# **Public Space**

Definition

*Public space* refers to an urban space that is freely accessible to all people. Accessibility here refers not only to the ability to physically enter public space, but also the ability to participate in, and take decisions about, the activities taken place in it (Carmona et al 2003; Shaftoe 2008). Conventional categorisations of public space include urban parks, civic plazas, streets, markets, playgrounds, community open spaces, waterfronts, greenways, and indoor public venues.

Public space is a physical entity associated with the political concept of *public sphere* (Low and Smith 2006). It can also be referred to as *public realm* when the physical aspect and the political aspect coincide. Understandings of public space have recently moved away from the dichotomy of public and private, with public space being recognised as bearing various degrees of publicness. Dimensions of publicness are further discussed below.

## Synonyms

Public sphere, public realm, urban open space

## Introduction

Public space forms a large proportion of urban space in our cities today and are vital for the city’s future. Ideally, public space provides venues for social gathering, communication, social activities, expression of political views, which are beneficial for people’s quality of life. Public space also contributes to the city’s ecological system, aesthetics, and economy. Ensuring good quality public space is the key for the development of more sustainable and resilient cities.

This chapter briefly reviews the origin and development of the concept of public space. It focuses on debates of contemporary public space which include the commodification of public space and its consequences on social justice; the temporary uses of public space that helps fulfil the changing demands of societies; and the mediation and social representation of public space, which also bear implications for equity. We conclude by reflecting on how urban design and planning can respond to the challenges posed by these debates, suggesting that research should extend to cover non-Western countries and regions.

Main Text

### Defining public space

Canonical texts associate the origins of public spaces with democracy and participation, using the Greek agora and the Roman forum as examples (Zucker 1959). Scholars critiqued these ‘origins’ narrative by noticing how those allegedly “ideal” Western European public spaces in fact precluded access to women and enslaved people (Arendt 1958; Low and Smith 2006; Sennett 1970).

Early literature suggested that dichotomies between public and private spaces were embedded in bourgeois cities where the “private” was neatly defined and protected by property laws (Benjamin 1979, cited from Parker 2015, 17). Walter Benjamin (1979) argued that, in cities where market dynamics were not the main driver of urban development, boundaries between public and private spaces were less defined. Researchers have started to investigate the concept of public space in those contexts, such as in China. The “public” referred to apparatuses of states, the market, and anything in-between, e.g. civil society (Warner 2002). Thus the “public” can have multiple meanings across the public-private spectrum.

This observation has prompted critics to explore and assess the so-called *publicness of public space*. For some, the publicness was defined by access, agency (who controls what happens in space?) and interests (who benefits from the activities that take place?) (Benn and Gaus 1983; Akkar 2005); Others stressed the question of ownership of the space, access, and social interaction or use (Kohn 2004; Marcuse 2004). Based on their study of several public spaces in London, Carmona and Wunderlich (2012) suggested that access is the main, if not the only aspect that truly determines the publicness of public space. Varna and Tiesdell (2010) proposed a *Star* model of publicness, assessing public space in terms of control (presence of formal rules), civility (maintenance and facilities), animation (social interaction), physical configuration, and ownership.

While important, these models tend to evaluate public spaces almost exclusively based on their physical qualities, and from the perspective of designers, planners, and managers. This approach has been criticized by those who see public space as inseparable from social structures and human agency (Low and Smith 2006). Public space is understood as a product of social practice and social relations (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; Mitchell 2003; Madanipour 2003; Kohn 2004). The relationship between public space and urban life is dynamic, reciprocal and ever changing (Loukaitou-Sideris and Benerjee 1998), which makes analyses of public space context-dependent and complex. Within the lively debates over the future of public space, there are recurring concerns over questions of privatisation, surveillance, and equity. The next section addresses some of these concerns, focusing on the commodification and social justice, temporary use, as well as mediation and representation of public space.

### Commodification and social justice

Since the 1990s, post-industrial cities experienced a shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the growing commercialisation of science and technology, and the emergence of professional classes (Bell 1976). As a result, public spaces, which traditionally resulted from economic and urban growth, increasingly carry the burden of generating income through tourism and place “branding” (Gospodini 2004; Ashworth and Voogd 1990). This is evident in efforts in heritage preservation, the creation of “creative clusters,” and large-scale urban regenerations which are typically mobilised to attract capitals.

In Britain, examples include the Southwark in London, the docks in Liverpool, and MediaCity in Salford. In Europe, there are the Hafen City in Hamburg or the Bjørvika area in Oslo (Burda and Nyka 2017). Such projects are frequently realised through public-private partnership, with the resultant public spaces being commercialised and privatised. Often, these developments advance the economic interests of the elites, which may conflict with the wider public good. The spatial and political ramifications of privatisation have received considerable attention (e.g. Minton 2006). We trace some of these debates below, highlighting recent efforts for countering exclusion.

Public spaces are supposed to be opened to everyone, allowing strangers to encounter one another and democracy to take form (Arendt 1958; Goffman 1963). But opportunities to access and use public spaces are not equally distributed among the residents of a city. Henri Lefebvre’s (1968) concept of the *Right to the City* famously captured the political consequences of spatial exclusion. Highlighting how capitalist relations make urban centres increasingly hostile to the poor, Lefebvre argued that all those who inhabit a city should instead have the right to use and produce its spaces. Scholars of the 1970s and 1980s further explored links between public space and social exclusion. For example, Richard Sennett (1970) argued that modern transformations of public spaces prevent people from interacting with each other, therefore impeding societies to “mature”. William Whyte (1988) drew attention on how the design of urban forms contributes to banishing traditionally marginalized groups who are designated as “undesirables.”

Feminist critics of the 1990s expanded discourses on the *Right to the City.* They demonstrated how people face exclusion not only based on social class, but also, because of their gender, race, health, and sexuality (Fraser 1990; Young 1989). Building on this consideration, Leonie Sandercock (2003) suggested that a more just urban condition should entitle all residents to the *Right to Difference*, or the ability to participate in the physical and social production of space. Scholars of the same period focused on detailing how built environments amplify inequities by rendering specific uses—and users—unwelcome (Banerjee 2001; Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998). Regulations sanction behaviours such as loitering or selling merchandise, de facto preventing some people from using public space (Austin 1994; Blomley 2007). Privatisations and commodification keep out those who cannot afford to pay to access a space (Boyer 1993; Sorkin 1992). The symbolic construction of landscapes normalises ideas of who are the “appropriate” users, making those who look different appear as if they do not belong (Hayden 1995; Zukin 1991).

If public spaces can exacerbate inequities, they can also provide people with opportunities to counter oppression. Since the 2000s, a robust scholarship has analysed *Everyday Urbanisms*, or the spatial appropriations by which the users of a city satisfy needs (Chase et al. 1999), and make a city their own (Low 2000; Hou 2011). While not all the interactions that occur in public space necessarily ease social frictions (Amin 2002), a consensus has emerged that ensuring freedom of access and usage to as many people as possible can help increase mutual respect among strangers (Anderson 2008, Kohn 2004).

These considerations have prompted new reflections on urban design as a transformative force for social change. While fully aware that design cannot solve all problems, critics have suggested that spatial transformations can help reverse oppressive relations of power (Tonkiss 2013; Loukaitou-Sideris 2020). *Just Urban Design* has recently emerged as a framework that urges architects and planners to centre the voices of excluded people, facilitating their insurgent practices of self-empowerment (Goh et al. 2022-forthcoming; Iveson and Low 2016).

### Temporary use of public space for changing social needs

Public spaces are produced, shaped and given meaning by various human activities, temporary appropriations, and subjectivities. Some of the uses of public space are not planned, but unexpected, spontaneous, and momentary to meet different users’ needs. Researchers refer to this quality as the ‘looseness of space,’ or the adaptability of public spaces to accommodate a diverse urban life and to facilitate vitality of cities (Franck and Stevens 2006). Scholars suggested that the temporary dimensions of public space are often neglected in the design and management of space, but are nonetheless vital for the functioning of public space (Carmona et al. 2003; Thwaites et al. 2007).

Public space offers possibilities for assembling temporary installations of portable, mobile, and demountable structures. These structures can serve a variety of purposes including hosting cultural and entertainment events, commercial exchange, markets, political activities, and other types of gathering. The COVID19 pandemic has demonstrated the enormous potential of such transportable, reversable structures set up in public spaces for testing and curing COVID patients (Fang et al. 2020). For example, in Wuhan, China, the public space by the Wuhan International Conference and Exhibition Centre was rapidly constructed to accommodate medical beds and facilities. Temporary drive-in stations and tents were set up in many cities for COVID tests.

Not only state-owned, but also private-owned spaces can be temporarily occupied to satisfy needs. As scholars noted (e.g. Bishop and Williams 2012; Madanipour 2017), temporary installations in privately owned spaces can serve regenerate areas and create opportunities in periods of economic stagnation (Berwyn 2013; Steele 2013). Vacant sites, according to Madanipour (2017, 13), were produced by “the cyclical nature of capitalism and its recurring crises of overproduction” but can be temporarily used by creative or cultural industries while waiting for planned regeneration. These uses can add positive value to the space and the community. For example, in the UK, a charity organisation called *Meanwhile Foundation* helps people deliver temporary uses legally and in a cost-effective manner.

Beyond these positive aspects, scholars have also pointed out that temporary use of spaces can become a branding exercise for corporate organisations and pose financial risk to smaller businesses with less capital security (Martin et al. 2019). Moreover, as pop-up parklets, food markets, and art installations have become popular tools to regenerate “neglected” areas, most of these interventions gear towards the tastes of white-collar professionals, further excluding disadvantaged urbanites (e.g., Bostic et al. 2015; Munoz 2019).

### Technological Mediations of public space

In the context of digitisation and global media, digital infrastructure interacts with many of the traditional elements of public space, producing new meanings of it. The technological mediations of public space are underpinned by theorisations of the image of the city in the age of electronic communication (Sorkin 1992; Zukin 1995); by conceptualizations of the city as a medium (Kittler 1996; Mumford 1961); by future urban imaginaries based on telecommunication networks (Mitchell 1995; Graham and Marvin 1997; Wigley 2001); by cinematic constructions of urban space (Koeck 2013; Penz and Lu 2011); and by urban experiences shaped by technological devices embedded in urban infrastructure (Shepard 2011; Townsend 2013). Models such as the ‘networked city,’ the ‘media city,’ and the ‘smart city’ are celebrated for their endless potential, openness, and performativity. Meanwhile, the citizens of these cities oscillate between the promise of infinite freedom and the concern of continuous surveillance.

As the city is digitally recorded and reproduced via the Internet, our understanding of public space is shaped not only by the material presence of buildings and landscapes, but also and increasingly by their digital representations. This has significant impacts on how politics play out in public space, and on collective identities are formed. Paul Virilio (1994, 62) argues that video recording and information technologies have marked the end of a logic of public representation and the beginning of a “paradoxical logic,” where the real-time image acts upon the object represented and, in this way, subverts the very concept of reality. With social communication taking place upon these recorded perspectives, the public image replaces the public space (Virilio 1994, 64) and the screen absorbs the public realm, becoming the new “city-square” (Virilio 1991, 25-7).

The ever-expanding number of images circulating across different media and personal devices may give us the illusion that the space of the city may be brought directly before our eyes. However, it leaves us with an unclear sense of the reality of things as well as with limited capacity for immediate action. Especially in spaces of conflict, it is important to look closely at, and to engage with, the places and people that are obscured, distorted, overwritten, or left behind the representations of public space (Boyer 1996, 138). This crisis, therefore, calls local bodies, policy makers, and designers to situate themselves between the complex layers of public space and their representation so that they create more inclusive spaces.

## Summary/Conclusion

This chapter has presented a non-exclusive list of debates on contemporary public space focusing particularly on the social impact of these various phenomena: the commercialisation and privatisation of public space, its temporary use, and its mediation and virtualisation. All three phenomena point to similar questions of justice and equity. They call for efforts to allow marginalised people to access and participate in social activities, benefit from them, and to be represented in physical as well as virtual spaces.

Design and planning cannot solve all social problems. But socially conscious urban design can provide a better chance for public spaces to overcome hurdles against these challenges. There is no one-size-fit-all design solution. As we argued in this chapter, the production of public space is highly context-dependent, being imbricated with multiple social, physical, and political relations. The meaning of public space is fulfilled through the entire lifecycle of planning, development, management, representation, exchange, and use (Carmona 2014; Madanipour 2017). Attention should be paid to particular cities and particular public spaces within them.

We also recognise that studies on public spaces have been mostly focusing on cities in Western Europe and North America. In the last decade, public spaces in East Asia, the Global South, and Eastern Europe have attracted more scholarly attention, but work on these regions is still scarce. Although similar phenomena of spatial change such as privatisation and gentrification can be found in those areas, the difference in attitude towards state intervention (via design and planning) poses new challenges and opportunities (Hee, Schroepfer et al. 2008; Sadowy and Lisiecki 2019). The public spaces in those areas, as reflections of different attitudes towards capitalism and neo-liberalism, call for alternative design solutions and approaches.

## Cross-References

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