the development of science parks, while many municipalities, such as Sheffield's (Creative Sheffield 2010), promote the development of cultural quarters. Stimulating innovation that would trigger economic development is therefore expected to benefit from the possibility of interaction that such scientific and cultural districts and their common infrastructure can provide.

Economic development also draws on investment, which is hoped to be partly attracted through public investment in public spaces, making cities attractive and competitive. The Lisbon Strategy emphasized on making Europe 'a more attractive place to work and invest', where the 'attractiveness of European cities' would 'enhance their potential for growth and job creation' (EC 2006, p. 1). The European ministers of development signed the Leipzig Charter in 2007, considering public spaces as 'soft locational factors', which are 'important for attracting knowledge industry businesses, a qualified and creative workforce and for tourism' (EC 2007, p. 3). In the context of globalization, where cities behave like private firms, competing with each other for investment, high-quality public spaces, tall buildings, and expressive architecture are all seen as symbolic assets, enhancing the image and quality of a city on the global stage. These prominent urban features are all seen as devices that could distinguish a city in the crowded global marketplace, much in the same way that advertising is meant to differentiate goods on supermarket shelves.

More specifically, public spaces have a direct role in the real estate market, using the public infrastructure to encourage private investment and to increase land and property values. The economic roles of the public space at the local level include building market confidence, creating attractive conditions for private developers to invest in an area, making and enhancing the land and property market. Research has shown the positive impact of the public space on demand for residential space and higher values in such properties. In some cities, proximity to a green space could add up to half the price of some types of dwelling (McCord et al. 2014). Some public authorities look for economic justification for investment in public spaces, and they find this justification in confidence building for the market, laying the foundations of a property market in declining areas, where none existed, attracting private investors to an area, and seeing the rise in the land value as the ultimate justification for investment in the public space. For private developers, good public spaces provide a clear competitive advantage for the



quality and market value of their development, especially if the cost of providing these public spaces is covered by public authorities.

The economic role of the public space is also evident in its support for leisure and retail activities, which drive the urban economy in many cities. The consumption of goods and services, now so thriving through globalization, is a major driver for the global economy; the more we consume goods and services the faster the wheels of the global economy, so consumption becomes a goal in itself, whether or not we need those products, to the extent that consumerism has become a primary identifier of the rich urban societies. Investment in the public space is an essential ingredient of boosting this consumerism and experience economy. Public spaces provide the atmosphere of glitz and spectacle that would draw people to particular places, where we can enjoy the pleasure of apparent abundance and being with others. With the economic crisis of 2008, there was a dramatic reduction in the retail and leisure spaces of British city centres, and the rate of shop vacancy went up to more than 14% of all shops in the country (Local Data Company 2013). A solution that was offered was to think of the entire city centres as a commercial space, setting up initiatives that would stimulate and revive retail activities. In other words, 'getting our town centres running like businesses', as the government-appointed adviser's report recommended (Portas 2011, p. 18). This approach has partially transformed the character of public spaces in city centres, bringing them in line with the commercial logic of shops and restaurants.

The rhetoric of the public space has been adopted at the macroscale level of urban development in globalizing economies, and at the microscale of property development and commercial support. In many of these promotions of the idea, however, the public space is used as a vehicle of attracting investment from companies, builders, buyers and visitors. It therefore tends to see the public space as an instrument at the service of economic aims, which may be at odds with the social and environmental expectations of the urban society.

Spatial fragmentation and dispersion

The third important reason for giving prominence to public spaces is the problem of urban spatial fragmentation and dispersion, which has had social and environmental consequences (Madanipour et al. 2014). Under the conditions of economic prominence in the character and functions of public authorities, the fragmentation and dispersion of urban space, and the problem of dwindling resources, the question becomes: how far is it possible to provide and maintain urban public spaces?

Transport technologies have long allowed the growing cities to disperse in all directions, a trend that continues to this day, with major social and environmental implications. Suburbanization has been an ongoing trend since the nineteenth century, facilitated through the invention of trains and cars, and in the twentieth century supported and encouraged through government subsidies, planning policies and cultural preferences (Abercrombie 1945; Briggs 1968; Cullingworth and Caves 2013; Keating and Krumholz 1999). It is a trend that continues in most forms of urban expansion around the world. The dispersion of the urban population into low density suburbs made living a private life possible for the middle class households (Fishman 1987), but it undermined the possibility of creating common spaces for shared experiences. It reflected a fragmentation of society into atomized units without sufficient spatial links to one another. The cry for the public space was partly a cry for the reintegration of this fragmented fabric through the introduction of connective tissues.

The process of suburbanization has primarily been facilitated through the motor car. In addition to the creation of new suburbs, the existing urban space was to be reimagined and reorganized to make it accessible to cars. The reorganization of urban space for vehicular access had already attracted criticism (Sitte 1986). The power and speed of cars, however, fascinated the early modernists, as shown by the Futurist depiction of movement and the modernist manifestos such as the Charter of Athens, which aimed at the abolition of the street and the introduction of a hierarchy of roads (Le Corbusier 1987; Sert 1944). This was later written into the core agenda of urban development, where fast roads were to become the backbone of the urban space (Buchanan 1963). The street, therefore, was losing its social value and turned into a functional tool for rapid travel. The campaign for the public space was partly an endeavour to turn this tide and reclaim the streets and squares for sociability. Pedestrian movement would allow the urban population to linger and repose, and as such to be able to develop spaces of interaction and sociability, rather than mere functionality.

With the arrival of the information and communication technologies, it was thought that cities would disappear altogether (Martindale 1966). Time and space were thought to have been annihilated and life was going to take place in a space of flows (Castells 1996). It was no longer important where you were, as you could have access to resources and services from any location. The possibility of connecting to anyone anywhere, and the creation of online communities, would herald a new type of non-spatial public space. These technical possibilities, however, have not removed the need for cities, but in fact cities have become more vibrant, and the actual spaces of the city needed to cater for the encounters with the growing number of urban populations. The economies of scale, the changing nature of economic



relations, the need for mutual social support and the cultural texture of social life have all stimulated the growth of cities, with inevitable need for the public space provision and improvement (O'Sullivan 2012). While the dramatic emergence of the information and communication technologies has stimulated the growth of a digital public sphere, it has enhanced, rather than impeded, the need for face-to-face interaction and communication that is enabled through physical co-presence.

Provision and maintenance of the public space is now a central theme of urban development in European strategic policy documents. According to the Aalborg Charter, created by European towns and cities in 1994, the lack of open space is a core environmental problem (EC 1994). The European Environment Agency acknowledged that the search for individual comfort and quality of domestic space had led to urban sprawl, with negative impacts for society and environment, consuming higher rates of energy and land, generating higher levels of traffic, air and noise pollution (EEA 2009). The solution lay in reducing energy consumption through the construction of compact cities, combining mixed land use, high-density living, and reliance on public transport. However, high-density compact urban environments needed to be made liveable by the provision of high-quality public open space. The public open space, therefore, becomes a central theme in the policy documents that advocate sustainable development (EC 2007, 2010). A sustainable city is envisaged to include 'safe areas, green and other public spaces, as well as ... short distances to facilities and services', to be 'sufficiently attractive to counter urban sprawl' (EEA 2009, p. 40). According to the European Environment Agency, 'Urban areas need to provide for their citizens the foundations for choices leading towards more sustainable life styles, such as affordable housing in more compact urban areas that provide high-quality public spaces and a healthy environment.' (EEA 2009, p. 102).

These various charters and strategies all give specific prominence to the public space, as the incessant urban expansion needs to be restrained by creating compact cities, but compact cities should offer a high quality of life that would persuade people to stay in cities, rather than leaving for the suburbs and fuelling urban sprawl. Provision of public spaces is one of the key ingredients of high-quality environment, and the significance of parks and boulevards has been recognized for centuries. Now the emphasis is on all the green assets of an urban area, connected to each other to form a green infrastructure, which allows the wildlife to thrive, local food production to be enhanced, and connection with the natural world be maintained. Public spaces are reclaimed from the car, pedestrians and bicycles are given more prominence, civil society actors invest their energies in urban improvement, and a campaign for de-cluttering has started for getting rid of the mass of instructions that fill

the urban space, creating information overload and aesthetic disarray.

The problem, however, lies in the gap between the need and the availability of resources, between the rhetoric and practice in the provision and distribution of public spaces. Under the conditions of dwindling public budgets, provision and maintenance of public spaces is under threat. An example is the situation of public parks. A recent research into public parks in the UK found that parks are popular and more frequently used, especially by households with children and those living in ethnic minority areas. At the same time, the park maintenance budgets and staff numbers continue to be cut. 'It is clear that there is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. This gap does not bode well for the future condition and health of the nation's public parks.' (Heritage Lottery Fund 2016, p. 2). The Report argues that 'No single organisation is capable of tackling this considerable challenge alone', and therefore asks for new models of management and funding through collaboration and partnership (Heritage Lottery Fund 2016, p. 2). The private companies who enter such partnerships, however, would have different modes of operation, with different expectations which may not coincide with the ethos of providing a free space for public enjoyment. The provision and maintenance of public spaces, which are seen to be so essential for the social integration of fragmented societies and spatial reintegration of the wasteful urban sprawl, are not supported by the economic circumstances of cities.

Multi-layered urban society

The spatial dispersion of cities unfolds alongside their social diversification and inequality, together creating a mosaic of difference and segregation. The fourth dimension of a social critique of the current wave of rhetoric about public spaces, therefore, is whether the provision of public spaces takes into account and responds to the problems of inequality, vulnerability and exclusion, or it contributes to them by becoming a vehicle of gentrification and a barrier to access (Madanipour 2010).

The world is now officially urban, with more than half the world living in cities, which are growing further at high rates (UN Habitat 2012). Even in Europe, where population is fairly stable and 80% of people already live in urban areas, larger cities are growing rapidly, albeit at the expense of smaller towns and cities, as well as through international migration (RWI et al. 2010). In this urban world, public spaces are particularly significant on many levels. As more people come to cities, they need the essential spaces that facilitate social life, a common infrastructure of institutions and spaces that is a vital prerequisite for making collective



life possible. It is in the DNA of urban life, as evident in informal settlements around the world, where we can witness the birth of an urban area, where consolidation of housing is followed by the development of local public spaces (Hernández Bonilla 2010). The development of urban areas that are dismissed as slums follows the historic path of mature cities, where people's ingenuity and imagination create the spaces necessary for a decent collective life.

Alongside the growth of urban populations, social diversity and inequality has increased. With the economic and political shifts towards the market, the growth of social inequality is detectable in most countries. As various reports by the EU, OECD, and the UK government show, social inequality has grown over the last three decades, alongside the changing model of economic development and the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres (OECD 2008; EC 2010). Also, with globalization and international migration, smaller households and increasing variety of lifestyles, the urban populations are more diverse than ever before. In the transition from manufacturing to services, the organization of social groups and urban spaces has been changing. Blue-collar workers had once shaped the industrial cities, with their rigid routines of life and mass patterns of consumption and socialization. With the relocation of industries, blue-collar workers are being replaced by white-collar workers who work in services, with their flexible routines of work and diversified patterns of consumption, and served by an army of casual and underpaid workers from around the world.

Gentrification, which facilitates this displacement and replacement of one group with another, is a widespread phenomenon around the world (Atkinson and Bridge 2005). Public space improvements, whether by public authorities, civil society activists, or private companies, adjust the city's space for its inhabitants, but in doing so, they might knowingly or unknowingly facilitate displacement and gentrification. On the receiving end, ghettoization, homelessness, and sudden bursts of anger in the form of riots, are some of the ways that these changes find expression in public spaces. But anger and protest are not limited to the invisible and deprived minorities. They are also displayed by the mainstream casualties of these major transitions, as played out in public spaces in all continents.

Meanwhile, a series of social movements have pushed for broadening the meaning of the public. The word public refers to people as a whole and theoretically includes everyone. But in practice, it has tended towards a narrow definition, without taking the diversity of society and the different positions and needs of its members into account. Women have argued that cities have historically been built and run by men, undermining women's roles and needs. In the distinction between the public and the private, men have dominated the public sphere of

work and politics, pushing women to a domestic sphere in which they could be controlled and suppressed. City design clearly reflected this unequal arrangement, whereby industrialization separated the world of work from home, suburbanization trapped women in isolated peripheries, socialization became limited to the spaces of consumption, and the design and management of urban spaces remained insensitive to women's needs. Alongside women's movement, ethnic and cultural minorities have also argued for their right to the city, overcoming the actual and symbolic barriers that deny them access to particular places and activities. They have demanded to be represented in the public domain, rather than being ignored, undermined or suppressed.

In the design of the urban environment, the standards were set by the able-bodied and mobile populations, while the elderly and the disabled were often ignored, and their reduced mobility was seen as a regrettable but inevitable fact of life. But now in ageing societies, addressing their needs becomes a pressing concern. For a person with reduced mobility, moving in most public spaces is a struggle, continually negotiating impassable barriers. Many cities have started adopting measures for widening access to those with reduced mobility, either in a wheelchair, pushchair, or just having difficulty in negotiating the steps and steep slopes. Children are at the core of the nuclear households and their significance has grown enormously in modern family life. Their presence in the public space has been managed through a combination of ordering and protection. The provision of playgrounds has acknowledged the need to cater for children, and the fear of anonymity and crime in the city has led to all forms of protective behaviour, but has also limiting their presence to specialist and monitored places. Young people in public places, meanwhile, become considered as threats to others, closely watched for any misbehaviour that would unsettle the calm order of the city. When fear of crime has risen, all vulnerable groups have withdrawn from public spaces. The tension between the vulnerable elderly people and the energetic teenagers is one of the key themes of the public space in many neighbourhoods.

With social diversification and historical change come tensions over identity. With its monuments and collective experience, public spaces form an integral part of the urban identity, folding many layers of history into tight corners of urban space. But when people or places change, a crisis of representation is evident: whose identity does or should the public space represent? Some elements of the past simply turn into an aesthetic experience, losing their meaning and significance in the mist of time. When the city's history includes troubled memories, or when they are simply treated as belonging to an unremarkable period in history, they present new challenges: should they be kept and remembered, or should they be removed and forgotten? As bad memories



or insignificant heritage, they put forward a dilemma that many cities face all the time.

The key feature of public spaces is their accessibility. The more accessible a place, the more public it becomes. Access is not abstract and universal: it is the expression of relationships between people, an expression of power and control over territory, an interplay of inclusion and exclusion. So it always takes different forms and levels, and that is why a city is full of shades of public–private relations, from the most public to the most private places. The boundaries that separate the public and private spheres from one another, manage this access, and in doing so they characterize a society. One of the orthodoxies in urban design advocates clear boundaries between the two realms. Harsh and strict boundaries, however, suggest unequal societies, where fear and threat of violence rule. Highly articulate, soft and porous boundaries, in contrast, show a more peaceful and sophisticated encounter, and a more urbane society.

The boundaries between public and private spheres are never fixed, dividing the urban world into a sharp dualism. Instead, it is always evolving and interdependent. While in legal and institutional terms the ownership and control of space may be clear, in practice and in managing the spaces of the city, elaborate interfaces between the two realms would add to the cultural richness of the city life. The blurred boundaries between public and private realms in institutions and in spaces are not necessarily the same.

Conclusion: between attraction and interaction

This paper has argued for a critical evaluation of the concept of the public space, which started life as a critique of the neoliberal phase in urban development, but has now been widely adopted by most stakeholders operating within that phase. This adoption, subsequently, is at odds with the needs for the provision and maintenance of accessible public spaces, which suffer from dwindling public budgets. As public authorities have embraced a more entrepreneurial character and approach, the concept and character of the public space have also changed. The rhetoric of the public space as a space of interaction has remained, but it has become increasingly an instrument of attraction, at the service of unequally distributed economic interests.

If there are strong social and economic reasons for paying attention to the public space, how can there be any shadow of doubt about the value of making public spaces? An important problem is in the potential incompatibility of the social and economic considerations, which tends to find expression in real estate issues. Public space as a space of attraction tends to find an instrumental value, at the service of attracting companies, visitors, shoppers, house-buyers,

property developers and investors. In other words, the creation and maintenance of public space is a vehicle of achieving something else, a stepping stone towards a different destination. However, in promoting it, the rhetoric of public space as the space of interaction may be employed, hence generating a multi-layered and potentially ambiguous representation. While attraction and interaction can be expected to coincide and be mutually supportive, the underlying conditions of fragmentation and inequality make it ever harder for it to happen. As the fruits of economic development are not equally distributed, the question becomes: Are public spaces good for everyone, or do they serve only some people? In other words, whose spaces are they? This gap indicates major political, economic and cultural transformations, which are reflected in the difference between ‘the public space’, as an ideal type which drives the rhetoric, and ‘public spaces’ as the real urban places with many layers of meaning, restriction and levels of accessibility.

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