Public Space--Urban Spaces Of Multiple And Diverse Publics

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PUBLIC SPACE—URBAN SPACES OF MULTIPLE AND DIVERSE PUBLICS

by

ANTTI MOELSAE

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Abstract

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by

Antti Moelsae

Advisor: Professor David Chapin

Shopping centers, hotel lobbies and – as was recently reported – McDonald’s restaurants have been appropriated as social and political spaces by the public, but then encounter resistance by the owners of those spaces. Shopping centers, which have come to replace urban public space around the world, are notorious for limiting the modes of use and actively prohibiting forms of political expression. The legal status of commercial spaces that substitute for traditional public spaces is still unclear. Much of the critique of privatization of public space has been directed towards these enclosed spaces, the ownership of which is unambiguously private. This study uses as examples the privately owned public spaces (POPS) found in New York. These are privately built and owned spaces, but their public use is regulated through legislation (easements) or otherwise granted by the owner. Many of these spaces were notoriously poorly built, and the public component was neglected. This study probes the political dimension of “public space” from various perspectives and analyzes the potentiality of POPS as part of the political public sphere through examples. Thinking these spaces through theoretical concepts that are developed over
the three chapters of this study, conclusions are drawn about the future of public space and the applicability of privately owned space as public space.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1
NOTES ON METHODOLOGY 2
CHAPTER 1: Theorizing Public Space and the Public Sphere 4
  What is the Definition of Public Space? 4
  Origins of the Concept “Public Space” 7
  Who is the Public: Community Space or Universal Public Space? 9
  Are physical spaces necessary for and constitutive of democracy? 12
  Hannah Arendt's Polis – Ideal-Typical Public Space 15
  The Public Sphere and Its Critiques 18
  Margaret Kohn – Ways Out: Radical Space 22
  Richard Sennet – Social Psychology of the Public or Can a “True”
  Public Sphere Exist In a Modern Society? 27
  Richard Wittman – Public Space as Discourse 29
CHAPTER 2: Three Examples of Privately Owned Public Space 33
  Seagram Plaza – A Civic Gesture 33
  Paley Park – Space for Leisure 37
  G.M. Plaza – Space Is Money 41
CHAPTER 3: Analysis 47
  Modern Space as Social Space 47
  What Does Privatization Mean for the Public Experience? 50
  Can POPS Be Called “Public Space”? 52
  Has Public Space Lost Its Political Potentiality? 55
  Spectacular Urban Space 58
  Conclusions 64
APPENDIX I: TABLES 69
  Table I: Spaces of Politics 69
APPENDIX II: ILLUSTRATIONS 67
  Seagram's ledge 68
  Seagram's steps 69
  New York City: General Motors Building – Sunken Plaza 1968 70
  Apple store entrance on GM plaza 71
  Crowd on GM plaza 72
  View of GM Building from Grand Army Plaza 73
  Paley Park seen from the street 74
  Paley Park interior 75
BIBLIOGRAPHY 76
Introduction

The first decade of this century has witnessed increasing interest towards public space amidst the ongoing privatization of this public good. Social and legal struggles against privatization and securitization of public space have been documented by Mitchell (2003) and Kohn (2004). The articles in Low and Smith's *The Politics of Public Space* (2006) analyze historical and current transformations of public space. Miller (2007) analyzed discourses on several of New York's nominally public spaces, where the notion of “the public” is constantly being redefined and curtailed. Kayden's (2002) *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York Experience* exposed significant lack of oversight by the NYC Department of City Planning over privately owned public spaces. Smithsimon (2008) found out that the poor design in a number of Manhattan's privately built, publicly accessible spaces was due to the developers express wish to keep people out.

Shopping centers, hotel lobbies and – as was recently reported – McDonald's restaurants (Torres, 2014)\(^1\) have been appropriated as social and political spaces by the public, but then encounter resistance by the owners of those spaces. Shopping centers, which have come to replace urban public space around the world, are notorious for limiting the modes of use and actively prohibiting forms of political expression. The legal status of commercial spaces that substitute for traditional public spaces is still unclear. Much of the critique of privatization of public space has been directed towards these enclosed spaces, the ownership of which is unambiguously private. This study uses as examples the privately owned public spaces (POPS) found in New York. These are privately built and owned spaces, but their public use is regulated through legislation (easements) or otherwise granted by the owner. In New York, the 1961 Zoning Ordinance introduced the so-called “bonus spaces” that are built through incentives given to developers: they receive “air rights” – the right to build higher than the zoning code would otherwise allow.

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\(^1\) According to the op-ed author: “One New York Times reader commented, 'It is only in the inner city that McDonald’s and Starbucks are the gathering places for the unwashed, elderly, incompetent and infirm. I suppose this is the price for being a city dweller. These people ruin everything!’ Others offered proposals to 'solve' the problem by making the seating uncomfortable or removing it altogether, suing the elderly customers or playing blaring rap music to drive them away." (Torres, 2014)
– in exchange for publicly accessible space. Many of these spaces were notoriously poorly built, and the public component was neglected.

The first chapter of this thesis reviews theories of public spaces, publics, and the public sphere. It probes the political dimension of “public space” from various perspectives. The provision of public space is understood as an inseparable attribute of democratic governance. It is not only that democracy is practiced in public space (cf. Parkinson 2009), public space is a democratic practice in itself. The second chapter presents three POPSs: all are located in Midtown Manhattan and were built between 1958 and 1966. Unlike shopping malls, which are clearly under private ownership, these spaces appear to be in the public realm when in fact they are privately owned and controlled. Seagram plaza was the first public plaza of its kind, and had a great influence on the 1961 Zoning Resolution that incentivized developers to build public spaces. The Seagram plaza has been lauded by critics; it seems to be a space that “works,” as a social space. A counter example is the General Motors Building plaza, which has never “worked”; its design is intentionally poor and its space thoroughly commercialized. Here we encounter most of the problems of POPS: poor design and commercialization that lead to a low level of “publicness.” Our third example is Paley Park, a privately built “vest pocket” park. Although widely lauded for its design, the private nature of this space is not completely unproblematic. Paley Park also raises questions about good public design and how the problem of designing for the “public as a whole” should be approached. In the third and last chapter, the potentiality of POPS as part of the political public sphere is analyzed through these examples. Thinking these spaces through theoretical concepts, conclusions are drawn about the future of public space and the applicability of privately owned space as public space.

Notes on Methodology

This study will not primarily be discussing political spaces strictu sensu (see Parkinson, 2011 for an exhaustive treatment on that topic); rather, it will be concentrate on the effects that public space has on a democratic society, which is understood as a shared cultural assumption of openness and equality rather
than through its properly political institutions (Laclau’s treatment of radical democracy\(^2\) has junctures with this understanding). This study proposes that public space is significant for democracy not only as a site for temporary protest or political speech but in a manner that penetrates the whole society.

Within the theoretical scope of this study, it is impossible but to scratch the surface of the theory of space. Although only fleetingly addressed for brevity’s sake, this thesis applies a Lefebvrian framework, whereby space is understood simultaneously through its ideological (planners, architects, administration), physical (materiality of space that guides use, symbolism), and practical (modes of use, appropriation) components. This framework allows for a balanced analysis, whereby no single aspect is given priority over the others and the relationship between all three remains dynamic and apt for change. Space should not be understood in absolute terms, but as a result of social, cultural, material, and political processes and everyday practices through which the physical reality is interpreted and produced. These processes can not be given one single “correct” interpretation. Space is understood as a “concrete abstraction” (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 340-1) – a socially produced and discursively constructed physical “thing” whereby a continuous “spatial dialectic” exists between the materiality, ideology, and practice, each of the three in a direct relationship to the two others.

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\(^2\) Laclau, although using the term public space more abstractly than this work, defines radical democracy as follows: “For me, a radically democratic society is one in which a plurality of public spaces, constituted around specific issues and demands, and strictly autonomous of each other, instills in its members a civic sense which is a central ingredient of their identity as individuals. Despite the plurality of these spaces, or, rather, as a consequence of it, a diffuse democratic culture is created, which gives the community its specific identity. Within this community, the liberal institutions - parliament, elections, divisions of power – are maintained, but these are one public space, not the public space. Not only is antagonism not excluded from a democratic society, it is the very condition of its institution.” (Laclau, 2007, p. 121)
Chapter 1: Theorizing Public Space and the Public Sphere

What is the Definition of Public Space?

In the political theory public space is usually understood as the physical aspect of the public sphere where democratic politics may occur in the form of public speech, discussion, or political protest. In urban design it is often understood as a recreational public facility (sometimes) with a civic purpose. Commonsensical uncomplicated definitions of public space as open, accessible, or publicly owned and managed spaces are insufficient – not only because these basic characteristics are being constantly undermined – but because such definitions disregard the connection of public spaces to other spheres of private, communal, and political life. When conceived of as spaces where one may do in public what one would otherwise do on one's backyard flattens the entire idea of “publicness” is flattened. The whole idea of “public” is lost when such spaces are defined primarily in terms of recreation, even if this is the primary incentive for the public to make use of these spaces.

Below I will lay out some basic definitions of public space and in the following section I will try to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding through an analysis of the relationship of public space and the public sphere (for the most exhaustive typology of public spaces and their critiques up to date, see Carmona 2010; 2010a). I will seek to understand the concept “public space” as widely as possible in order to account for its implications for a democratic society. Public space is a fluid concept and the definitions below are to be understood as tentative and complementary of each other.

Carr offers a definition of public space as a center of communal life, as “the common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community, whether in the normal routines of daily life or periodic festivities” (Carr, 1992, p. xi). Normatively, public spaces should be responsive (accommodate the needs of individuals and community), democratic (accessible, freedom of action), and meaningful (connect to individuals and communities) (p. 19-20). This is a minimal definition of political
public space; it considers the immediate needs of the user - but does not make the necessary connection to other structures of society or democratic practices.

According to Geenens and Tinnevelt public space arises as a result of three different “epistemic attitudes” that correspond to the spaces of oikos (private household), agora (marketplace), and ekklesia (formal political sphere) in ancient Greece. The first one is the space of unlimited personal freedom, the second the space of free discussion and debate among friends and peers, and the third one the space of necessarily restricted (by social conventions and legibility) public speech (p. 1). Geenens and Tinnevelt go on, correctly, to argue that “[i]n order to foster three epistemic attitudes, democratic regimes need to provide spaces where these distinct modes of knowing and speaking can be learnt and exercised” (p. 1). Rather than limiting the definition to the question of ownership or openness/accessibility of space, they put forward a definition in terms of the functionality of space: “[P]ublic space could be defined as the set of processes in which the particular ideas and interests of individuals or groups come into a more or less friendly confrontation with each other” (p. 2). In this sense, nominally private spaces (bars, cafes, associations) can be understood to have a function as public spaces.

Miller extends the definition of public space as not only a site of democratic practice but also an object of political discourse:

The links between public spaces and democracy are more complex than the former being the physical location for the latter. Public spaces are not mere backdrops for democracy. While public spaces can be settings for demonstrations and protest, they must also have concerned publics who formulate positions about that particular place and who demand action from a governing body, and that governing body must respond. In this way public spaces do not need to be the sites of acts of political speech to be tied to democracy. Perhaps more difficultly, they must themselves be the subjects of ongoing democratic processes. (Miller, 2007, pp. Xvi-xvii)
Kohn (2004) examines the relationship between private ownership, public space, and political activity, tracing transformations in the legal understanding of what constitutes public space. According to Kohn:

Design and regulation of the built environment can either reinforce or challenge existing patterns of inclusion or exclusion. By structuring people’s perceptions, interactions, and dispositions, spatial practices and architectural markers can mitigate or intensify ingrained social dynamics. One of the purposes of public space is to create a shared set of symbols and experiences that create solidarity between people who are separated by private interests. (Kohn, 2004, p. 6)

Here public space receives significance as part of the urban environment as a whole (inequities and segregation included), implicating planning practices at larger scale than that of a single space or neighborhood.

Rather than seeing the difficulty of defining public space as a problem, Nadal sees the very fluidity of the concept as its main strength and radical potentiality. This, in my view, is the appropriate, open-ended, inclusive and pluralistic definition for public space:

In this sense, public space can no more be thought as a design typology nor a programmatic function; it is not a given setting nor lost dimension; it cannot be contained in a bounded place nor produced as a commodity. It does not dwell in ‘beautiful or well-planned cities’ any more than in ugly or messy ones. The ‘right to the city’, like any human right, must be asserted and enacted to become reality. Against the power of oppression in its many guises public space is the possibility and embodiment of everyday positive urban culture; a ‘work of life’ that has to be worked upon and recreated daily. It is an ideal of richness and multiplicity of choice, of coexistence of unassimilated differences, of pacific encounter without necessary understanding, of interaction and possible but
non-required mixing of fluid, infinitely re-composable identities, in a space that offers practically inexhaustible opportunities. (Nadal, 2000, p. 216)

In this passage Nadal synthesizes much of Henri Lefebvre's work concerning the potentiality of urban environments. The liberatory moment of everyday life can be actualized in public space of limited control. Through inhabiting, appropriating space, everyday life can have a transgressive moment in face of the always incomplete colonization of space-time, which, according to Lefebvre, is the orientation of modernist planning practices.

**Origins of the Concept “Public Space”**

Luc Nadal's unpublished dissertation *Discourse of urban public space, USA 1960-1995: a historical critique* deals with the rather recent development of the concept *public space* and its changing scope of meaning. According to Nadal, public space emerged as a category of its own at the turn of the 1960s as a response to societal changes; its disappearance became an issue "precisely at the time when the diffusion of technologies and social-economic restructuring increased the scale of spatial dispersal, scattering, and the segregation of social activities and social territories" (Nadal, 2000, p. 30). Public space is significantly different from earlier terms such as "open space," "green space," or "public place" (pp. 33, 35). Most importantly, its use is less differentiated, countering the functional notions of modernist urban and architectural discourse, such as “recreational space,” “transportation space,” or “civic space” and “communal space” (p. 35).

The concept "public space" was first used in a 1950 study by the British sociologist Charles Madge that fell into obscurity. In the study Madge discussed the important places of sociability such as streets and pubs, using the term “private and public spaces”. Hannah Arendt, although mostly concerned with the “public realm” of a political society, used “public space” in *The Human Condition* (1958), referring to the abstract political space that emerges between people (p. 39). Jane Jacobs’ limited use of the term in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) made it a concept in its own right (it was even added to
Jacobs advocated for the application of public spaces in city planning, of which there were many examples in the traditional neighborhoods that Jacobs so cherished (Nadal, 2000, pp. 42-3). Jacobs' ideas started becoming popular among the public, architects, and planning professionals as "the characters of density, complexity, heterogeneity and the intensity of public life associated with cities' older social/physical fabrics – long depreciated in the various ideologies of urban reform and planning – now appeared important to numbers [sic] of urban dwellers and to many of the coming-of-age children of suburbia" (p. 44). During the 1960s the ideas of "urbanity" and its connection to vibrant "public spaces" started to be applied by practitioners such as "reformed" modernists Serge Chermayeff and Victor Gruen (pp. 52-3). The idea of a sociable urbanity gained traction during the 1960s through the writings of Lawrence Halprin, Christopher Alexander, and Henri Lefebvre (p. 62). Although Arendt's concept of political public space and Jacobs' use of the term as a space of urban plurality pretty much summed up the most significant conceptualizations of public space, it was not until the 1970s that the complexities of the term started becoming fully appreciated. Lyn Lofland's *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Public Space* (1973) defined the concept as "a place where strangers meet" and Richard Sennet's *The Fall of Public Man* (1974) analyzed the withering away of the public life and its spaces (pp. 56-7). According to Nadal, "[u]rban public space now was [perceived as] the (endangered) heart and soul of the vital city" (p. 63) as "[i]deals of free-expression and abolition of social divisions connected to visions of a positive, pleasurable and creative city – space of active, inspiring and liberating (public) life" (p. 94).

Discourse on public space was constructed as a counter-narrative to the dominant paradigm of technocratic modernist planning practices. The city was not to be understood as a source of disorder and malady, but as a vital alternative to the car-centered sub-urban individualistic lifestyle, and its socially vibrant public spaces were what set the city apart.

Protests that ensued after a reclaimed space named "People's Park" in Berkley, California was fenced off by the university in 1969 symbolize the significance that the concept *public space* had gained during the 1960s as a space of free action and political organization (Nadal, 2000, p. 104). However, by the mid-1970s "public space" had lost its revolutionary potential alongside the traction of the utopian ideals of the generation that first made the term significant. "New public space," stripped of any radical pretensions,
became a strategy for the revival of downtown commercial centers. In this way the establishment institutions were able to “paradoxically benefit from the fresh revitalization and aesthetization of urban space that counter-culture had initiated” (p. 110). With the structural changes in the national economy towards services, cities were made attractive for investment once again. “In this context, the early focus of the discourse of urban public space on spontaneous artistic and political expression, and creative communal everyday life practices, gradually mutated into a concern for the production of tangible and practical attractors of economic growth. Engineering a revamped ‘new public space’, entertaining and appealing to the new urban consumer, became the most central issue” (p. 124).

Who is the Public: Community Space or Universal Public Space

An unavoidable question emerges when discussing public space: Who is the public? Although “the general public” or “public at large” are extremely vague concepts, we have to rely on our sociological imagination to construct some image of what this might be. Public spaces can help us construct that image, as long as they are “truly public”. On the other hand, open spaces that might not be spaces for the “public as a whole,” serve a more expressively political function.

Banerjee questions the value of (increasingly privatized) public spaces that are produced for recreation, as a “public amenity,” rather than as a civic or democratic institution. She offers as a possible solution local countermovements that arise from the “powerlessness of the local public over global corporate interests; inexorable trends of cultural homogenization; growing income polarization; environmental degradation on a local and global scale; a crisis of cultural, local, and social identities in multiethnic urban communities; and the like” (pp. 16-7). This “conviviality,” or solidarity, that is built on the neighborhood level could work as a foundation for the production of an alternative public realm.

Eizenberg compares two different approaches to protecting access to urban public space through NGOs in New York. According to Eizenberg community gardens are significant community projects since they help build a sense of empowerment and increase political participation. During the 1990s, under the
Giuliani administration, the city sought to reclaim community garden spaces for redevelopment. An agreement was reached where over 500 gardens were saved, part of them by NGOs that bought the land. One of the organizations, Trust for Public Land (TPL), emphasizes community participation (which is the measure of “publicness” of the space [p. 112]) by transferring legal ownership of the gardens to the community. Another organization, New York Restoration Project (NYRP), seeks to create and preserve open green spaces through professional management of gardens with voluntary community participation in maintenance. Enthusiasm for maintenance waned, however, since the “garden is no longer experienced as a communal shared space that evolves over time, much like the vegetation in it, as a collectively determined and objectified space” (p. 117).

Eizenberg sees these two models as corresponding to two different conceptualizations of civil society (after Cox, 1999). A conservative understanding of civil society sees its function in covering the deficiencies of the state while preserving the status quo, whereas a radical, progressive understanding sees it as an “autonomous social platform that mitigates the power of the state and the market” (p. 118). These also correspond to two different conceptions of public space that I would call “the community model of public space,” a space where a political community may be enacted, and “the universal model of public space,” a space (a city park, for example) where differences in the society can appear and be safely experienced (cf. Low & Taplin, 2005, Introduction) or a monumental space that symbolizes social unity and cohesion. Both models certainly have an established function in a democratic society.

M. Low criticizes the idealized understanding of urban democratic space that is based on community level “microsociologies”. Low purports the view that democracy does not depend on urban space but on the functioning of political institutions. Here efficiency in communication between citizens and the state is paramount. “Rather than tying it down to specific spaces, whether national or urban, it is better to acknowledge that democracy has only thrived to the extent it has because it has involved continuous development of practices, institutions, and forms of communication that have made it socially and spatially complex” (Low, 2009, p. 130). This institutional understanding would seem to limit the scope of spatial imagination that seeks to keep physical public space relevant. I suggest that public space is one of
those democratic institutions, simultaneously produced through, and supportive of, other institutions.

Although public space of the “universal model” may not be constitutive of modern democracy in any real historical sense, democracy can not thrive without the physical spaces of face-to-face society. It is not only that democracy is practiced in public space (cf. Parkinson, 2009); rather, public space is a democratic practice itself.

Sennet is also critical of reverting to the intimate, localized community as a psychological and political strategy that leads to (or is a result of) an atomized, ghettoized city. According to Sennet “attempts to create community in cities are attempts to make psychological values into social relations” (Sennet, 1992, p. 298). Sennet advocates the “reawakening [of] meaningful public space and public life in the city as a whole” instead of “talk[ing] about building a sense of community at a local level in the city” (p. 309). Sennet perceives the ideology of the community as a ruse that gives a false impression of political power and psychologically an impression of affection. The political *gesellschaft* that is based on difference is run over by the intimate, psychological *gemeinschaft* of (an appearance of) sameness. This feeling of *gemeinschaft*, according to Sennet, is not appropriate for political action that necessitates an amount of impersonality, whereas the psychological community is, in a sense, sublimated self-interest.

In Nicholas Rose's work we encounter another hazard of community as a substitute for the political society, that is, as a governmental entity, being increasingly supplanted by the idea of a “self governing community”. According to Rose a model of “advanced liberal rule” is displacing the model of state-led governance. Advanced liberal rule “does not seek to govern through 'society', but through the regulated choices of individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfillment” (Rose, 2006, p. 147). The relation between the “social citizen” and “society” becomes substituted by the relation between the “responsible individual” and the “self governing community” (p. 157). This strategy could lead to more efficient or even more legitimate use of power locally, but it also can help obscure the real sources of power as political interest is projected inwards. As Murray Low reminds us, “[d]emocracy does not involve processes of political communication between tightly confined political communities and their governments, a vision which at both local and national levels can give rise
to inward looking, static and traditionalist notions of who ‘the people’ involved in democracy are” (Low, M., 2008, p. 122).

Rather than condemning the idea of the community, Lippard constructively suggests an adjustment in the understanding what community is: “Community doesn’t mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve” (Lippard, 1998, p. 24). As Sennet correctly points out, the political community should not be a substitute for intimate social relationships. But communities are still necessary for the development and articulation of political ideas and identities (that might become politicized). Public spaces of the “community model,” as with those of the “universal model,” are necessary for the practice of democracy in a pluralistic society. They certainly fulfill different purposes, but their functionalities are also interchangable.

**Are physical spaces necessary for and constitutive of democracy?**

Nemeth crystallizes an idealized view of democratic public space in design and planning literature as follows:

> The best spaces present opportunities for discussion, deliberation and unprogrammed, spontaneous encounters with those maintaining diverse viewpoints on the world. […] They are sites of social interaction and active citizenship, in which personal identities are constructed through unmediated human contact, educating the city-dweller about the ‘other’ and teaching true urbanity […] (Nemeth, 2009, p. 2463)

These kinds of idealized spaces might seldom appear in reality, but open and accessible public spaces are valuable for more than recreation. Discussing the political implications of theoretical approaches on the public sphere, Smith and Low state that “[i]t is [our] underlying conviction . . . that the respatialization of our sense of the public brings the opportunity of a more complete repoliticization of the public . . . “
“The public” comes to existence only through its spatialization, and the image of the “public” as a political entity stays afloat only through the spaces where it becomes materialized.

Bickford builds on Arendt's and Sennet's work (both discussed below) and points out the changing “meaning and experience of 'being in public'” in new urban environments that seek to erase all difference (Bickford, 2000, p. 363). According to Bickford “if we expand our focus on the public sphere to encompass the built environment that helps constitute that 'sphere,' 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” (p. 356). Bickford asserts that homogenization and securitization of urban space is detrimental to the practice of democracy:

The meaning and experience of "being in public" changes quite significantly in such a context. We are no longer moving with and negotiating around diverse strangers in a shared material world, but rather within a certain kind of bounded space that determines who and what we perceive. And who we "happen" to see regularly as we move through the world has an influence on who we think of as citizens and who we think to engage with as citizens—in other words, whose perspectives must be taken into account when making political decisions. (Bickford, 2000, p. 363)

The power of the idea of the intimate connection between public space and democratic citizenship becomes apparent in some governments' utilization of public space for different goals. The Singaporean strong state has had remarkable success in integrating the society as a whole into a national framework through a thorough spatial strategy that has employed urban planning as a tool to simultaneously build a homogeneous political base and to root out urban inequities (Shatkin, 2014). Simultaneously, the state seeks to root out dissent: not only are urban public spaces of new towns designed to eliminate political or cultural expressions but, in a classical modernist fashion, the uncontrollable public spaces of pedestrian streets have also been removed and commercial activity has been located in self-contained malls. In contrast, Berney (2011) shows how in Bogota, Columbia public space has been used in a project that
aims to transform citizenship and construct it as an inclusive category through enhanced use of public space. Although the use of public space is modeled on a rather Olmsteadian vision of civility in the public, enforced and supervised by authorities, the sheer appeal of public space to the authorities is quite remarkable.

Mitchell refers to the empowering effect of a notion of shared, public space, and the necessity of its materiality for collective action: “As ideological constructions, contested ideals such as ‘the public,’ public space, and the public sphere take on double importance. Their very articulation implies a notion of inclusiveness that becomes a rallying point for successive waves of political activity” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 133). Likewise, Kohn (discussed below) points out the connection of physical space, on a very concrete level, to the formation of identities and ideologies:

Space affects how individuals and groups perceive their place in the order of things. Spatial configurations naturalize social relations by transforming contingent forms into a permanent landscape that appears as immutable rather than open to contestation. By providing a shared background, spatial forms serve the function of integrating individuals into a shared conception of reality. […] Political spaces facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and practices. The political power of space comes from its ability to link the social, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of space. (Kohn, 2003, pp. 3-4)

There is no doubt that physical spaces are of utmost importance for development of political subjectivities, collective identities, responsive citizenship, and public imagery. A pluralistic democratic social order is very much dependent on all of these attributes, and a variety of public and private spaces are necessary to support that order. Additionally, Harvey points out the importance of connectedness of spaces: “[T]he character of public space counts for little or nothing politically unless it connects symbiotically with the organization of institutional […] and private spaces. It is the relational connectivity between public, quasi-
public and private spaces which counts when it comes to politics in the public sphere” (Harvey, 2005, p. 32).

**Hannah Arendt’s Polis – Ideal-Typical Public Space**

Hannah Arendt's theory of political space is an ideal-typical model that, although at times somewhat outlandish, carries a lot of weight in theorizing public space as political space. Arendt takes as her theoretical point of departure the thoroughly politicized Greek society that emerged within the space of the polis. In the agora of the polis free men were able to actualize their freedom through political speech that had the definition of the common good as its goal. This common world, the existence of which was dependent on the actualization of the political man, Arendt laments, had been forever lost in the transformation of the society into one of mass culture and consumption. In the mass society, where “the only thing people have in common is their private interest” (p. 60), the properly political life-form that was developed in the antique had fully lost its meaning.

Arendt understands the proper nature of man as inherently political. Man’s nature as zoon politikon can be perfected only through the active political life, vita activa, which is coterminous with human freedom. Freedom is practiced in the political space of appearances that is the space that emerges between people engaged in political action, idealized in the space of the polis where otherwise unequal men appear as equals. Because the political space is necessarily one of appearances, Arendt arrives at a complete separation between the public and the private spheres. The private sphere represents the unequal relations of the feudal order, whereas the public space of the polis represents the practice of freedom, where the reality of the public realm is produced through “the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself” (Arendt, 1971, p. 57).

Space of appearance refers to the perception of a common world in the public realm by anybody who is a participant of that world. Any human or political reality is dependent on appearance, as otherwise the
plurality of humanity would remain irreconcilable and private. “[W]ithout a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt” (Arendt, 1971, p. 208). Space of appearance is the socially produced, shared conception of reality, that is the only basis for political speech or collective action.

But it is also a space of appearances because, as Sennet asserts, the public self has to be separated from the private self in a political society. The private volatile psychologized self needs to be left out of public argumentation, not because it is insignificant, but because one has to make oneself understood in front of others that don't necessarily share the same experience. As Sennet tells us, private imperfections were considered politically inessential before the cult of the individual. Today every private whisper is publicized in search of a political scandal. Public credibility was once a matter of being trustworthy in public matters, not a matter of puritanism in ones private affairs.

Benhabib extracts two different understandings of public space from Arendt's portrayal of the *polis* life: “agonistic space” and “associational space”. In the agonistic sense, public space works as a counter-space to the politically inconsequential private space of the home. The futility of individual life is transformed into glorious deeds only in the competition with and in the view of others. This makes it work as political space. In the associational sense, public space emerges wherever “men act together in concert.” Thus, public space can emerge also in nominally private places if political action takes place, as space is temporarily transformed into a site of power. (Benhabib, 1992, p. 78)

Arendt maintains that as the definition of who the public is got more inclusionary – especially after the revolutions in France and America – the “social” (private welfare) started taking over the “authentic” spheres of public and private while (true) governance got replaced by (mere) administration (Arendt, 1971, p. 65). Benhabib counters this notion by arguing that the distinction between the social and the political has stopped making sense in the modern world, not because of the shift that Arendt describes, but because “the struggle to make something public” has become “a struggle for justice” (Benhabib, 1992,
She thus counters the essentialist notion of public space as the pre-eminence, “pure” political space with the notion that private matters of production and reproduction can and should become matters of political action. Benhabib posits that “[d]ifferent action types, like work and labor, can become the locus of public space if they are reflexively challenged and placed into question from the standpoint of the asymmetrical power relations governing them” (p. 80). In Arendt’s model these would belong strictly to the private sphere as they do not involve questions about the “common good”.

Benhabib correctly points out that Arendt’s critique, based on the structure of the ancient society, can not really be used in any practical manner to critique the modern “mass society” or pluralistic democracy. The “morally homogeneous and politically egalitarian but exclusive community” of the ancients can only be thought of as an ideal type, not an ideal structure. Arendt demonstrates how the “social” concern came to invade the conception of “res publica,” and how wealth took over the public realm, all while capital (a process, not a structure) came to appear as continuity and the common world was exchanged for common wealth (Arendt, 1971, pp. 68-9). Here is the core of the Arendtian critique: the watering down of the strictly political to the mere concern for one’s own position. Such a critique becomes relevant for public space as the political society ceases to exist together with the space that makes it political in the first place.

The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. […] It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly. […] To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. […] Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever. (pp. 198-9)
The Public Sphere and Its Critiques

The point of this theorizing is that many things that were public (such as commons in England that were taken...) became privatized, and some things that were private (such as a politicians private life) are getting publicized. The state, ultimately through its law-making apparatus draws the final line between these two spheres.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) Habermas demonstrates how (necessarily spatialized) audience-oriented publicity (with the monarch as the focus of the spectacle) was transformed into a non-material bourgeois publicity (the world of letters) in France, Germany and England at the turn of the 18th century. Although the public sphere itself is understood as an immaterial institution, specific spaces (coffee houses, salons, societies, theaters etc., and ultimately the family home) were fundamental for the formation of political subjectivities. In the coffee houses and salons rational-critical discussion was possible under the premise of temporary suspension of status hierarchies among the speakers (Habermas, 1991, p. 36). In these spaces ideas and critiques (of art and politics) were developed and tested and then circulated through the printing press. After the relatively short flourishing of this critical literary culture, through the properly modern societal transformations of the 19th century, these spaces of critical reasoning and debate became culturally superfluous. The critical practice of reading was exiled to the closed-off privacy of the home and the bourgeois “group activities” (now in the sphere of leisure and the social) became depoliticized and commodified since a critical public was no longer formed around these activities (Habermas, 1991, p. 163). “The leisure activities of the culture-consuming public [...] take place within a social climate, and they do not require any further discussion. The private form of appropriation removed the ground for a communication about what has been appropriated. The dialectical relationship between the two [public/private] was smoothly resolved within the social framework of group activity” (p. 163). Accordingly, critical debate eventually turned into a form of passive entertainment in the media as access to the market of cultural goods expanded (p. 164, p. 166). Habermas seems to think that as an increasing amount of people had the possibility of obtaining bourgeois attributes, there resulted a qualitative decline in the public sphere whose transformation coincided with the rise of a “mass culture”.
At pace with Arendt, Habermas sees the sphere of the social taking over the “authentic” public and private spheres.

Akin to Arendt's assertion in *On Revolution* about the “necessity of bodies” that drove the French Revolution to its demise, Habermas observes that the propertyless working classfactually destroyed the authenticity of the public sphere of the bourgeoisie by turning their economic conflicts into a political conflict. The “mediating function” of the public sphere between state and society was thus transferred to special interest organizations (in the private sphere) and political parties (in the public sphere) that now engaged in negotiations over the equilibrium of power with the state as their playing field. At the same time the “manipulative” media engage in creating “publicity from above” (Habermas, 1991, p. 177). All this, according to Habermas, has led to the erosion of the liberal principle of justice that was based on “the connection between rational-critical public debate and the legislative foundation of domination, including the critical supervision of its exercise” (p. 178). It is to be noted that Habermas adjusted his position after *Structural Transformations* and the “Habermasian public sphere” is to be understood as an ideal-type, just like Arendt’s *polis*.

I will present three critiques of the Habermasian public sphere. Fraser's and Benhabib's critiques concentrate on the conceptual limitations of the public sphere; Smith and Low criticize the lack of spatialization in the Habermasian public sphere; Kohn's critique, discussed in the next section, questions the necessity of the spatial separation of the private and public that is implicit in Habermas's conception of the bourgeois public sphere.

Fraser seeks to modify Habermas's understanding of the public sphere as “the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction [...] conceptually distinct from the state [and] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (Fraser, 1992, pp. 110-1). Fraser is critical of Habermas stopping short of developing an alternative vision of a “post-bourgeois” public sphere (p. 112). She criticizes the exclusionary tendency of the bourgeois public sphere, especially with regard to gender, as femininity is
constructed as inherently non-public, condemned to the private sphere of the home (p. 114). While it excludes non-bourgeois social classes, a "discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction" (p. 115). Fraser notes the parallel existence of various counterpublics of women and workers that "[v]irtually from the beginning […] contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (p. 116). Conflict was thus always constituted in the public sphere and the idea of a single public sphere has to be seen as an ideological creation, a tool of political domination through hegemony (p. 117).

Fraser points out four problematic assumptions within the "masculinist," bourgeois conception of the public sphere: (1) the bracketing of status differences, (2) the existence of multiple public spheres as problematic for democracy, (3) discourse in the public sphere should be limited to common good, (4) separation between civil society and state is necessary for a functioning public sphere. Fraser's argumentation goes on approximately as follows: In complex stratified societies people develop significantly differential cultural positions and they only can and should argue from these positions (1). The supposition of a singular public sphere would limit the scope of argumentation, because it would necessarily phase out certain styles of argumentation (not adhering to “universal” principles) (2) and certain arguments (things condemned to the private sphere) (3). For these reasons the construction of competing publics is actually necessary for democracy where discourse needs to include challenges to dominant conceptions of society or world-views. Lastly, associations engaged in public discourse surely can act as decision-making bodies (4). For example, sovereign parliaments are involved in normative discourse and decision making, as well as several smaller governmental bodies of direct democracy down to neighborhood associations. Fraser concludes that "any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society" (p.136). (pp.117-135)
I would raise another problem that the separation of the civil society and the state implies: the public spaces of a pluralistic democratic culture, where the “public at large” may come together, are often produced by the state. Without the legal protection that is provided solely by the state these spaces would no longer be public, severely damaging the prospects of constructing an inclusive civil society.

Benhabib asserts that the Habermasian “discursive model of public space” could, correctly applied and modified, work as a model for a democratic society. The problem inherent in this conception is the circumscription of certain issues as being outside of public interest, while in reality “[d]istinction between justice and the good life, norms and values, interests and needs are internal, and not external, to the process of discursive will formation. As long as these distinctions are renegotiated, reinterpreted, and rearticulated as a result of a radically open and procedurally fair discourse, they can be made in any of a number of ways” (p. 89). Through a theoretical feminist lens the discursive model can be incorporated as a legitimate model for a democratic political practice. This includes recognizing the power relations within the public (issues of difference) and the private (“female,” intimate) spheres instead of covering these power relations with ideological fumes (p. 92).

Low and Smith call attention to disregard of the spatialization of the public sphere: “In Habermas’s account […] the ideal public sphere is deemed universal and thereby, in any meaningful sense, spatially undifferentiated” (Low & Smith, 2005, p. 5), whereas the public sphere clearly does have a geography of its own as Habermas's examples of the spaces of critical rationality already clearly demonstrate. Low and Smith point to the “lost geography” of the 20th century and call for a “respatialization of our sense of the public [that] brings the opportunity of a more complete repoliticization of the public” (p. 7). They point out that whereas the public space literature often fails to connect with the political or cultural theory of the public sphere, the public sphere literature, that is essentially historical, doesn't concern itself with the physical spaces of publicness (p. 6); the other is often constructed solely through the category of time, the other through the category of space.
Following Low and Smith’s lead, Geenens and Tinnevelt’s notion of the three “epistemic attitudes” – *oikos* (private space of the household), *agora* (public or semi-public space of the marketplace), and *ekklesia* (formal political sphere) – comes in handy. To give an example, a recent development in a long fought social struggle finally becoming socially accepted and even legally formalized comes to mind: homosexual relationships. This has not been a matter of rational deliberation by “the public” or legislators, but a matter of making a “private” matter public. Thinking about urban gay culture (see Castells, 1983, Ch. 14) spatially, one could think of the politicization of this issue as being a matter of permeability between the private space of home, the semi-public space of gay bars, the public space of the streets (I am thinking of 8th Ave in New York City’s Chelsea neighborhood) where gay culture is seen and evaluated by “the public at large” (with more “official” publicizing at the annual gay pride parade), and the formal political arenas. Although homes, bars, or streets are rarely used as expressively political spaces, they might work in this way as identities are developed and negotiated in and through these spaces. Here it is good to recall David Harvey’s assertion that “it is the relational connectivity between public, quasi-public and private spaces which counts when it comes to politics in the public sphere” (Harvey 2005, p. 32). Obviously, the media and popular culture always play a critical role, but the considerable significance of the spatial aspects of making an issue properly political cannot be eschewed.

**Margaret Kohn – Ways Out: Radical Space**

Margaret Kohn’s *Radical Space* offers an alternative to the immaterial public sphere of Habermas. Although critical of Habermas’ definition, Margaret Kohn finds the concept useful as it “links together political ideologies and practices, ideas and spaces” (Kohn, 2003, p.44). Further, “Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois public sphere […] linked two different dimensions of politics that have traditionally been investigated in isolation: ideas and institutions. […] Like a Weberian ideal type, it abstracted from empirical regularities in order to highlight their salient features” (28-9). Kohn offers two alternative definitions of the public sphere, the first one being the space of rational debate among private people, the other being that of a place where “the hegemony (or counterhegemony) of a social class is achieved by integrating elements of other classes and formulating a worldview capable of assimilating some of their
values” (p. 40). This latter, inclusive, pluralistic definition incorporates different forms of action and different social identities within a political framework of radical democracy (see footnote 1 for Laclau's definition of radical democracy). Kohn's fundamental critique of the public sphere resembles Benhabib's feminist critique:

A constitutive (as opposed to merely incidental) exclusion puts into question whether the ideal of universalizability is really the appropriate standard for transformative political change, given that the interests of those excluded socially are almost never defined by existing structures as generalizable and hence relevant to the “universalist” project. [...] The standard of universalizability overlooks the fact that the interests of the marginal and disempowered are precisely those that are not defined as generalizable under dominant definitions. (Kohn, 2003, pp. 35, 40)

Kohn understands space, a concept strongly implied in Arendt, but somewhat lost in Habermas, as constitutive of political action. “Whether the goal is to create a unified demos or to empower the disenfranchised, shared places help forge communities by enabling and constraining the way in which people come together” (p. 3). In contradiction to the monumental spaces of established power, Kohn concentrates on “radical democratic spaces”. These are spaces "outside the state where the disenfranchised generate power” (p. 7). Radicalization of democracy works “by linking diverse democratic struggles, creating new sites for more effective political participation, extending collective control into previously excluded domains such as the workplace, and expanding the understanding of citizenship to accomplish meaningful inclusion of previously marginalized groups” (p. 7). It could be said that spaces of radical democracy constitute the government by the people next to the republican government for the people enabling or compelling it to be more truly a government of the people.

The public sphere needs its private corollary where “the sense of autonomy and subjectivity” (collective and individual) are cultivated (p. 41). Kohn takes as example for the popular public sphere workers' institutions in pre-fascist Italy where conditions for effective public and private spheres were met through
workers collectives, cooperatives and houses of the people. It is important to note that the private spaces of the working classes were not found in the family dwelling, but in the collective spaces such as union halls and cooperatives, trade unions and mutual aid societies (pp. 41-2).

As Kohn seeks to theorize politics as a spatial practice, she finds more support in Arendt's “agonistic” model than in Habermas's later deliberative democratic theory, that presupposes “discursive practices governed by necessary, universal presuppositions” (p. 14). Arendt's “agonistic” conception of democracy presupposes a political space that is open for contestation, making “pluralism, distinction, and action” possible (p. 14). Lastly Kohn seeks to understand space as “more than a metaphor” (p. 15). It is to be understood as a fundamental element of human action, not – although socially produced – as mere discourse.

One of the most interesting theoretical contributions of Kohn's book is the introduction of a "popular public sphere" that in its ideology and structure differs significantly from the Habermasian "bourgeois public sphere" as well as Arendt's ideal-typical model. Thus Kohn does not abandon the idea of a public sphere as such, but seeks to modify it. As a significant shortcoming of the Habermasian public sphere she points out its class character – a class character that was not only accidental to the economic position of the actors (e.g. having the means of acquiring the intellectual tools of rational inquiry and sufficient leisure time). According to Kohn the interests of the bourgeoisie were already embedded in the economic order; they did not perceive a conflict between the private and public good (p. 35). Thus the inclusion of the working class in to the public sphere could not but introduce conflict in to the balanced structures of publicness and privateness (p. 35). As Habermas would have it, an inclusionary public sphere would necessarily destroy its rational-critical basis.

Therefore, Kohn asks whether there are other options beyond exclusion or destruction of deliberative politics. As there certainly are distinctive forms of political action within the working class culture, could it be that these "cruder" forms (public theater, ritual shaming, songs, satire, sabotage, riots, demonstrations) could develop towards the bourgeois model and become infused in this “authentic” public sphere? The
answer is a firm “no,” since the working classes would first need to acquire political rights and the right to openly challenge the dominant structures of power (p. 35). This could only take place through an alternative to the bourgeois public sphere, that Kohn calls the popular public sphere, its main difference being the decreased significance of the absolute separation between the private and public spaces (of the home and the salon or coffee house) (pp. 41-42). Kohn moves through the factory to workers councils to cooperatives to “houses of the people” as spaces that defined the proletarian identity and built a basis for solidarity.

Houses of the people were multifunctionary buildings built and financed by workers collectives that were built around Europe at the turn of the 20th century (Kohn gives examples from Italy and Belgium). Combining social, economic and political functions, a spatial breech in the public/private separation of the bourgeois public sphere was accomplished. They were necessary as meeting places for the working class who did not own spacious homes for meetings and were often prohibited from using bars or cafes as meeting spaces. Financed and built by workers collectives, and housing space for political and educational purposes as well as collectively run bars, cafes, and bakeries, houses of the people effectively combined and modified the spheres of sociability, economic activity, and political action. They were independent of other political organizations and open to anybody interested in the cause of the subaltern classes. Although many had a socialist agenda, some were based on democratic inter-class alliances. They of course also worked as symbols of the emerging political power of workers to the outside. (pp. 95-101)

Arendt’s public realm and Habermas’s public sphere both assume the absolute separation of public and private. As Habermas’ public sphere is meant to be “universal” it is also rarely spatialized, although the spaces of the cafes and salons were of major importance for developing and testing new ideas. As a counterargument to Habermas Kohn presents the popular public sphere that is spatialized, embodied, and political but where the separation between the public and private is not experienced as absolute. Kohn, while not radically dismissing the conceptions of public and private, shows that the absolute separation of these spheres is not necessary. Whereas the bourgeois public sphere “presupposed a
realm of interiority, subjectivity, and privacy in which the bourgeois man experienced himself as an
individual and developed the convictions that he would bring into public debate" (p. 34), the much less
differentiated popular public sphere was based on the development of collective subjectivities where the
rift between the private and the political was not as accentuated. This difference was very much engraved
in the space of the houses of the people. I think a Lefebvrian framework will help understand the efficacy
of the popular public sphere that Kohn describes.

Lefebvre presents a triad of spatiality (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38-9) that is constitutive of the theory of space
developed in *The Production of Space*. These three concepts are to be understood of simultaneously and
this approach implodes any subject – object division, that is being replaced by a “spatial dialectic.” These
three components exist simultaneously and affect each other. They can be taught of separately only for
analytical purposes.

1. Spatial practice – this is the active space of practice and appropriation of space. It also includes
   the potentiality of transgression as space can be practiced differently than 2. or 3. might suggest.
2. Representations of space – this is the “conceived” space that incorporates the theory of the
   “constitution” or “character” of space, including the ideas of architects, planners, and urbanists.
3. Spaces of representation – this is “lived” space where space is “read” as a system of symbols
   and signs. This is the space of passivity where the “user” adapts to the intended modality of
   space.

One could say that the house of the people represents a certain set of values of the working class. Its
physical form and functionalities communicate these ideas, which are practiced in the different communal
activities of education, political action, and celebration. Ideology is materialized and practiced in space,
but there is a reciprocal effect between the three components. Ideology is as much developed through
spatial practice as it is engraved in the materiality of the space. This “spatial dialectic” produces social
space, which is not a stable order as “representations of space” would assume, but it incorporates
ideologies, materiality, and spatial practices. Social space is the meaningful, enacted space (some would
speak of place-making here), that is not completely free as action is limited in many ways, but it is “real” in the sense that it is not an abstraction – it is being constantly produced.

[Social] space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object […] Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. (Lefebvre, 1991: 73)

Richard Sennet – Social Psychology of the Public – Can a “true” Public Sphere exist in a modern society?

Whereas Arendt concentrates on the decline of public life as a purely political form, and Habermas on the institutional decline of the public sphere, Richard Sennet pays attention to the further decline of sociability in the 20th century. Sociability among strangers – although at least from a strict Arendtian perspective perhaps politically worthless – is a precondition to any collective action, and maybe the only thing we have left of the “authentic” political space in a pluralist democracy. For people to act together, they have to come together in space in the first place. This might be the more actual challenge posed to public space today.

According to Sennet, individual psychic life has become increasingly isolated from the social world with far-reaching consequences. Sennet approaches the phenomenon from a social-psychological standpoint: as narcissism has replaced Freud’s hysteria as one of the most prominent psychological disorders (APA actually considered dropping Narcissistic Personality Disorder in 2010), society has become thoroughly private and only intimate relations are given any value. The “self” feels attacked from the outside without the shelter of the private space of the bourgeois family. As we have become liberated from (Victorian) repression, a romantic search for “self-realization” has replaced any collective goals. Sennet sees this
change in individual psychology and, most importantly, the very concern with one's self (psyche) as
deriving from a change in the Western society's conception of public and private: "Western societies are
moving from something like an other-directed condition to an inner-directed condition—except that in the
midst of self absorption no one can say what is inside" (Sennet, 1992, p. 5). (ibid., p. 4-12)

Sennet shows that linguistically there has been a shift in the meaning of the word “public.” Originally
meaning common good, “public” began to connote a region of social life by the end of the 17th century.
During the 18th century, as the bourgeois society grew in cities, the scope of the word got extended and
came to mean the unregulated (by the court) meeting of several social groups of the city as public life was
accommodated by parks, promenades, cafes, and open access to opera and theaters. Parks gave even
the working classes a chance to exercise bourgeois sociability. Simultaneously, a developing cash
economy facilitated and rationalized wider exchanges among strangers outside of feudal relations. A code
for dress, speech, and behavior was developed to accommodate an emotionally satisfactory public life
outside the sphere of the home and reproduction. (pp. 16-18)

The economic turmoil that followed industrial capitalism developed a psychological necessity to shield
oneself and retreat to home and family, which during the 19th century took the form of an “idealized
refuge” rather than “the center of a particular, nonpublic region” (p. 20). Whereas for women to be “out in
public,” was less a virtuous endeavor, public life for men became a hideaway from the responsibilities as
the head of the family. “In ancien régime, public experience was connected to the formation of social
order; in the [19th] century, public experience came to be connected to the formation of personality” (p.
24). In a very concrete manner, the personal qualities of a political figure became the measure for his
qualification. The personal character and authenticity of the speaking subject became to carry more
weight in the intimate society than their competency in the public arena (p. 105). Accidental display of
private emotions in public became an anxiety (private became superimposed on the public), and one's
“true” personality was hidden behind the fashion of wearing unremarkable clothing in the high Victorian
era. Eventually, in mid 19th century Paris and London, silence became a defense against disclosure of
one's character, and a notion of a right not to be bothered by strangers in public was developed. Public behavior became a matter of observation; silent and passive participation. (pp. 19-27)

The balance between private and public life had come to a complete imbalance. Their fruitful interaction had ceased to exist as they both were based on some sort of masking of the "real" self. If one could not know who one was himself, how could one know the true nature of a stranger? The question of identity has come to haunt us forever. Arendt describes the same phenomenon when she describes the "occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudospace of action in which individuals no longer "act" but "merely behave" as economic producers, consumers, and city dwellers" (Arendt, 1972, p. 75). Arendt, Habermas, and Sennet all bring forth the argument that the public self had been lost in the confusion of public and private spheres. For Arendt the reason is the substitution with the social, for Habermas the conflicting demands of multiple publics, and for Sennet the individual's modern obsession with the self. All authors connect these changes in the public sphere (however understood) to the rise of modern industrial capitalism and the generalization of the bourgeois society. If Sennet's estimation of the social psychology of the modern is correct, then the reconstruction of a political public sphere would be impossible, even in a society where the values of the bourgeois culture would be widely shared (whether achieved through the German model of social democracy or the American liberal equivalent). The prognosis, then, seems dire, but Margaret Kohn's Radical Space (2003) offers a refreshing alternative to these rather bleak analyses.

Richard Wittman - Public Space as Discourse

I will end this chapter by discussing the relationship between space and the public sphere in Richard Wittman's work, which traces the transitions in the perception of architecture at the dawn of the modern age. In his essay The Hut and the Altar (2007) Wittman shows how an anxiety about the place of architecture in the new immaterial order of the literal public sphere transformed architectonic narratives in 18th century France. Architecture started losing its function as a form of public communication that structured society as written word emerged as the primary medium around which a public was formed.
“This relatively open discursive sphere encouraged the airing of opinions that would once have remained invisible, in the process of highlighting the dizzying variety of available perspectives. As a result, the real social heterogeneity lying behind the reassuring notion of an ordered society grew more evident” (p. 246). As a result, architecture, once a means of reproducing a fixed social order, became a matter of public discussion and commentary. A theoretical debate ensued about the origins of architecture as a theory was needed to justify architecture (understood as a socially grounded spatial practice), and to form a basis for making architecture socially relevant again. Wittman tells us that in his writing *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1753), Marc-Antoine Laugier developed an enlightenment equivalent to the Roman theorist Vitruvius, contending that the origins of architecture rested in the natural man's need for comfort that he had found in building the “primal hut”. Laugier then developed a rational model of building from the most necessary (structural) elements, to “licenses” (window, doors), to the most unnecessary “faults” (decorations). Another theorist of the era, Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux published a series of essays throughout the 1780s where he developed an early culturalist theory of the origins of architecture claiming that the origin could not have been a measly hut, but something much more profound, an altar; built to worship the sun, not to hide from it. Viel's view was based on a theory that suggested that architecture had been a universal language of the ancients who “had enjoyed a thoroughly integrated worldview, in which the interrelatedness of all things physical and metaphysical was fully acknowledged” (p. 240). Two competing views were thus developed within a short period, one claiming that architecture was fundamentally a rational solution to worldly problems, the other claiming that architecture was fundamentally a universal means of communication, at the origins of human civilization.

Juxtaposing these two theories is interesting as such as they – at the very beginnings of modern architecture – framed the socio-semantic field that architecture still needs to negotiate: while serving a specific function, built form also needs to communicate that function. The form is culturally determined, or it becomes adapted as such, as meaning becomes eventually attached to form, whether that is planned for or not. What Wittman finds especially interesting is how architecture as a communal form of communication, became conceived of in a novel way through the literal public sphere in the late 18th century – commentary on architecture became political. “To write about architecture and the city was […]
to comment on the visible, material face of the common public sphere that was controlled by the governmental and ecclesiastical elites, yet inhabited by the large populace" (p. 245). Architecture was understood as an integral component of the public sphere, and it became a natural topic for commentary. Laugier's writing sought to establish a basis for new architecture instead of copying old forms, whereas concern about the fragmentation of the social order underlies Viel's text some 30 years later. In architecture, Viel hoped, the epistemological, philosophical basis of the society could be unified with the concrete materiality of the world (pp. 248-9). It is noteworthy that this debate took place during the decades leading to the Revolution.

Wittman concludes:

Laugier’s appeal to the rational origins of architecture bespoke a faith, characteristic of his age, that reason offered a valid basis upon which to solve the problems of contemporary society. Viel de Saint-Maux’s account of architectural origins instead reflects not only the loss of that faith, but also a stronger sense of the magnitude of society’s problems. Viel's critique of the modern world is predicated on the conviction that the prize of meaningful architecture is simply unavailable to a contumacious public of anonymous, atomized individuals; not only were there too many independent, subjective judgments to be accommodated in such a public, but printing had also so completely exploded its spatial scale that any collective experience of a stationary, inarticulate object, in real time and space, had become impossible for it. (Wittman, 2007, pp. 250-1)

This early modern theorizing is of importance for this study in three ways:

1. The crisis of space was severely felt soon after the literal public sphere emerged, and this crisis is still at the heart of the matter of defining the necessity of space for the formation of publics and public politics.
2. Public space became an object of public discussion, encompassing space as part of the literal public sphere and its form and use became a matter that concerned the public in the first place.

3. The fundamental problem of modern rationalism in creating meaningful spaces was felt early on. Viel's critique of the subjectivity of the atomized public also brings forth the problem of building public space that potentially would bring the “public at large” together.
Chapter 2: Three Examples of Privately Owned Public Space

This chapter presents three urban public spaces, all situated in midtown Manhattan in New York City. These are all privately built and managed spaces, examples of a type of privately owned public space (POPS) that in one way or another came to define the urbanism of the 1960s era in New York. Two of the most appreciated new urban spaces in Manhattan, Paley Park and Seagram Plaza, were also corporation-funded public projects that were built without the financial involvement of the city. The third one, GM plaza, was a result of the 1961 Zoning Ordinance that incentivized developers to include public spaces in their buildings in exchange for the right to build taller than the zoning code would otherwise allow (known as “air rights”). As William H. Whyte (and later Jerold Kayden) found out, most of these “bonus spaces” were poorly designed, and their contribution to the city as public spaces rather questionable. Please refer to “Appendix II” for images of all the spaces.

Seagram Plaza – A Civic Gesture

Designed by the original starchitects Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, the Seagram Building is situated on Park Avenue, between 52nd and 53rd Streets. Construction was completed in 1958. An iconic monument of distinctively high-modernist aura, the project, through its inclusion of a publicly accessible plaza in front of the building, set the tone for the development of urban form in Midtown Manhattan. The Seagram Building guided the 1961 zoning ordinance that incentivized private developers to incorporate public plazas and arcades in their buildings. Initially, Seagram’s president Samuel Bronfman selected Charles Luckman, a proudly commercial architect who believed that “architecture was business, not an art” (Stern et al., 1997, p. 342). He offered a rather mediocre proposal to say the least. However, the love of Bronfman’s daughter for contemporary architecture resulted in a change of plans. Phyllis Bronfman Lambert eventually chose, from a list of top candidates, the German modernist master Mies van der Rohe to design the building (Stern et al., 1997, p. 344). In a seven-page letter Ms. Lambert lectured her father on the history of architecture and civic responsibility. She wrote: “You must put up a building which expresses the best of the society in which you live, and at the same time your hopes for the betterment of
this society” (Lamster, 2013). Lambert also made sure that van der Rohe got his way designing the $36 million dollar building. No expenses were saved and the building and its plaza have almost unexceptionally received praise from critics. A permanent sculpture was initially planned for the plaza, but it has been used as a site to present several temporary displays of sculptural art instead – including Jean Dubuffet’s *Milord la Chamarre* in 1974 and in 2011 Urs Fischer’s *Yellow Bear*, made out of bronze, as are the I-beams on the building’s facade.

For the company, the plaza was simultaneously a civic gesture – a pricey one since Seagram was made to pay property tax on the unbuilt portion as well as the building – and an expression of corporate power, as half an acre of prime real estate was left undeveloped (Stern et al., 1997, p. 351). The plaza, while being a public amenity, also lends the building more prestige by bringing the architecture more comfortably into view through the setback from Park Avenue. Careful consideration went into designing a remarkable office building with civic attributes that would help counter the negative association that still came with liquor in the 50s. Bronfman (a Canadian and Jewish) also had a private stake in recovering respectability: it was well known that he used to be a major provider for bootleggers during prohibition (Flowers, 2009, p.106). Because of all the publicity, the building became an integral part of the corporation’s identity; Bronfman made continuous efforts throughout the 1960s to control how the “booze building” was represented in the media (pp. 126-7). During the Cold War the idea that a corporation was a bulwark of democracy against communism had serious pull (p. 140). Corporations were seen as integral to the well being of the society; the capitalist enterprise had a secure place in the moral order of the world (Upton, 1998, p. 223). Using the plaza as a civic gesture thus made sense on multiple levels. The building was a watershed moment in both an architectonic and an ideological sense.

The building’s plaza accentuated van der Rohe’s architecture, allowing for a better view of the building, and functioned as “the exterior portion of the monumental entrance sequence” for the building (Stern et al., 1997, p. 345). Described as a “pristine space fronting the pristine portal” (van der Rohe refused to design the building without it) and “uncompromisingly permeated with the spirit of the Italian renaissance” (Jordy, 1976, pp. 260-1), the formal, empty plaza is a prime example of modern monumentalism – an
example of abstract, negative space. When Lewis Mumford reviewed the building in *The New Yorker* he evaluated the minimalistic plaza quite positively:

This plaza is open without being formidable; the absence of any kind of ornament, except the tall bronze flagpole, seventy-feet high, slightly to the right of the main entrance, and the fountains and rectangular, step-rimmed pools of water on either side, only emphasize the quality of the space itself. In spite of the towering shaft, the plaza, thanks partly to the treatment of the ground floor, maintains the human scale, and its emptiness is a part of its serenity, while the impeding tower itself disappears from the viewer’s vision. It needs no ornamental fixtures other than those it has in order to increase this human quality; all it needs – and it already has these, both by day and by night – is people capable of enjoying the primal aesthetic pleasures: ordered space, air, the spray of the fountain’s on one’s face, and sunlight or the regal mixture of black and gold that greets one from the lighted building at night. Small plazas like this, if repeated often enough about the city, would accomplish more for recreation than thousands of distant wild acres hardly worth the effort of a crawling Sunday Journey. (Mumford, 1958, p. 141)

Mumford goes on to lament the lack of benches on the plaza and to note the popular use of the fountain ledges for seating. Most critics lauded the plaza design, but it was not seen as a general model for new urbancy. Developers – inspired by the 1961 Zoning Ordinance that took its model from the Seagram Building – mimicked the design, causing a mushrooming of useless commercial plazas in Manhattan that was highly criticized (Stern et al., 1997, p. 353; Scully, 1963).

It was van der Rohe’s explicit wish that the immaculate plaza be kept clear of disturbing factors (including people); he even suggested filling the fountains to the brim so that the edges would not be suitable for seating (Tafuri & Francesco cited in Stern et al. 1997, p. 347). As Philip Johnson, who worked with van der Rohe on the building, explained to William H. Whyte: “We designed those blocks in front of the Seagram Building so people could not sit on them, but, you see, people want to so badly that they sit
there anyhow. They like that place so much that they crawl, inch along that little narrow edge of the wall. We put the water near the marble ledge because we thought they'd fall over if they sat there” (Whyte 1980, p. 121).

Regardless, Seagram's simplified ledges worked really well for seating, failing to become the “quiet and serene space for people to be in or pass by” that van der Rohe had planned for (Stern et al., 1997, p. 345). William H. Whyte later confirmed Mumford’s positive assessment of the plaza by finding that it was actually one of the most well-used public spaces in Midtown Manhattan, especially because of the seating options on the ledges (Whyte, 1972; Whyte, 1980, p. 29). In his article for The New York Times, Whyte summarized the findings of his research on Manhattan public spaces and noted the conscious efforts to keep people away from the plazas: “Some builders genuinely and sincerely mistrust people – noncustomer people at least – and are almost obsessive on the threat of hippies.” Whyte published his findings in a book called The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1980), subsequently made into a movie of the same name (1988).

William H. Whyte took up a project of observing life on Manhattan plazas in order to analyze which spaces “worked.” He found out that in contrast to most “bonus plazas,” the forecourt of the Seagram Building became an immensely popular public place. Whyte's observations showed that whereas the Seagram Plaza attracted up to 150 people at lunchtime on a good day, the average for other plazas was four people per thousand square feet at lunchtime (Whyte 2009, p. 104). Although on average 80 percent of all plaza activity happened during lunchtime (between 11 am and 2 pm), Whyte still considered these spaces very useful (p. 106). Further, Whyte's research found that the best-used plazas attracted more people in groups of two or more, and more female users (pp. 105-6). There was not much mixing, however; people kept to themselves or their own groups (p. 107). Whyte recommended that to be well used, these public spaces should be centrally located, within three blocks of downtown core (p. 108). The size, shape, or design of the space (or even the amount of sunlight) was not crucial to their success, Whyte observed (pp. 109-110). The most important thing was the quality and amount of seating. Various spaces, GM plaza among them, had barely usable ledges for seating, as the vague zoning ordinance was
very unspecific about design and did not make recommendations on additional seating (pp. 110, 113-4). Pedestrian flows and seating on the plazas (steps, ledges) were complementary and coincidental, which is why sunken or elevated plazas were not good ideas (p. 116). The connection to the street was found to be paramount (pp. 128, 130), thus walls around a space made it feel less welcoming. The movable chair was found to be a well-liked seating option, as it afforded some individual control over seating position (p. 11). The inviting and sit-able steps of the Seagram Plaza were found to be highly popular, but it had not found application in any other building (p. 187). Whyte observed that the sense of enclosure, offered by McKim, Mead & White’s Racquet Club across the street from the Seagram Building, was a major element for the success of the plaza as well (Whyte, 1980, p. 26). The plaza at the GM Building, as will be seen, was in this sense (and many others) a complete opposite of Seagram's plaza.

**Paley Park – Space for Leisure and Relaxation**

John Lindsay, running as a progressive on the Republican ticket in the mayoral race, began to steer the planning of urban environment in New York in a novel way after taking office January 1, 1966. Lindsay championed the mixing of private and public realms of governance by promoting incentives for developers in exchange for public goods. He paid attention to the livability of the physical city and brought community participation into planning, all while taking a reserved position towards urban renewal. Although his well-intentioned initiatives in the end had less to show for than hoped, his concepts still today influence New York planning policy (e.g. moving away from physical planning, incentivizing, setting design standards, neighborhood scale planning). At the time of Lindsay's election, New York had hit rock bottom (or so it was thought), but Lindsay showed admirable zeal and had confidence in the city's creative potentiality. He viewed density as a strength, not as a cancer eating the city from the inside.

An important figure in the change of planning philosophy was Jane Jacobs who emerged as a prominent and vocal critic of modernist planning at the turn of the 1960s. Her contempt for aesthetized plans for urban renewal projects arose from their negligence of social space. The traditional, chaotic patterns of urban spaces were in her opinion much more useful than thoroughly planned architectonic environments.
In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she rose to defend the dense and diverse city – with all its contradictions – against the modernist planning establishment receiving a lot of blowback from that direction. (Klemek, 2011, pp. 109-119)

By the time of Lindsay's election, Jacobs' (as well as Herbert Gans’s and Robert Venturi’s) message was being received in liberal planning circles, and certainly guided Lindsay's planning teams' policy suggestions. They also moved away from the idea of the plaza ordinance bringing buildings back to street-line, a decisive nod towards Jane Jacobs' appreciation of the street. Lindsay's parks commissioner, Thomas Hoving, sought to actively enhance the quality and use of public spaces such as parks and museums – partly to enhance the public quality of the city (Mogilevich, 2014). It is interesting to note that both Philip Johnson and Robert Zion were part of the commission, chaired by William S. Paley, responsible for the 1967 “Paley report,” an analysis of the current physical state of the city that became a kind of founding document for Lindsay's planning policy. (Goldberger, 2014)

Paley Park represents the softer approach of the Lindsay government towards the city. Like the Seagram plaza, it was built out of private initiative and became a model for further urban interventions. The first of so-called vest-pocket parks, Paley Park provided public space while leaving the urban grid untouched. William S. Paley, chairman of the board of CBS, acquired the site at 53rd Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues in 1966 and established a foundation to maintain a park in memory of his father. Robert Zion designed Paley Park in association with Albert Preston Moore (Stern, 1997, p. 489). The tiny park, built on a single lot at the former site of the infamous Stork Club, is lush with trees and its brick sidewalls are covered with ivy. An impressive water wall adorns the back of this outside room, which, besides being visually striking, also covers the noises of the city by its sound. The park is furnished with simple portable metal garden chairs and tables, which are rather intimately close to each other, as are tables in New York restaurants. Originally, two guards were hired to maintain an orderly and clean park. The park became immediately immensely popular and a small number of parks were built on the same model, most notably the Greenacre Park in Midtown East in 1971.
Zion believed that small neighborhood parks could work and be safe in a dense urban setting, without attracting the “bums and perverts” that Jane Jacobs believed would ultimately take over the space (Stern, 1997, p. 490). Zion’s ultimate aspiration behind Paley Park was the construction of a network of small parks around the city in lieu of large parks and formal plazas (the parks department believed at the time that a park had to be at least three acres in size [p. 490]). Zion’s wish was that every Midtown block have such a park for people to regenerate before returning to the urban chaos, but Paley Park remained the only vest-pocket park that he designed. These parks, according to Zion, should become “not amenities, but necessities of city life” and “as ordinary as, say, the cafés of Paris” (Thwaites & Simkins, 2007, p. 113).

Ada Louis Huxtable was an influential critic of architecture and planning in New York. She was the first architecture critic at The New York Times and held the position between 1963 and 1982. She was said to have single-handedly brought the critique of the urban environment into public discourse (Dunlap, 2013). Her assessment of Paley Park was unreservedly positive, and she greeted the idea of vest-pocket parks as a novel idea, although she was skeptical about the funding of maintenance for these parks (Huxtable, 1966). A 1967 Times article celebrated the success of the park as a popular space for visitors and area office workers during the day and as more of a neighborhood space in the evening. The vest-pocket concept had proved to be immensely popular: the city had, within the previous year, set up 18 parks and had 10 more in the planning (Carroll, 1967).

However, a 1968 article in The New Yorker criticized the waterfall in the popular park that had become “a part of the essential New York”. The assessment was that the waterfall was functionally anti-social:

> At first sight – or hearing – one is hard put to it to figure out what possessed Mr. Paley to add that waterfall. It makes a fearful din as it comes crashing down the wall it occupies, at the far end of the park, at a rate of eighteen hundred gallons a minute, causing people to sit and stare straight ahead of them as if they were deranged or at the theater. The nineteenth-century poet who wrote of Niagara Falls “My brain/grows wild, my senses
wander, as I gaze/Upon the hurrying waters, and my sight/Vainly would follow, as forward
the verge/Sweeps the wide torrent – waves innumerable/Meet there and madden” has
well described the state of mind produced by the waterfall in Paley Park. (The New
Yorker, 1968, August 4, p. 22).

The article goes on to describe the different characters occupying the park describing it a “crowded Dada
back yard,” and the activities of two uniformed attendants who were constantly occupied with keeping
things clean and orderly in the space. Another article in Times noticed the same phenomenon of staring at
the water and disregarding other people, but evaluated the phenomenon more positively, attributing it to
New Yorkers’ wish for privacy and delight in being alone in a crowd (Corry, 1974). A 1972 article
highlighted the deteriorating condition of parks due to the “loss by attrition of approximately one park
worker a day for the last two and a half years,” noting that by contrast privately built and maintained vest-
pocket parks, such as Paley, had been very successful. (Blumenthal, 1972)

Like the Seagram Building, Whyte found that the Paley Park was easily approachable. It had inviting
steps and maintained a strong relation to the street; the place is also meant to be seen (Whyte 2009, p.
131). The movable chairs and tables were a hit; in fact, Paley was one of the examples that made the city
extend the use of these chairs to other sites (p. 122). Whyte found that while the sound of the rather loud
water wall was not that pleasant as such, it could be appreciated when combined with the visual
attractiveness of the place. Besides dampening the street noise, it also increased the feeling of privacy,
as it was difficult to overhear other people’s conversations (p. 140). Whyte found Paley Park to be an
especially encouraging example of a heavily used public space: although it was one of the most densely
populated spaces that he studied, people found it to be the most pleasant and least crowded (Whyte,
1980, p. 75).
GM Plaza – Space Is Money

A plan to demolish McKim, Mead & White’s beloved Savoy Plaza hotel – part of a Beaux-Arts ensemble surrounding the Grand Army Plaza in the southeast corner of Central Park – was published in 1964 to the shock of the preservationist community that had, just one year earlier, suffered a devastating loss when Pennsylvania Station was demolished. Edward Durrell Stone, one of the first important architects to depart from the modernism of the “International Style” and utilize classical elements and ornamentation in his designs, was chosen as the architect of the new General Motors Building that was to replace the Savoy Plaza Hotel.

Gray reports, in *Times*, on the protest that ensued:

In October 1964 the architects and teachers Elliot Willensky and Norval White, who had picketed at Penn Station to protest its demolition, organized their students in a demonstration at the Plaza to protest the demolition of the Savoy Plaza. Signs included “Renege on Rampant Wrecking” and one placard, “Landmarks Preservation Weak,” was a bitter satirical jab at Mayor Robert F. Wagner, who had just declared “Landmarks Preservation Week” but had not put any law into effect. One student, Miles Kurland, carried a sign “Save the Seagram Building.” He told The New York Times that he was “thinking ahead.” (Gray 1999, July 18)

The proposed building went ahead, with the architects making use of the new zoning ordinance of 1961 that offered higher floor area ratios (FAR) to developers in exchange for a public plaza. A sunken plaza emulating the court inside Rockefeller Center, twelve feet below grade, was added to the controversial design in 1965. Profits were planned in the design of the plaza from the beginning, as the sunken space had commercial space lined with shops on three sides. As building started, Ada Louis Huxtable turned extremely critical towards the plan that she had originally praised (Stern, 1997, pp. 511-2). The plaza was widely criticized for destroying the enclosure of the Grand Army Plaza across the street; Huxtable called it
“redundant” and “a sick planning joke” (Huxtable, 1966). Besides being an urbanistic disaster, Huxtable criticized the lavish marble cladding and tasteless furnishings, calling the style “Throwback Classicism or Furniture Store Posh” (she also noted GM’s gusto for cost-saving, as they proudly announced 20-25% savings in comparison to other buildings of similar scale) (Huxtable, 1968). Stone saw the white marble finishing of the building as a contextual factor. The editors of *Progressive Architecture* begged to differ on this part, deeming the 50-story building as too visually dominant for the site (Stern et al., 1997, pp. 508-511).

The sunken plaza drew criticism from the beginning and became a notorious example of poorly designed public space. The building managed to colonize space in many ways: as the scale of the architectonic setting got exploded, the public plaza (which allowed building that high in the first place) never managed to attract many users. Huxtable sharply criticized the whole “plaza ordinance” as profiteering companies abused the zoning laws; this resulted in piecemeal development of open space where it was not necessarily needed or wanted. Huxtable was especially concerned about the destruction of the Grand Army Plaza, “New York’s most distinguished, urbane and elegant open space,” through new development. “As for the General Motors Building, its contribution to the rape of the plaza is a clear demonstration of how the new zoning, like the old zoning, is to be used exclusively as a tool for profit. […] As much as we need open space, it can be as destructive in the wrong place as it can be beneficial in the right one” (Huxtable 1965). Peter Blake pointed out, in *New York Magazine*, the dull commercial qualities of the building (designed by an architect he greatly admired) and found this work especially discouraging when compared to the innovative GM Technical Center by Eero Saarinen from 1953 (Blake, 1968). Another *Times* article lauded the appointment in 1967 of an “Urban Design Council,” headed by William S. Paley, and used the GM Building as an example of disastrous planning.

As an exercise in what-might-have-been, there is the appalling General Motors Building, destroyer of scale, space, and standards on the city’s most elegant plaza, a monstrous behemoth dwarfing the [Central Park] itself. This was not just a matter of design sacrificed by the builders to economic expediency, like the Pan Am Building, it is a matter
of brutality of size and in addition a perversion of open space planning. [...] The new office structure [...] need not have mutilated Seagram’s superb urban statement [...] (Design for a City, 1967)

Donald Trump had his eye on the GM Building already in 1980. Unhappy with the dominance of the building in his architect’s contextual model of his nearby Trump Tower, he was eager to “get rid of the building” – at least in the model (Brenner, 1980). Apparently this experience remained with Trump: as part of a plan to “make this the greatest urban setting in the world,” Trump bought the building in 1997 for the price of $800 million, renaming it the “General Motors Building at Trump International Plaza.” Trump also decided to add an exquisite design touch to the building by adding signs with his name in four-foot-high, gold-colored, “really expensive” titanium letters on all sides of the building – his rationale being the heightened marketability of a “TRUMP” building (Goldberger, 1999). A new plan was made to enliven the unpopular plaza by creating a new one just above street level with fountains and seating areas on either side of a central walkway from Fifth Avenue to the General Motors Building. Covering the sunken plaza would create space for a new CBS studio and add more retail space underneath (Dunlap, 1999).

In 2002, local residents who were appalled by the “racket and congestion” in the public plaza filed a lawsuit against CBS; they charged the company with privatizing the plaza by using it as a stage for their morning show. Donald Trump was also charging the broadcasting company rent for the use of a public space3. The company claimed that their activities on the plaza were open to the public (Bagli, 2002). The prevalent theme of privatization got revisited in 2006 when Apple opened a 24-hour store situated in the space that was initially used by the unpopular, car-themed “Autopub.” Apple erected a 32-foot glass cube as an entryway rising from the sunken plaza (Dunlap, 2008). Francis Morrone lauded the plan in 2007 as “partly rectifying” the dominating visual effect of the building (Morrone, 2007). Trump’s elevated plaza hadn’t worked too well either, and he had not managed to find a retail tenant for the covered plaza. The street-level plan included new landscaping, pools, and movable chairs and tables. As is the leitmotif of

3 Trump has not had a good track record in keeping his POPSs public. According to Miller (2007, p. 123), Trump had run into several confrontations with the NYC planning department for closing the atrium of the Trump Tower for private events on multiple occasions.
this story, financial calculations were a major part of the new plan. Macklowe properties had bought the
building from Trump in 2003 for the record price of $1.4 billion (Bagli, 2003). In 2013 the building was
valued at a whopping $3.4 billion, a 20% increase from the value in 2008, when a Chinese and a Brazilian
developer bought stakes in the building (McGeehan, 2013). Macklowe’s lawyers, after carefully
recalculating the required amount of public space, found that they could decrease the amount of public
area by almost 14,000 square feet altogether, thus easily accommodating the space taken by the cube
and the conversion of a part of the public space to retail on Madison Avenue. Amanda M. Burden, then
commissioner of city planning, showed enthusiasm about the rehashing of the public space and called the
plan a "tour de force in design that returns the GM plaza, really, to the public realm"; she saw the Apple
cube’s effects as unproblematic as long as the signage would be kept to minimum (Dunlap, 2005).

William H. Whyte featured GM plaza as a prime example of poorly designed public space in his book
Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. According to Whyte, the plaza’s poor design had been very efficient in
keeping people out. Apart from the barren design, the seating at the front ledges had a railing that stuck
one in the back (Whyte, 1980, p. 59). Whyte cites the irrational fear over vandalism and “undesirables”
that has resulted in making spaces defensive and unwelcoming, as was the case with GM plaza (Whyte,
2009, p. 156). Greg Smithsimon’s research of Whyte’s archives revealed that Edward Durrell Stone, the
building’s architect, had told Whyte in an interview that the uncomfortable railing was included as per the
developers wish to keep “loiterers” away – as was the case in so many other bonus plazas of the era
(Smithsimon, 2008, p. 338). One can only guess why Whyte didn’t reveal this intention in his books.

Flowers writes about the ideology of the skyscraper: “Looking today at the Empire State Building and the
Seagram Building, we move from a building that celebrated the republican convergence of business and
the higher aspirations of civic duty to one that celebrated a growing consumer culture and liberation from
older, constrictive social values” (Flowers 2009, 97). Moving from Seagram Building to the GM, the
difference is even more apparent as the GM Building does not even pretend to have a function outside of
the economic. The skyscraper is a technical solution to the problem posed by the intensification of land
values that over-accumulation of capital has induced in a certain geographic location. Its architecture is
an almost unmediated expression of capital accumulation. The Seagram Plaza and Paley Park were built only because a private corporate donor was willing to sacrifice productivity for private motives. Because it was motivated solely by profitability, GM plaza did not “work” in any sense. As spaces become integrated into global capital flows, they lose their public character – the sole point of something being in the public realm is that its exchange value is neglected so that it will have use value for everybody.\(^4\)

What the Seagram plaza does well is connect to the street: one need not enter a space; one is already there. Maybe there was something to the non-compromising attitude of the builders. The architecture, although clearly monumental, does not inhibit the social use of the space, although the building was intended as an advertisement for Seagram. Paley Park is integrated in the urban fabric, has a visual connection to the street, and becomes part of the “city image” for anybody that passes by. As an urban oasis of sorts, it has a corrective function as a necessary momentary getaway from the exhausting city. However, it needs to be asked why one has the need to escape the streets in the first place. GM's urbanistically redundant plaza is also practically redundant. Profits were built into its design from the beginning, reducing it to the status of an architectonic spectacle. Seagram Plaza allows some amount of publicness to happen, just by the fact of its connection to the public space of the street. I am quite confident that any transgressions on the actual plaza would be put down by the security. Paley Park has more “third space” qualities, and it might very well work as such. GM plaza has only started to “work” in any sense after the addition of the Apple store drew people to the location.

The GM Building has become – using Venturi’s term - a “duck,” a building that represents only itself. Whereas the Seagram Building was still informed by “civic values” of sorts, the GM Building’s only motivator was money, and it shows. As the skyscraper form itself is an expression of high levels of capital accumulation in a physical place, the building is tightly integrated into global capital flows. In the end “enlivening” the public space is achieved only in terms of further commodification through the addition of

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4 The proximity of public parks has naturally positive effects on surrounding property values, but when these spaces are built solely for the purpose of pumping up real estate values, something of the intended “publicness” is definitely lost. The High Line in Chelsea is a recent example of a space that got built as a profit-making apparatus for the city and developers, turning it into a touristic showcase for spectacular urban design and architecture.
the Apple store. Somehow the intensification of consumption in the public space does not seem contradictory in the context of the GM plaza. The Apple store almost belongs there, whereas it could never exist on van der Rohe’s solemn plaza. This is not to say that economic activity as such would be necessarily antithetical to public life – historically the contrary has been true (one of the most socially and ethnically diverse public spaces in New York, the Coney Island boardwalk, is built around leisure and consumption, but it has tremendous public qualities as well). In contrast to Paley Park and Seagram plaza, both well-intended civic-minded gestures, the history of the GM Building indicates clearly how the goal of profit-making can extenuate any public intentions of architectural projects. Space does not necessarily adhere to some immanent, reductive, logic of capital, but in some cases this certainly applies. The following passage from Dell Upton’s *Architecture in the United States* crystallizes the relationship between building and money, and helps grasp the differences between the Seagram Building and the GM Building:

> Architecture is a phenomenon of political economy. The flow of money makes building possible and desirable. It is equally important to understand that building and landscapes are commentaries on political economy, not merely its translation into bricks and mortar. That is, raw economic power is filtered through the economic beliefs of builders and users, giving the landscape a variety that would not exist were it a simple vector of monetary forces. (Upton, 1998, p. 191)
CHAPTER 3: Analysis

Modern Space as Social Space

In the first chapter we differentiated between two types of public spaces: the spaces of pluralistic society/liberal democracy that are open public spaces for the people and closed public spaces by the people, (including political spaces) (cp. Kohn, 2003, p. 108) and the spaces of privately owned “third places”. POPS, as well as most state-sponsored public spaces, fall into the first category. To significantly simplify matters, POPS will be analyzed according to this intended use. Interestingly, however, many of them might work better as places for congregation than as public spaces in the first sense (which makes Zion's comparison of them to “cafés of Paris” quite apt). This distinction is also important because, although they may not be perfect examples of public space in the first sense, these spaces still have potential uses apart from leisure and consumption.

Arendt and Habermas argued that the rise of the modern “mass society” of atomized individuals eventually obliterated more authentically political forms of life. However, Sennet's narrative suggests that, going in to the (20th) century of the mass society, social alienation had been an ongoing process for some 200 years. Could it be then that some aspects of modernity have been a response to a social phenomenon (which, of course, would derive from the restructuring of the society in the new economic order)? In Sennet's theory the individual's disposition mirrors the society. As we build spaces that are more or less supportive of social interaction or political action, we have to ask whether these spaces in themselves facilitate (or force) these changes in public life, or whether these spaces are a response to changes in individual needs. Did there emerge a psycho-social necessity for heightened social distance in the society or was modernity with its homogenizing and separating tendencies merely superimposed on an unwilling population?

As always, this question can not be given one answer, and one has to understand it as a dialectical movement (or trialectical as below). A recently suburbanized middle-class family in the mid 20th century,
for example, might have a different feeling about their freedom to partake of modernity than members of a family forcefully moved to public housing as many economically viable neighborhoods were summarily destroyed in the slum-clearing frenzy of the mid 20th century. Without going too deep into the dialectics of the matter, within the confines of this study it suffices to say that modernization has certainly contributed to the lowered sociability of urban places in the dual movement of suburbanization and rationalization of space in inner cities. My own experience has lead me to agree with Jacobs (and Whyte) that traditional cityscapes are unsurpassed as social spaces.

Although suburbs and new towns, as well as housing projects, have certainly always been more socially vibrant environments than stereotypes might suggest, there is a considerable difference between the kind of intensive social life (which I hold to be a basis for politics in/of public space) of traditional inner-city neighborhoods that Jane Jacobs rose to defend (even if this was just an exceptional Village microcosm). Regarding my contention that public space has a “deeper” meaning than providing spaces for leisurely consumption, the issue is not so much whether public spaces were more or less socially diverse or politically engaging in some distant past, but that we can imagine such a state of affairs and maybe even have personal experiences of such spaces. One does not have to travel too far from Midtown Manhattan.

I want to offer another dynamic model for understanding the process of modernization. If we analyze one example, the Seagram Plaza, through the Lefebvrian “trialectic” it could be said that the modern architectonic practice (a certain spatial representation) helped give form to a certain type of physical space (representation of space), which was then appropriated by the public (spatial practice). The way it was appropriated, again, helped define what is understood by the term *public space*, for example in Whyte's study (another spatial representation), and defined the form of public space through legislation in the 1961 Zoning Ordinance (another representation of space), which again would have effects on spatial practices. This illuminates how space as a "concrete abstraction" becomes concrete from the abstract models of architects, planners, other professionals, and the people that appropriate the space. This framework of analysis helps us understand how space is constantly being produced without necessarily assuming a framework of “top-down” power. The ways that power is being used in actuality (through...
enforcement of rules, design, culture, etc.) can then be analyzed in their particularities as Foucault did in his work on prisons and mental institutions that directly addressed questions of space and power. The section on “spectacle” addresses this issue fleetingly.

In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre criticized modernist planning practices that did not take into account, or actively suppressed, social aspects of space. One of the first decidedly modern interventions in the urban environment was Baron de Haussmann’s redesign of Paris. It serves as an historical example since it was a deliberate and overt attempt at the homogenization of social space through means of modern technology. In this example “production of space” is exemplified in a very concrete manner, due to its unconcealed intentionality. This is a prime example of control and production of social space by interventions in the built environment whereby the use and desired user is made explicit, whereas the traditional, authorless city appeared as a puzzling mosaic to a stranger.

The classic image of the early 19th Century Parisian house is of a wealthy family on the first floor, a respectable family on the next floor, and so on, until one reached the servants in the garret. The image of course is misleading, but dismissing it is also misleading. For in the remaking of the city by Haussmann in the 1850’s and 1860’s the intermixing of classes within districts was reduced by design. Whatever heterogeneity occurred spontaneously in the division of private houses into apartments in the first half of the century was now opposed by an effort to make neighborhoods homogeneous economic units; investors in new construction or in renovation found this homogeneity rational in that they knew exactly what kind of area they were putting their capital into. An ecology of quartiers as an ecology of classes: this was the new wall Haussmann erected between the citizens of the city as well as around the city itself. (Sennet, 2002, pp. 134-5)

It is also important to recognize that the matter is not so much the design of a single space, but how modern space as a whole is understood on one hand as differentiated according to function and on the other as undifferentiated abstract space that can be compartmentalized. According to Lefebvre “[abstract]
space is a lethal one which destroys the historical conditions that gave rise to it, its own (internal) differences, and any such differences that show signs of developing, in order to impose an abstract homogeneity” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 370). Abstract space, of course, is not homogeneous in actuality, but instead has homogeneity as its orientation – it violently reduces difference. I don’t think walking through the city should be like driving down the highway with designated areas for nourishment, recreation, and even history (cf. Augé, 1995); neither should this experience be homogenized, sanitary, secure, and boring (it should be noted that the Seagram plaza mixes functions of circulation and sociability, and maybe this accounts for its attractiveness). As Frampton puts it, “we are confronted by piazzas whose hypothetical public status is vitiated by the vacuousness of the context or alternatively we are conducted down streets evacuated of all public life by the circulatory demands of traffic […] a ruthless cultural reduction masks itself by the rhetoric of kitsch or by the celebration of technique as an end in itself” (Frampton, p.118). As the street is reduced to the function of circulation, public space is reduced to the function of social behavior. It is thus stripped of any politically or culturally relevant status it might have had.

What Does Privatization Mean for the Public Experience?

Just as the French monarchy in Wittman’s (2008) account sought to achieve a shared experience of the physical world through a campaign that promoted architecture by literary devices – at a time when those very devices started introducing fragmentation and heterodoxy in to the fabric of the society – a major function of urban public space is the production of a shared experience of urban space. Public space should counter the fragmentation of social space rather than attenuate it. Circumscription of uses of space by design or by force (often the result of privatization) leads to the circumscription of possible publics. Forbidding barbecuing in Prospect Park would not only change how the space is used, but also who uses it⁵. As paradigmatic public spaces, parks usually produce publicness in two senses: they might be a shared interest for the “community” (whatever that may be), but they also produce shared

⁵ As a rather encouraging example, the Lindsay administration sought to extend the public of art events organized in Central Park by moving the events further up north to draw crowds from Harlem as well (Mogilevich, 2014). Whereas the forms of expression that were allowed in these events were rather limited, this was a laudable effort in complicating the definition of “a public”.
experiences and a shared image of “the public” (although “friends of” programs and “conservancies” that claim to represent the “community” seek to control and produce a certain kind of public image for these spaces).

Whereas the French government’s project of nation building concentrated on a few major buildings in the capital and sought to conceal both the plurality and the fragmentation of the society, public space should allow for this difference to take its embodied expression. As plurality is made explicit, fragmentation becomes explicit, and this, I think, is the important lesson of public space. To quote Parkinson: “spaces in which one can encounter the *demos* in all its variety have an important democratic function – they help us see and recognize others and make us more willing to take their right to make claims on us more seriously when we encounter them in political debate” (Parkinson, 2011, p. 67). Public space should act as a counterbalance to the mediated public sphere which – differently from the clear cut bourgeoisie public sphere of Habermas – is often muddled by the infotainment of the visual mass media or the seductive potentiality of the Internet as a tool for the affirmation of one’s world view comparable to the NIMBY communities that Sennet criticizes. This is the great potentiality of cities as proudly heterogeneous sites that can be (certainly) suppressed or (hopefully) allowed to thrive through thoughtful urban planning and design. As Jane Jacobs put it: “We should not plan to allow diversity, we must generate diversity” (Summary of Jacobs’ talk at Museum of Modern Art on February 11, 1962, quoted in Klemek, 2011, p. 117). Public spaces are places where this multiplicity can appear and be appreciated.

Other than an ideal public space, such as a public park, a POPS is planned for a certain type of public and for a certain type of use (which in a truly public space can and should be able to be challenged by the public). Its appropriation by its public is parochial, as the nature of its public often is. The public visiting the spaces that Whyte researched consisted mostly of Midtown white-collar office workers, with only the occasional “undesirable” (it must be noted that Whyte himself was critical of limiting access to public space) appearing as a fringe phenomenon that more or less confirms the homogeneity and civility of the public that these spaces (in Whyte’s account) predominantly serve. Although this kind of social construction of public space considerably limits Whyte’s study, the underlying message is rather
encouraging: people gravitate towards public places filled with people, even if privately owned. Whyte concludes that people “do not […] seek to get away from it all. If they did, they would go to the lonely empty places where there are few people. But they do not. They go to the lively places where there are many people. And they go there by choice—not to escape the city, but to partake of it” (Whyte, 1980, p. 100). Appropriation also always challenges the intended use (in whatever petty ways it may be); van der Rohe planned Seagram’s plaza for silent contemplation, yet it became much livelier than that.

In the passive consumption of privatized space the consumer has little subjectivity. Subjectivity is left in the private sphere and the sense of ownership is severely diminished (cf. Eizenberg, 2012). This is not to say that a more engaged appropriation of these spaces would not be possible (besides the fact that the owner might not agree to different uses). It is important to note that as soon as the concept public space was invented as a radical critique of modernized urbanity (see Nadal, 2000), it already went through a de facto privatization in New York – with mostly devastating consequences by any reasonable standards, as was pointed out by Whyte and later Kayden. It is also important to note how William H. Whyte constructed the meaning and utility of public space in certain terms on the example of the few spaces that were “successful” (meaning that they were not inhospitable by design). Their publics and their uses were taken at face value. Then again, Whyte’s study was titled Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, not “Political Life of Small Urban Spaces.” The methodology was decidedly behavioral. Here it is good to recall Arendt's argument that distinguished political action was replaced by conforming social behavior in the modern age (Arendt, 1971, pp. 38-49).

**Can POPS Be Called “Public Space”?**

POPS was a strategy to create open space in expensive Midtown Manhattan without public funding. Some of these spaces offer a welcome respite from the tiring city and they cannot be deemed useless as such. However, we are confronted with a particular problematic as POPS becomes a generalized model for creating public space. Do these spaces anymore fulfill the socio-political uses that public space should ideally serve?
Calling for a theoretical approach that would concretely link public spaces to the public sphere, K. F. Miller writes: “Most scholarship from design fields emphasizes the role of public space as a site for relaxing, recreating, and enjoying everyday social encounters. The goal of many of these studies is to examine spaces that ‘succeed’ in providing settings for such activities and to offer pattern books for practitioners and communities in order to reproduce them in locations” (2007, xiii). Public space is treated as a commodity, and it is articulated solely in terms of a certain kind of consumption of space by a certain kind of public – the use commonly associated with leisure time. Thinking of public space in terms of consumption makes the term “privately owned public space” not seem oxymoronic anymore. This understanding of public space, as consumption of space for leisure, is prevalent in Whyte’s research and it allows him to consider the relationship between the space and its public(s) as rather unproblematic. Although Whyte’s research is useful in many senses, this one issue is rather bothersome. In his books and movie he presented an Upper West Side street as a paradigmatic social space, but did not go on to make further conclusions about social spaces on the basis of this example.

Although the Seagram plaza and Paley Park were well-intended urban interventions that sought to make the city more public, corporations ultimately decide what happens on their plazas, regulating the form of public life on their own terms – they decide what kind of art is suitable and what kind of expression is allowed. The weak zoning ordinance of 1961 showed the docility of the city government in the face of capital flight. The state (including the city government) finds itself between rock and the hard place trying to negotiate public benefits while providing a framework for capital accumulation. Although the interests of the state and the public might not always coincide, the use of space that is nominally in public ownership and management can at least theoretically be controlled by the public. It is hard to imagine “truly public” space that is under private ownership and management. Today, as the city’s image is robust and the city

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6 “Consumption of space” does not mean consumption in space, as in purchasing goods or services, which does not have to be in opposition to public use. What is meant by this is that space itself is understood as an objectified “good” that can be consumed, I think most conspicuous examples would be a private beach at a resort or a historic city center that is fashioned for visual consumption by tourists. 7 Further, the “analogous city” (Boddy, 1992), that seeks to address the “problem” of shared urban space by making it exclusive through a privatized circulation system that connects buildings through bridges, is maybe the most exhaustive example of commodification of urban space.
is flush with capital, it has been able to put rather stringent standards on public space design, as demonstrated by the plan for the Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront, where the city has even managed to regain the privately built public spaces for public ownership.

POPS become effectively depoliticized firstly since their use is a matter of contract between administration and owner, not between the public and the state, where some concept of an active civil society is always implied. The political dimension is undercut due to this contractual relationship, and this shines through in Whyte's study: public space is understood functionally as space of recreation and personal enjoyment since this is the only mode of publicness that POPS allows. I do not, however, mean to suggest that these are not important elements of public space. The problem is that this limited, flattened understanding does not make any connection between public space and the public sphere (as political spaces) or public realm (as commons), and makes privatization unproblematic as long as access is contractually guaranteed.

When we ask who uses them and how they are used, the public component of these spaces is pretty much reduced to a matter of being publicly accessible. If the public is limited and use is limited, what is left of publicness? Taking such spaces as paradigmatic examples of “successful” public spaces is therefore highly suspect.
The following two sections seek to address the problems developed in this section:

1. It is indisputable that POPS are not public in the legal sense. While on the other hand state ownership does not necessarily make a space any more public, there is at least the potential, theoretically, for it to become an integral part of the public realm, being a shared and valued material expression of a pluralistic democratic society.

2. If they are not public in the legal sense, are they public in any other sense? To be “public” in more than name, public spaces should have some connection to the public sphere as laid out in the first chapter. Can they work as political spaces in any of the modalities as presented in the first chapter?

3. Can consumption substitute for publicness or sociability? Admittedly, Midtown public spaces associated with office buildings do have specific uses and users – there is definitely nothing wrong with working in an office or having lunch outside – but ideally public spaces should have several constituencies and a variety of different uses. Can consumption enhance publicness, as was the intent in the redesign of the GM plaza?

**Has Public Space Lost Its Political Potentiality?**

“To write about architecture and the city was […] to comment on the visible, material face of the common public sphere that was controlled by the governmental and ecclesiastical elites, yet inhabited by the large populace” (Wittman 2007, 245). In the beginning of the modern era architecture was understood as an integral component of the public sphere, and it became a natural topic for commentary. Some of the commentaries underlied a certain spatial anxiety that is still with us in the discussion about placelessness (2008, 5), a “post-modern” condition that the early moderns seem to have anticipated. Making architecture meaningful again was one of the major concerns of postmodern architecture. In both cases a social crisis was followed by a crisis of representation, a concern that Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux felt very strongly.
Could it be that our anxiety with the loss of public space is of similar nature as the loss of concreteness at the threshold of the modern age? Are we losing the subject of public space together with its representation? Could it be that we have lost the “public” of the public space and thus treating it as a recreational facility might just be a logical consequence⁸? Here I am not referring to the limitation of rights of access or of political expression in privatized public space that is an issue of constitutional rights or human rights (see Kohn, 2004), but more along the lines of Sennet's discussion of the waning of public sociability. In other words: Is the “public at large” itself interested in being a public?

Let’s remind ourselves of the crucial relationship between space and political subjectivity:

Space affects how individuals and groups perceive their place in the order of things. Spatial configurations naturalize social relations by transforming contingent forms into a permanent landscape that appears as immutable rather than open to contestation. By providing a shared background, spatial forms serve the function of integrating individuals into a shared conception of reality. [...] Political spaces facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and practices. The political power of space comes from its ability to link the social, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of space. (Kohn, 2003, pp. 3-4)

This experiential dimension of space is primary. The secondary dimension is of space as a concrete part of the immaterial public sphere that is a shared value in the society (such as community space or a neighborhood park) or an object of commentary.

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⁸ Some commentators definitely think so. Susan Feinstein and Rosalyn Deutsche pointed to the ahistoricity of “a more authentic urbandy” that was deeper and more inclusive (Nadal, 2000, pp. 157-8). According to Nadal, in City Builders Feinstein (1994, p. 230) argued that the “disneyfication” of public space was probably a reflection of actual social and economic processes in the United States (Nadal, 2000, p. 159). Feinstein also countered the more appropriate critique that did not raise the authenticity as an issue, but the failure of “new public space” to satisfy human needs. Here Feinstein countered by basically asking “which needs?” (ibid.).
The loss of the political importance of public space might be attributed to the following factors (cp. Table I)

a) the public debate is elsewhere (who talks when you have the Internet?)
b) public sociability has waned (who talks to strangers anyway?)
c) public protest does not carry a lot of weight (who cares?)
d) built environment is not a matter of public debate (it's none of my business)

All of the above are certainly true to some extent, and it is possible to qualify a time and place when each point has been more strongly a part of the political society (Greek polis, bourgeois and popular public spheres, eras of popular political movements, Ada Louis Huxtable’s biting critiques). If, as Habermas suggests, there has been a transformation from an audience-oriented to a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public (Habermas, 1991, p. 159), does public space matter any more as political space or has it become just another object of consumption? Ash (2006) defies notions that public space primarily should (or indeed could) instill social interaction among strangers or as spaces where identity politics should be played out. Politics of the public realm should not be read through the sociology of public space. Publics are still being formed, just not through the category of sociability. He uses the term “situated multiplicity” to describe the experience of plurality in urban space, which does have political consequences, just not in the straightforward manner that theorists of public culture have often been assuming. To paraphrase Sennet, intimacy is not what public space is about (and Arendt would agree). Public experience is a much more complex – and less overtly political – phenomenon that involves such things as the material environment and (official or unofficial; overt or covert) regulation of behavior. It grows out of a “sense of shared space” rather than a cognitive acknowledgement of the presence of the other. This resonates well with Sennet's view that “[a] city ought to be a school for learning how to live a centered life. Through exposure to others, we might learn how to weigh what is important and what is not. We need to see differences on the streets or in other people neither as threats nor as sentimental invitations, rather as necessary visions” (Sennet, 1990, p. xiii).
It is fairly evident that the ideal of the *agora* does not have much import anymore. Although our plazas are references to the antique tradition, the function of the space is quite different, even when well appropriated for other uses. In Southern Europe, plazas are still focal points of neighborhood social life and occasional political performances, but it would be unreasonable to expect something like this to transpire in the spaces described in the previous chapter. Still, the plaza speaks to us, signifying a space for public use. A democratic culture needs spaces where an understanding of who the public is can be developed. Media offers often a rather skewed perspective of that, and the publics of Internet forums might rather serve to isolate different lifeworlds than build a dialogue. Thus, public spaces such as plazas and parks might still carry importance in fulfilling that public function even though they might not be *fora* for public discussions. On the one hand, public life in its essence is reduced to the passive observation by the atomized *flaneur*, whose social-psychological development Sennet describes. On the other hand private people can still congregate as a public in these spaces and engage in cultural or communal activities (such as barbecuing in Prospect Park that suddenly has become politically contested terrain). The appearance of the social is a condition for the appearance of the political, the form of which has to be left for the actors to negotiate. A network of planned and “natural” public and semi-public spaces that are open and accessible is the only guarantor for any political space to appear – if only fleetingly.

**Spectacular Urban Space**

In this section public design is situated in the analytic framework of “the spectacle,” based on the analysis of the culture of late-capitalism by the French Situationist theorist, Guy Debord. In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord develops an understanding of the spectacle as an integral part of the workings of the political economy of late-capitalism. In a simplified form it can be said that it includes the intensification of visual consumption in our culture, including the mass media that becomes integrated as part of everyday life. According to Debord, the spectacle induces passivity and separation in the

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9 The social certainly has political potentiality: according to Shatkin Singapore’s “new towns” have successfully integrated Singapore’s various ethnic groups while eliminating ethnically signified spaces. The government has sought to allow for social activity, but to eliminate political or cultural expressions. Pedestrian streets have been removed as uncontrollable public spaces, while commercial activity has been situated in self-contained malls. This has presented a problem for the government, since these planned “public spaces” of social activity have not attracted citizens. (Shatkin, 2014, pp.123-7)
consuming public. “The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity” (Debord, 1995, p. 15). The spectacle appears as intensified visuality (at the cost of other senses). It also limits modes of action. “Power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect […] The modern spectacle […] depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible.” (25)

Similarly, Lefebvre describes how modern cities experience increased visualization of the built environment:

A further important aspect of spaces of this kind is their increasingly pronounced visual character. They are made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and of whatever is contained in them. The predominance of visualization (more important than ‘spectacularization’, which is in any case subsumed by it) serves to conceal repetitiveness. People look, and take sight, take seeing, for life itself. We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images. Sight and seeing, which in the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap: the means whereby, in social space, diversity may be simulated and a travesty of enlightenment and intelligibility ensconced under the sign of transparency. (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 75-6)

Sennet describes how, during the 19th century, the introduction of various spectacles in the city came to substitute for socialization in public:

The terms of the spectacle were […] becoming one-sided. The masses watching Nadar’s balloon witness an act outside everyday experience—that, precisely, makes it spectacular. In the face of this feat, how are they to judge him? How are they to participate? As the flaneur parades down the street, people watch him; they do not feel free any longer to go up and speak to him. The passive spectator, the onlooker silent and
amazed: the city may be in fever, yet even in this surface excitement the signs of a
change appear. (Sennet, 1992, p. 125)

The city of passive spectacle was new; it was also a consequence of the public civility
established in the ancien régime. That prior culture had to exist for the bourgeoisie to
inflate it into spectacle, and so ultimately rob the public realm of its meaning as a form of
sociability. (Sennet, 1992, p.126)

Harvey reflects on the remaking of Paris in the mid 19th century when boulevards and department stores
emerged as spaces of conspicuous consumption while the city was redesigned for heightened separation
of social classes.

Haussmannization was an attempt to put an image “in place of a city which had lost its
old means of representation.” What had been lost was the idea of the city as a form of
sociality, as a potential site for the construction of utopian dreams of a nurturing social
order. [...] Once the city is imaged by capital solely as a spectacle, it can then only be
consumed passively, rather than actively created by the populace at large through
political participation. (Harvey, 2005, p. 23)

To use Lefebvre's terminology, I suggest that “representational space” often incorporates some form of
spectacle. Certainly, spectacle has been built into many planned urban environments: traditional parks
offered a simulation of nature and beyond that, historic monumentality, while still being highly public
spaces. The ideology of Olmstead's parks was Victorian, as they were intended as a civilizing instrument;
however, they were, for this very reason, intended for all social classes. Rome has several visually
captivating monumental spaces, but the city is also full of nondescript but highly public piazzas. A
staircase is pretty much all the landscaping needed. In the traditional city the street is full of unexpected
contacts of bodies and eyes; places are full of sounds, visual impulses, and different smells (cf. Edensor,
1998). In the modern city that has been planned with the rationality of visual consumption in mind, these
irritants have been reduced to a minimum for the sake of the efficient circulation of capital. New urban spaces, devoid of locally produced meanings have to re-invent themselves in order to attract people to enjoy public life. The spectacle might simply be needed for making public life happen in these spaces. It definitely becomes a problem when the production of space is not spontaneous anymore, its imaginary is fixed, the visual is dominant, and room for improvisation is significantly reduced.\(^\text{10}\)

Moving from Seagram plaza to Paley Park to GM plaza, an intensification of the spectacle can be sensed. The Seagram plaza is monumental, but its design does not inhibit social action. The sound of the waterfall at Paley Park is not one that shifts ones attention from the visual; rather, it amplifies it by negating the sounds of the surrounding environment, of the now banal and tiresome city that one needs to take a little distance from, enabling separation and privacy. The waterfall is also a strong visual element, illuminated from below at night. As the street is so exhausting (or it is made tiring by the rationalization of urban life) one prefers an individual, private experience – here the flaneur easily turns away from the crowd, rather than enjoying the public, social experience. Here there is a definite intensification of the spectacle, as the design gravitates towards the dominance of the visual. Paley Park, admittedly, serves an important function providing a space of relaxation; the effect of the waterfall is not as socially deadening as The New Yorker (1968, August 4) reported. It is of importance, though, that such a space could be criticized as “anti-social.” The author found this novel type of arrangement of public space highly suspect.

The kind of blatant commodification that the case of the GM plaza represents is the spatial version of the integration of spectacle into the public sphere (comparable with “infotainment”) that severely diminishes the intended public nature of the plaza. In a very curious sense, the Apple store is an example of what Venturi calls “inflection” in Baroque architecture, where the relation of the building's components is not only a matter of spatial organization, but each component in itself includes the whole. The Apple store's structure does not only tack the space together in a physical sense, but also ideologically, as a tool for

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\(^{10}\) In authentic urban places “urban design” is not necessary. In Whyte's opinion one of the best working urban spaces was a block in East Harlem (101 Street) (Whyte, 1988, p. 103). Children enjoyed playing on the street and it had all the attributes of well working urban spaces: light, seating (on stoops), water (from hydrant) etc.
intensification of capital flows and accumulation, aspects that have been continuously revisited in the history of the building and its plaza.

All three spaces have aspects of spectacularization, from van der Rohe’s celebrated monumental architecture to the thoroughly commodified GM plaza, but then do many public spaces. On the one hand it could be argued that because of the privatized and uncritical nature of the spectacle (and the uncomplicated relationship to its public that is assumed) it would seem to effectively depoliticize public spaces. On the other hand it might be that our public life has always been dependent on some variation of the spectacle (maybe in a less commodified form) and economic activity. Leisure, pleasure, and consumption are connected to political action in many distinctly political spaces, from the agora (that retained its market function) to the coffee houses of the bourgeoisie to the houses of the people of the working class. It could be that the public function of space is dependent on the intensity of the spectacle, and that the reductive nature of the spectacle in public space is a matter of gradation. It might even have a positive public function, as successful public art projects may demonstrate. According to Kohn, the “transformative potential of space lies precisely in the possibility of suspending certain aspects of reality in order to intensify others” (Kohn, 2003, p.156). Here the possibilities for transformation are seemingly limitless.

As it has been demonstrated by now, not every well-used space is “truly public,” even though it might be theoretically open to all and free of charge. Here two other critiques need to be noted that have much in common with the “spectacularization” of urban space. Michael Sorkin’s Variations on a Theme Park (1992) presents various readings of the disappearance of public space amidst securitization, privatization, suburbanization, separation, and segregation in urban space while public functions are replaced by consumption. Building defensive, enclosed, privatized public spaces definitely has a detrimental effect to the public’s wish to partake in public life, but Allen (2006) suggests that behavior in space can be controlled in more subtle ways than building walls or adding surveillance. Control could succeed merely by design, creating a certain ambiance that informs the user of the proper behavior. This is what he calls

11 This use obviously necessitates some disconnection of the spectacle from the totalizing power of capital in Debord’s theory. An issue that cannot be discussed here.
“ambient power”. Finally, Lees (1998) seeks to “dislodge the end of public space thesis” by showing that
public spaces have always been controlled and contested in one way or another, and that control can
always be subverted. Contrary to many critics, Lees believes that public space is not going anywhere,
and that it is rather expanding. I tend to reservedly agree with this position, while privatization is a very
real issue that needs to be dealt with.
Conclusions

Discussing the political implications of theoretical approaches to the public sphere, Smith and Low state that “[i]t is [our] underlying conviction […] that the respatialization of our sense of the public brings the opportunity of a more complete repoliticization of the public . . . “ (Smith & Low, 2005, p. 7). “The public” comes to existence only through its spatialization, and the image of the public as a political entity stays afloat only through the spaces where it is materialized. If the “public nature” of space is not being paid attention to, if space is conceived of merely as “an asset” with “use value,” if its importance in creating the image of “the public at large” is not being paid attention to, the possibility of acting and imagining a diverse “general public” weakens. Even if the idealistic understanding of public space as a democratic, discursive space rarely materializes, spaces open for all expose difference in society and give a sense of something shared. “Society” and “public” are abstractions, they are directly experienced only in spaces where broad segments of the population can make their appearance and come in each others view, if not in direct contact with each other. Exclusivity of spaces has just as adverse an effect on a plural democratic culture as any other form of segregation. As global capital is harnessed for production and management of space for public use instead of institutions that at least nominally represent the public, there is a danger of those spaces not being developed in the best interest of the public in mind. Most conspicuously, this has been seen in the miserable quality of “bonus spaces” in Manhattan, where developers instructed architects to build unattractive spaces (cf. Smithsimon, 2008).

I personally do not think that there is such a thing a post-modern era or post-modern culture. We are still struggling with the same problems of spatiality as Viel and Laugier in Wittman's analysis. I see post-modernism as a response to the shortcomings of the ideology of the modern – a dialogue with the modern – rather than any kind of coherent set of cultural assumptions that shapes our lifeworld. Information technology has changed our sense of space but our experience of the world is still very much grounded in the physicality of it; embodiment is still a part of the human condition. At the threshold of the modern age, print technology enabled conceptualizing an immaterial public sphere, but ideas were still developed and enacted in physical space. This has not changed in the information age, as seen in the
worry that governments express over occupation of physical space, or the very physicality of places where information technology itself is developed, such as Silicon Valley. A politician speaking in front of a crowd is not just a symbolic act. His physical presence gives his message a power that does not travel through a facebook post or a tweet. Apart from the expressively political uses of public space, the embodied appearance of different social groups in public space can be a strong tacit statement as well.

In this study I have sought to identify different modalities of political public space and build a theoretical basis for further analysis. I came to the conclusion that the physical world is necessary for the construction of a political society, and that diverse types of public spaces are needed to construct this “common world” in an urban setting. The public experience can not be substituted for by controlled spaces of consumption or the mediated, immaterial, public sphere. Politics do not happen everywhere and all the time, but they may happen, and this potentiality of space is paramount for a democratic society. Privatization of space is not necessarily detrimental to public life, but it often is, and thus privately owned and controlled public space should be treated as an exception, or its “publicness” has to be guaranteed by contracts that hand over the proprietorship to the city. Although privatized space might on the surface work fine as open space of leisurely consumption (such as Seagram Plaza), it does not fulfill the requirements to make space relevant to public culture and public politics.
APPENDIX I: Tables

Table I: Spaces of Politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Typical Spaces</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space of appearance</td>
<td>Agora of the Polis</td>
<td>Any political action or speech good</td>
<td>Arendt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hyde Park speakers corner</td>
<td>Ultimately private in nature</td>
<td>Habermas</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical space</td>
<td>Houses of the people</td>
<td>Forming of group interests</td>
<td>Kohn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coffee houses, Salons</td>
<td>Goal oriented</td>
<td>Habermas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protest, Demonstration</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mitchell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space of difference</td>
<td>Public parks, plazas, streets</td>
<td>Confronting urban difference</td>
<td>Sennet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Festival, parade</td>
<td>Questioning/constructing a self dialectically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space as an object of discourse</td>
<td>Any building or space that becomes a public concern</td>
<td>Important for community politics / res publica Constructing “a public”</td>
<td>Wittman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paley Park seen from the street. (August, 2014). Image by author.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


