

Rethinking Urban Public Space in the Context of Democracy and Altruism

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Renewed interest in the potential and opportunity that exists in urban environments has led to a reinvestment in the public spaces of American cities. This reinvestment has led to changes in the design, maintenance, security, and governance of public spaces across the country. These physical and administrative changes in public space largely reflect the competing ideas about *what* constitutes public space and *who* constitutes public space (Mitchell 1995:115). Recent social science literature emphasizes that the way in which public space is defined and controlled has significant consequences for democratic operations within the city. For the purposes of this paper, the term public space will initially refer to the streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas that are accessible and open to the all people of the city. It is the intent of this paper to review the social science literature that discusses the importance of public space in democratic societies and proceed to use that discussion as a springboard to consider how public space might be defined from an altruistic perspective.

Susan Bickford, political science professor at the University of North Carolina, offers a clue as to why public space is important in democratic discourse: “We can see that it is also significant as a space of attention orientation, a space that shapes citizens’ sense of what people, perspectives, and problems are present in the democratic public” (Bickford 2000: 356). From the discussion of the role of public space in developing democratic participation, it is somewhat natural to make the transition to how public space might be thought of from an altruistic or “other-regarding” perspective. It seems public space plays a role in informing a potentially altruistic person as to whom “the other” includes in

her or his city and what the needs and desires of “the other” might be. The logic behind this is fairly simple. One can only think about showing concern for the other if one, first, realizes that the other exists. Thus, we might begin by thinking of altruistic public space as a common area where *every* “other” would have the opportunity to be seen or heard by an altruistic person so that the altruistic person would be able to recognize the various others and determine how best to respond to their needs.

In order to further develop the idea of altruistic public space, it seems appropriate to turn to the social science literature which analyzes the current condition of public space. The ideals of *what* should take place in public space and *who* should make up the public space are central to most of the public space literature. The authors of the public space literature used in this review largely share similar concerns when it comes to the ideals of *what* and *who* constitutes the public spaces that have materialized through the design and redevelopment efforts in the past decades. It seems that the consensus is that most attempts to develop or redevelop public spaces have been characterized by attempts by the middle/upper classes, business owners, government, and planners (those with decision-making power) to promote biased views of who the “public” is and how public spaces should function. These ideological visions of public space promoted by the dominant groups of society have created public spaces that exclude certain groups from fully accessing and using the public spaces.

Indeed, the trend has been for dominant groups in society to take various measures to privatize public space as a means of creating order, control, predictability, comfort, sameness, and security in public spaces in order to promote recreational, entertainment, and shopping opportunities (Bickford 2000; Crawford 1995; Davis 1992; Katz 2006;

Mitchell 1995; Mitchell and Staeheli 2006; Schaller and Modan 2005; Staeheli and Thompson 1997). Privatization is generally achieved through the transfer of the maintenance, security, or management rights of a space to a private entity like a business association, development corporations or homeowners association. When private interests provide security or make rules for a public space, they can directly or indirectly exclude certain groups or types of people. Middle/upper classes see order, comfort, and security (as defined through their own experience) as critical to a properly functioning public space and seek to exclude those groups who do not fit with their definitions of order, comfort, and security. The literature contains many examples of how privatizing public space to create order and security dramatically reduces the rights, opportunities, and visibility of many social groups and minorities, preventing such groups from using public spaces in ways that are beneficial to their needs, desires, and lifestyles. Here, I will try to summarize some of the main problems with public space today and will end with the literature’s ideas of how to create truly democratic public space while attempting to link those ideas to a working concept of what altruistic public space might entail.

The homeless are, perhaps, the group that are most harmed by the changing nature of public space. Don Mitchell details the fight between the homeless and the university planners at UC Berkley over People’s Park, undeveloped land owned by the university but left undeveloped until 1991 when volleyball courts, public baths, and security lights were installed (Mitchell 1995: 110). At this time, the park also began closing every night at 7 p.m. and all trespassers (the homeless) were arrested for occupying the space at night (115). From 1969 to 1991, the park had operated as a user-controlled space that provided a “haven for those squeezed out by a fully regulated urban environment” (109). The park

had a Free Speech stage, grassy assembly area, and a Free Box (a clothes drop-off). For homeless activists, People’s Park “was a place where the rights of citizenship could be expanded to the most disenfranchised segment of contemporary American democracy” (117). Mitchell argues that the changes made to People’s Park were based on the University administration’s idea that the homeless did not constitute a “legitimate public” since their presence was contrary to an ordered and rational society (118). Mitchell emphasizes that strict regulation of public spaces can be detrimental to the idea of a true democracy where every voice is represented. When the homeless are removed from the gathering places of the city, they are “*unrepresented* in our images of ‘the public,’ they are banished to a realm outside of politics” (120).

Recently, Don Mitchell and Lynn Staeheli examined the redevelopment at San Diego’s Horton Plaza Park, a long-time gathering place for the homeless and elderly poor. The park once featured public toilets, a rescue mission, benches, and served as a social center and location for essential services for the homeless (Mitchell 2006: 147). Yet, in 1990, it was decided that all benches were to be removed from the park and the grass was replaced with prickly plants and flowers (156). Mitchell and Staeheli define property as a set rules and practices that determine how the owner can exclude others (149). Those in charge of property have an influence over who is excluded. Thus, Mitchell and Staeheli found a cause for concern when redevelopment initiatives gave a private interest, the Downtown Partnership (a private organization funded by business and property owners), control over the maintenance and cleanliness of the park (162). This made Horton Plaza Park a pseudo-private space; pseudo-private spaces are spaces “that are formally owned by the state, by the public, but that are subject to the control and

regulation of private interests” (153). The Downtown Partnership took further action against the homeless by hiring “Community Ambassadors” described by the president of the Partnership as mean and rough looking individuals who will “get in the face of the homeless people” (164). These ambassadors have “a very set idea of who belongs, and who does not belong, in the public spaces of the city” (165). Mitchell and Staeheli point out that pseudo-privatization transforms the nature of what is *public* since a private corporation can choose who belongs and who does not (166). Through the transformation of the *public*, “the homeless become pariah, at once a symbol of all that is wrong with the public sphere and an ongoing hindrance to redevelopment and the good it brings in the form of increased property values” (166).

The call for increased security in public spaces tends to drastically limit the access and opportunities available to marginalized groups. Mike Davis extensively describes security measures designed to reduce the presence of the poor and homeless and separate the middle class from conditions of poverty in the public spaces of Los Angeles. Davis cites that the modern obsession with security ruins any chance for urban reform and social integration since it has become a form of social warfare that “pits the interests of the middle class against the welfare of the urban poor” (1992: 155). Davis describes the process of “armoring the city against the poor” (includes rounded bum-proof benches, eliminating public water sources and toilets, bag-lady-proof dumpsters, etc) in order to deter the poor from occupying areas near the redeveloped areas of the downtown. This armoring is done so that the middle and upper classes will not be deterred from living within the city (160-1). In areas where middle and lower classes may potentially cross paths, precautions are taken to ensure their separation (163). Davis describes parking

garages that feature “twenty-four hour, state-of-the-art security” for corporate parking structures that feature landscaped micro-parks, food courts, picnic areas, and a historical exhibit, minimizing white-collar exposure to the street (163). Clearly, this exclusion and segregation is detrimental to the functioning of public space as a space where the people and the problems of the city can be witnessed. A number of other security measures are described in the article, but Davis’ point is that truly democratic public spaces are destroyed when city governments and businesses insist on continually upgrading the security of the city (155).

On top of affecting the opportunities, rights, and well being of the poor and homeless adults, the privatization and deterioration of public space also affects the development and presence of children in public space. Cindi Katz cites the “all-out assault on the sense of public responsibility for collective social life” that has taken place since the Reagan administration (2006: 111). Privatization of park management tends to result in uneven distribution of funds that go toward the improvement of public parks. The private groups in charge tend to put all their money into the improvement of prominent parks of the city, but look past improving the parks and playgrounds in poorer neighborhoods (117-8). This results in fewer quality places for children to play. Katz adds the problem of “terror talk” and the infatuation with keeping children safe in public environments. After dismissing the thought that public environments pose a major threat to children (abuse often occurs within the home), Katz cites some of the consequences of children’s restricted access to public space, including lost opportunities for developing spatial skills or geographical knowledge (important to a range of careers) and lost opportunities to develop social skills that are learned best among children playing on their own. Katz is

left wondering what kind of citizens might result from children raised in highly restricted (often socially homogenous) environments (115).

Another group that has lost full rights to public space could be characterized as “counter-cultural” youth (those who do not necessarily desire to be a part of the mainstream community). Lynn Staeheli and Albert Thompson describe the youths struggle to have access to “the Hill” near the University of Colorado. For the University Hill Merchants Association, the city government, and the University Hill neighbors, the youth that occupied the Hill posed a threat to the order and comfort of the area (Staeheli 1997: 32-35). To bring order and security, the government, merchants, and neighborhood increased police presence, and extended private control into the public space of the Hill through the use of fences and “no loitering” and “no skateboarding” signs (33, 36). The youth were not perceived as true citizens since the merchants and neighbors did not feel that they were “responsible” members of the community even though all were legal citizens (30, 37-8). In fact, the youth did not want to be members of the mainstream community since they had their own economy, social norms, and system of justice (36). Yet, the authors take issue with the restriction of public space to any citizen regardless of whether or not they fit the mold of the dominant community (38).

Taking the issue of citizenship and public space rights one step further, Margaret Crawford describes the immigrant street vendors of Los Angeles who engage in street vending which is illegal (but unprosecuted) and are often undocumented, making them “doubly illegal” (1995 6-7). This raises the question if public spaces should be restricted to non-citizens. Crawford points out that the vendors contribute to the social and economic narratives of the city by offering heroic and horrifying stories of their fight to

cross the border and use vending as a means of economic mobility (6-7). Even though vending is criminalized, the vendors use the public space to fight harassment and defend their livelihood as they become an economic and political presence in the city (7).

Again, what the literature indicates is that perceptions of *whom* and *what* constitutes public space differ greatly, but when one group has decision making power, their ideal public space is created. This is best shown by Schaller and Modan’s study of how different racial/ethnic and class groups viewed their neighborhood of Mount Pleasant in Washington DC. The Vietnamese and Latina/o groups viewed public space as “places ‘to hang out’ and ‘meet friends’” and low-income groups did not think spending money was an important part of socializing in public space (Schaller 2005: 403). Meanwhile, European-Americans associate just ‘hanging out’ in public space with suspicious behavior and describe “‘people entering stores, buying things, having a purpose’ as ‘more comforting’” (403). Thus, it is no surprise that the Euro-American and business owner dominated Neighborhood Business Improvement District (NBID) has placed an emphasis on “an increased security force and more stringent loitering statutes” in Mount Pleasant’s public space (403).

Privatization and the demand for order, comfort, and security does not only harm the marginalized classes and groups that lose rights and a political voice; indeed, the exclusion and segregation created by privatization harm the dominant societal groups by creating distorted views of the city, democracy, and civic virtue. Susan Bickford describes how racial and class segregation caused by gentrification creates a purified experience of the city where those who live in purified areas are presented with an inaccurate view of the city and the people with in it (Bickford 2000: 361, 363). “We

endanger the possibility of democratic politics when we settle in these enclosures, particularly when we become so accustomed to the walls that we forget that they are there, for then we begin to imagine that ‘the world’ consists only of those within our gates” (363). Here again, we can make the link between democracy and altruism that was described at the beginning of the paper; one might not be a true altruist in a community where she or he does not realize that there are needy people in the community. Bickford also describes how civic virtue is distorted in privatized developments to simply mean “maintaining property values” (360). Further, Schaller and Modan describe how BID’s (Business Improvement Districts) turn neighborhoods into a “sanitized economic space” where the primary role of citizens as social actors is reduced to that of a consumer, which “narrows the domain of interaction with the environment and with fellow citizens” (Schaller 2005: 396). Clearly, recent trends in the treatment and design of public space have created an environment that distorts human intersubjectivity.

Yet, it is important to note what agreements in the literature might promote as a more appropriate view of public space. Generally, the authors seek a view of public space that emphasizes interaction and debate between diverse groups instead of economic exchange or unattainable desires for security and comfort. Indeed, middle class notions of order, control, sameness, predictability, comfort, and security are to be done away with when describing public space. Public space is an arena where marginalized groups can make themselves known and protest injustice, even if that means allowing disorder and discomfort (see particularly Crawford 1995; Mitchell 1995; Schaller 2005). “Change,

multiplicity, and contestation—rather than constituting the failure of public space—may in fact define its very nature” (Crawford 1995).

It seems that the literature’s definition of a more appropriate view of public space may well coincide with what an altruistic public space might be like. The literature revealed how privatization and demands for order, comfort, and security can be destructive to democracy since they are based on exclusion. From an altruistic point of view, order, comfort, and security do not seem to be “other-regarding” at all; rather, notions of security, comfort, and order put the interests of the self ahead of any concerns for the other. I think this is a point that must be emphasized because it seems that current attempts to build community (and presumably promote altruism and reciprocity) are still plagued by a desire to create a community that is comfortable, consumption-based, and free of all disorder and conflict. David Harvey examines the darker-side of community; he finds that “the spirit of community” has historically been used as an antidote to threats of social disorder or class war” (Harvey 1997: 3). He criticizes New Urbanism for trying to create an environment where the unexpected and conflicts will be “tightly controlled and screened out with big signs that say ‘no deviant behavior acceptable here’ (3*). We live in a society that is unjust, so it at least seems that altruistic public spaces should avoid views of communities characterized by comfort and complete harmony. The focus should be on allowing every other (especially those with great needs) to make their sufferings and concerns known so that various people can work together and employ an altruism that seeks common good. The beauty of such spaces would not be found in the neatly trimmed and watered landscaping and orderly and controlled interactions, but rather in the spontaneous interaction and debate between a wide variety of social groups.

The success of altruistic public space would be gauged by the extent to which the city would bring together diverse groups and be able bring relief to the suffering of those in need.

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