# Common Ground? Readings and Reflections on Public Space

*Anthony Orum and Zachary Neal, Editors*

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### Locating Public Space

Setting the stage for this exploration of public space, Zachary Neal addresses the two questions: (a) What is Public Space and (b) When and Where is Public Space? He defines public space as including all areas that are open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle, though not necessarily in practice. The individual pieces of this definition, as well as distinct legal, political, and social conceptions of public space are considered. Then, focusing on the social conception, he examines how different forms of public space have emerged during major historical periods from antiquity through the twentieth century, and how these forms continue to be relevant today.

### PART I – Public Space as Civil Order

#### Introduction

Proceeding from the definition of public space developed in ‘Locating Public Space,’ Anthony Orum argues that there are three distinct models of public space. Here he defines a model of public space as civil order. This model insists that the constant and regular use of public space for social activities, such as conversations or public gatherings, is absolutely essential to the workings and the social vitality of cities and societies. He provides some firsthand observations on these matters, among them that there are important differences in the ways in which public space is made available and used by residents of cities and suburbs.

#### The Death and Life of Great American Cities – Jane Jacobs

This selection is one of the earliest and still most significant writings on the importance of public spaces. Drawing on her own experiences while living in New York City, Jane Jacobs argues that the everyday activity on the streets and sidewalks of neighborhoods is essential to the life of cities and, therefore, that urban areas must be designed to encourage the use of such spaces. She notes, among other things, that such everyday social life promotes trust among neighbors as well as providing for the safety of urban inhabitants, especially young children.

#### The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces – William H. Whyte

William Whyte and his associates systematically studied various parks, plazas and sidewalks in New York City in the 1970s in order to understand how people used them. They found, for example, that people gather in various ways on plazas, and during specific times, such as the lunch hour, many people cluster in small groups, chatting and conversing with one another. They also discovered how people sometimes gather in unconventional sites such as at the edges of sidewalks. Based on the results of this work, Whyte consulted with officials in New York City to improve the placement and design of its parks and plazas.

#### The Character of Third Places – Ray Oldenburg

Ray Oldenburg argues here for the importance of ‘third places’: those public sites outside the home and the workplace. He believes that places like bars and taverns, even coffee houses,
furnish a space where people can meet and converse, and thus expand their social and political horizons. Such public spaces, he insists, can be inclusive and work mainly through the social conversations in which people engage.

The Moral Order of Strangers – M. P. Baumgartner
In one of the very few systematic studies of life in a modern American suburb, M. P. Baumgartner observes the unique ways in which suburbanites deal with one another in public. She observes that people rarely encounter one another in public in the suburb as most use their automobiles to get from one place to another. Also, there are very few public spaces, like parks, and most people keep to themselves. Those people who are strangers and are found on sidewalks in the suburb tend to arouse suspicion, in part because so few people actually use the sidewalks. All of this, she argues, tends to create a very thin veneer of sociability, in which people maintain their distance from one another.

Street Etiquette and Street Wisdom – Elijah Anderson
In a classic examination of life in a Northeastern city, Elijah Anderson writes about how people of diverse class backgrounds and race negotiate the use of sidewalks and other public spaces. He observes that people deal with issues of trust and fear as they share sidewalks with one another, and that young black males often create the greatest fear among pedestrians. People eventually acquire a certain wisdom and etiquette about passing one another on sidewalks – rules that alert them to possible situations of danger but that also enable them to engage in their daily routines without a constant sense of fear.

PART II – Public Space as Power and Resistance
Introduction
Until a couple of decades ago, the model of public space as civil order represented the only image of public space. Here, Anthony Orum identifies a second view, which claims that the openness and accessibility of public spaces are qualities that often are contested between public authorities and residents. In recent years local authorities have employed new surveillance techniques to monitor who uses public spaces and how they use them. In addition, there are growing numbers of private developments – gated communities – in which the availability of public spaces is limited to the residents. He discusses these important concerns while at the same furnishing firsthand evidence from his own observations of the use of public space in Shanghai, China.

The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy – Don Mitchell
A question that arises often in the use of public space nowadays concerns who is actually entitled to use the space. Are all members of the public entitled to use it, or only some? Don Mitchell has provided some of the most provocative and impassioned work on these matters and, in this selection, review the continuing struggle between the local authorities and residents over the use of People’s Park in Berkeley, California. This park has become a contested site in the struggles over public space: residents and various political advocates seek to use the space for the homeless, whereas the local authorities and the University of California wish to maintain absolute control over the Park. Mitchell regards this struggle as an example of the broader struggles between residents and authorities over who has the right to define and to use public spaces in modern society.
Fortress Los Angeles – *Mike Davis*

Here, Mike Davis provides a bleak and dark image of public space, drawing on his knowledge of Los Angeles. He argues that public space is becoming less open and less accessible to the public itself, in part because the local police, on the pretext of protecting the public, are increasingly turning to the use both force and of surveillance techniques to control public space. In many cases this happens because citizens, especially wealthier citizens, barricade themselves behind walls and gates, thereby secluding themselves from other urban residents and the larger metropolis.

Whose Culture? Whose City? – *Sharon Zukin*

In a selection that begins by noting that “the fastest growing kind of public space in America is prisons,” Sharon Zukin adopts a critical stance toward the transformation of New York City parks into exclusionary and heavily regulated spaces. In the particular case of Bryant Park, she describes how William Whyte’s suggestion to make the park more attractive was used as a method of encouraging some users, while at the same time keeping ‘the undesirables’ out. This approach, labeled Pacification by Cappuccino in reference to the introduction of chic coffee carts, is viewed as problematic because it relies heavily on the interests of private-sector elites.

Dispersing the Crowd: Bonus Plazas and the Creation of Public Space – *Gregory Smithsimon*

William Whyte viewed public spaces, and especially city plazas, as important social gathering places. In this selection, Gregory Smithsimon challenges this view by asking why some plazas resemble empty concrete boxes with none of the sociability Whyte described. In some cases, these empty plazas offer no seating, while in other cases they are poorly lit or feature a fountain that keeps things uncomfortably wet; it is as if the plazas were designed to be inhospitable. And, indeed, through interviews with architects, Smithsimon finds that in many instances developers requested designs that would reduce, not facilitate, the social usefulness of their buildings’ plazas.

Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong – *Lisa Law*

Questions of the use of public space take place not only in the parks, plazas and sidewalks of Western cities, but in cities around the world. In this selection, Lisa Law examines how local residents use certain central and significant public plazas in Hong Kong. Many recent immigrants, especially female domestic workers, like to use a central downtown area, known as Statue Square, to gather and socialize on Sundays. But the authorities have begun to resist these efforts, and to make it difficult for the women to engage in such gatherings. Law argues that there will be growing pressure on local authorities to make these kinds of spaces available to people, as major metropolitan areas like Hong Kong become the favored destination of immigrants.

**PART III – Public Space as Art, Theatre, and Performance**

Introduction

In this introduction to the third and final model of public space, Anthony Orum suggests that people often use public space today for public gatherings during which they engage in various kinds of performances and artistic expressions. In these activities, public spaces furnish a way
for their users to affirm and express their own collective identities. In this regard, then, the study of public space provides not only insight into the social activities of people, but also into their cultures. He illustrates these processes with observations from Chicago and Shanghai.

Art and the Transit Experience / Creating a Sense of Purpose: Public Art and Boston’s Orange Line – Cynthia Abrahamson, Myrna Margulies Breitbart, & Pamela Worden
A city’s transit centers – bus stops, train stations, etc. – are often some of the most mundane, overlooked, and ugly urban spaces, despite the fact that they are used by hundreds, if not millions, of people. In this pair of essays, the authors describe how art-in-transit programs have begun to change this. Cynthia Abrahamson provides an overview of such programs, as they have been deployed in London, Los Angeles, Seattle, Stockholm, and New York. Myrna Margulies Breitbart and Pamela Worden then examine the specific case of Boston’s Orange Line, and how involving local residents in the design process not only beautified a public space but also provided a venue for collective expression.

The Harsh Reality: Billboard Subversion and Graffiti – Timothy W. Drescher
Billboards may not be public spaces themselves, but their ubiquity and high visibility make them an ideal canvas for those who want to get their message into public spaces. Usually these messages are of a commercial nature and can be interesting in their own right. But, as Timothy Drescher explores in this selection, they become particularly attention grabbing when graffiti artists have modified the advertisers’ original message.

The Paradox of Public Art: Democratic Space, the Avant-Garde, and Richard Serra’s ‘Tilted Arc’ – Caroline Levine
Repeating something that had happened in dozens of cities and plazas elsewhere, in 1981 a commissioned public sculpture was installed in Manhattan’s Federal Plaza. But, this case was different because Richard Serra’s ‘Tilted Arc’ sculpture, a 12 foot tall and 120 foot long curved steel wall, provoked strong reactions. In this selection, Caroline Levine describes the opposition from office workers and the support from the Avant-Garde artist community, seeking to understand who should get to decide what counts as good public art.

Those “Gorgeous Incongruities”: Polite Politics and Public Space on the Streets of Nineteenth Century New York – Mona Domosh
Elijah Anderson described how many of the social interactions that happen in public spaces like streets are structured by unwritten social rules and scripts that constitute a street etiquette. In this selection, Mona Domosh argues that such street interactions could take the form of expressive political actions, when participants intentionally and strategically transgress these rules. This process is explored and illustrated through newspaper depictions of street scenes in nineteenth century New York City.

Soundscape and Society: Chinese Theatre and Cultural Authenticity in Singapore – Tong Soon Lee
In this original essay, Tong Soon Lee considers how modifications to a traditional form of performance – Chinese Street Opera – shape how tourists experience public space in Singapore.
He describes how the troupe performing at Clarke Quay, a popular tourist destination, combines traditional (e.g. music) with non-traditional (e.g. projection of the script in English) elements, to manufacture an atmosphere that attempts to merge an authentic experience of public space with one that visitors will understand and find accessible.

Relocating Public Space
Cutting across these and other writings on public space is a pervasive narrative of loss – public spaces are disappearing. In this essay, Zachary Neal briefly describes some of the ways public space is being lost, but then challenges this view by arguing that public space is actually expanding in three ways. As conceptions of ‘the public’ are redefined to be more inclusive, public spaces are becoming more open and accessible. As the borders of public space are redrawn to include non-physical virtual spaces like the internet, new public spaces are emerging in previously nonexistent locations. And, as public space is redesigned by architects and planners that understand the new ways such places are actually used, they are becoming more inviting and vibrant.

Toolkits for Interrogating Public Space
In the conclusion to the book, Anthony Orum and Zachary Neal suggest that each of the three models of public space promote specific research questions and programmatic agendas. For example, the ‘public space as civil order’ model leads one to examine the prosocial activities that take place in such sites as parks, but possibly to overlook deeper tensions on which the ‘public space as power and resistance’ model would focus. Orum and Neal conclude that the full and comprehensive study of public space is best pursued by using the three models in combination with one another.