

The Social Production of Public Space

Natalia Bonilla Porras

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC SPACE: A LACK OF CONSENSUS

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There is a lack of consensus on the definition of public space, primarily due to the ever-changing management that public space has received throughout history. Nonetheless, some features of public space have survived: it allows *strangers* to meet (Jacobs, 1992; Lofland, 1973), and it allows free expression of *citizenship* (Houssay-Holzschuch & Thébault, 2017; Gehl, 2014); thus, it has always been the place where peoples' political determination, plurality, and conflict materialise.



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Iconic photograph from the violent conflict in 2013 in Taksim Gezi Park: citizens fought against the Turkish government to protect the park from construction plans, ending up as a protest for civil rights. Photo by Osman Orsal/Reuters, and retrieved from:

http://www.publicspace.org/timthumb.php?src=/app/webroot/files/urbanps/projects/H312_05_1.jpg&w=1000&h=750&zc=1&q=95

Lefebvre (1991) states that society and space are strictly correlated, in that space is *produced* by society. He explains that space form is *perceived* through human senses, then mentally *conceived* and represented, and finally *lived*. The latter refers to the act of giving meaning, identity and uses to space. Nonetheless, when discussing public space, a question arises: *who* produces public space? The perception and conception of public space are conditioned by the actors who manage the lived public space. Today, public space embodies a wider and increasingly complex structure in its management because several types of actors share control over decision-making processes on it: from governmental agencies to community organisations, NGOs, private entities, and anything in between (Magalhães & Carmona, 2006).

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Stadtlounge – Roter Platz in St. Gallen Switzerland: a gift by Raiffeisen Schweiz (bank), and managed publicly.
Image retrieved from: https://img.myswitzerland.com/mys/n64484/images/buehne/stadtlounge_st.jpg

Such complexity has meant that public space can either be under-managed with poor design and a run-down look, possibly publicly managed, and insecure; or over-managed with a homogenised and high-level design, commodified, and over-controlled (Carmona, 2010). Paradoxically, this dichotomy seems to lead to two hypotheses on the uses and design of contemporary public space: 1) the emergence of a third form of public space namely common space, not public nor private, but commonly produced by the people (e.g. cafés, hair salons, community gardens); and 2) a simplification of public space, where flat and simple design prevails in response to budget crisis, control, and obsession with maintenance, yet allowing freedom of use and appropriation.

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Tempelhof in Berlin, a former airport that is now a park. Residents voted against development plans in the area to keep it as an open field for recreation and multiple purposes. Image retrieved from:

https://gruen-berlin.de/sites/default/files/styles/header_image/public/header/luftbild_tempelhofer_feld_2012-08_151_-_bm.jpg?itok=00Vu28kX



Tempelhof. Image retrieved from:

https://gruen-berlin.de/sites/default/files/styles/header_image/public/lebendiges_flugfeld_koppatsch_1.jpg?itok=YcTZpUwd

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