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An Ontology for Exploring Urban Public Life Today

There is a common and historic assumption that open space is where public life occurs. But this historic relationship between open space and public life may no longer be so true, and may now be too constraining an assumption to be very useful in thinking fully about public life.

Public life has had a 300-year transformation, seen by most social critics as a “decline,” or worse, a “fall.” I don’t really agree. Rather, I believe we tend not to recognize some of the public life we do have or many emerging forms of public life. Nor do we honor those forms we do recognize, because they are not for purposes that we esteem or not for everybody.

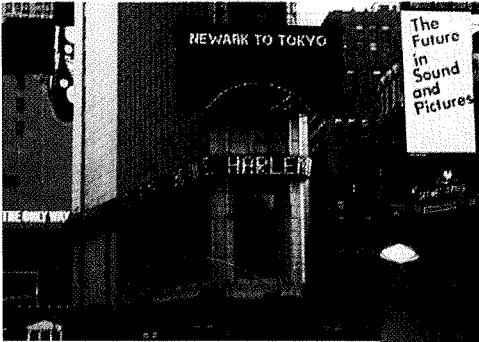
In fact, there is a rich component of public life that occurs in spaces that are not publicly owned and are not the “classical” urban open space of the dense street, the enclosed square, or the park. Examples include the “strip,” the indoor and outdoor mall, the atrium, the skyway system connecting a second level public world, the vacant lot, the abandoned highway fragment used by skateboarders and sunbathers, community gardens, the boardwalk and the beach.

Moreover, there is still a vigorous public life in the discourse about politics, morality, and religion, but in space that isn’t a physical place at all: the “virtual space” of the interactive media, of text, image, and voice communications.

Nevertheless, the literature generally accepts the idea that there has been substantial loss of public life. This supposed loss generates strong nostalgia for an image of a dense, diverse, classless, and democratic public life lived in our streets, squares and parks, an image that was probably never true for us here in America.

The literature that couples public life with public space often contains a condescending attitude: if we Americans want to see how public life and public place is done really well, we must go to Europe’s historic urban centers (always, it seems, to the Piazza Di San Marco, the Piazza Navona, or Milan’s Galleria) and, if we would only

Times Square's famous "zipper" brings New Yorkers information through the "virtual" space of the mass media. Yet Times Square is still a gathering place for sharing extraordinary events, from New Year's Eve to the Mets winning the 1986 World Series. Photos by Todd W. Bressi.



The New York Stock Exchange ticker is broadcast in the World Trade Center concourse. People can use computer terminals to obtain up-to-the-minute financial news. We receive more and more of our information from the printed and electronic media, and less at the coffeehouse, or on the street.

re-create these, we might be able to have that kind of public life here. That vision of public life is partly an illusion, sustained by our movies, publications, theme park “businesses,” and by travelers who are charmed by Italy’s piazzas but who don’t recognize that these places are part of a non-transportable ecology. Most American cities, and most parts of even our great ones, are spatially distinctly different from European cities. They have different densities and different ways of organizing use-locations.

Other discussions of public life are really about neighborhood life, about networks involving a community psychology of the “parochial realm”—not about public life, which is social life with strangers. Since much of urban life’s social support now occurs within freely chosen sub-cultural networks rather than ethnic enclaves and neighborhoods, there is some loss of neighborhood life. When public life is mistaken for neighborhood life, and if both are seen as being lost, then the mourning and nostalgia may be for both, and may be very powerful indeed.

Finally, while a rich public life is generally considered desirable, it is seldom actually described. There may even be an underlying and simple assumption that what happens in public places is public life. The literature generally bypasses descriptions of public life, and seemingly has no systematic structure within which to talk about it. These writings tend to leave aside the question of what public life is, and what it is for.

All this conspires to prevent us from seeing our real public life more clearly. Our mass nostalgia for the “good old days,” the old forms of public life, fuels attempts to recreate it through a simplistic historicism in which we build again the classic forms of public places. In much current design for public places, we do not acknowledge that American affluence has spatially dispersed, stratified and segmented its population, reducing both density and localized class diversity, which are necessary for a public life based on streets, squares, and parks.

This might not be a problem in itself, but these attitudes and assumptions guide public policy, which may prevent us from using our scarce public resources more wisely. Incentive formulas that bring public open space into existence as an automatic by-product of every development have littered downtowns and business districts with little used and poorly conceived spaces. Other schemes involve the re-pedestrianization of streets and banning cars from parts of the city, a nostalgic return to the pre-automobile age. We are saddened when public life doesn’t blossom anew in these newly created squares and plazas.



Watching other people haggle with street vendors can be as interesting as shopping oneself. When consumption becomes public theater, it is a form of public life.

Crowds throng to Baltimore's Harborplace, a private place where the public experience is packaged and managed.



The Transformation of Public Life

There may be a crisis, but I do not think it is about the loss of public life. It is about not paying enough critical attention to what public life really is, or its long-term transformation. We do not think often, systematically, comprehensively, or well about public life.

Public life here and in Europe has gone through a transformation, not necessarily a decline. This has not been recent but has taken, so far, 300 years. The high density, socially diverse public life that many mourn as if it had been lost was already in decline in Europe when the Mayflower landed, never actually made it here in the first place, and has since then taken uniquely North American forms. We've not had the density to obtain this older public life, nor the physical form to contain it, nor the socio-economic structure to sustain it.

How can one describe the urban public life that we do have, and will have in the future? It seems possible, but silly, to say that all life in public is what public life is. That cannot be true, for it would mean that everything that takes place outside the home or other private places is public life, and it would classify as public life the everyday relationships we have with people in our neighborhood. Lyn Lofland argues convincingly that public life is the form of social life that occurs with strangers, my position as well.

Trying to describe public life requires some structure, some method of categorizing phenomena as public life or not, or at least a way of saying something is more truly public life than is something else. For several reasons, I propose an ontological perspective, which tries to understand the "nature," the "essence" of public life, in order to describe it. From this perspective, we can consider a number of possible elements that may be said to characterize modern public life, and what they offer the individual. Given one's response patterns to strangers, public life can be approached as a labyrinth to be negotiated, a text to be read and a mosaic to be appreciated.

Public life is one with strangers, distinctly different from both private and parochial life. Public life does not necessarily supplant private and parochial life, but rather supplements them. Engagement in public life is now a matter of choice, where once it was an obligation of all citizens.

Freedom to assemble and associate gives everyone access to interactions with and/or observations of strangers, in space that all may use. The role of observer, or audience, is by far the most frequent for most people. These interactions are relatively free of social control and surveillance by the primary groups of kin and local community, and often, quite free of control by institutions and the state. This freedom confers anonymity, an ability to play with identity and to test alternative visions of the self.

Conversely, many interactions in public life are more guided by social control from participation in one of the cities' collection of expressive subcultures.

Social experience is expanded through finding satisfaction and pleasure in relationships with strangers, even though they seldom share our values, history and perspective. This occurs in a variety of ways: within expressive subcultures; as vehicles of public opinion; in surface, fleeting, and restricted relationships; and in situations in which we gain some knowledge of strangers through appearance, location, or limited interaction, a kind of "categoric knowing" rather than a personal knowing.

Confronting the unknown is something that part of us enjoys, and it helps us grow. There can be excitement and pleasure even when no attempt is made (or none is successful) to "know" or to categorize the stranger, when the pleasure derives from the stranger remaining extraordinary, a marvel, a spectacle, an unknown, a possible source of adventure or risk.

Social learning is accelerated through an awareness of the remarkable diversity of strangers and a civility towards this diversity. This awareness, coupled with the loosening of social controls, enables individuals to form and test new opinions, attitudes, and values.

Public opinion about matters of social significance can be expressed by individuals who freely assemble and associate in groups. Public opinion, once only the task of criticism and control that a public body practiced in relation to the state, has now expanded to become a field for the competition of interests of many groups and subcultures.

Coming together in numbers great enough to be "a public," and a public with an opinion, confers upon the individual *the power to "count" for something*, and for something that counts. If each individual voice or body "counts," and somewhat equally, then power and status inequities diminish, if only temporarily. Public life acts as a social leveller and a reminder of the roots of "democracy."

Individuals and groups can offer social presentations or productions and respond to those offered by others, often in ways that can alter the character of those presentations, in freely available public space. They can seek and find excitement and extraordinariness in the productions and presentations created by strangers, and in those they create themselves.

Commerce can be framed within a social mode of organization. Commerce becomes a form of public life when its exchanges are social ones, malleable, unique, and personal, as opposed to economic ones, which are impartial, impersonal and interchangeable with all others.

Individuals can act as components of an information network, facilitating the exchange of news and information, acting as components of a network, both receiving and transmitting, and often altering both the communication and the network.

Describing Urban Public Life Today and its Transformation

I'd like to test this framework by using it to suggest aspects of contemporary social life that seem to be most truly characteristic of urban public life, and to describe how they are changing.

More of public life now involves passive spectating rather than active, direct interaction with others. For several hundred years there has been less individual oratorical, theatrical expressiveness. People choose to be "unavailable" to others in public situations, a function of the (recent) right to be left alone in public. Conversely, much more of individual expressiveness and subcultural identity is gained through dress and body adornment, and display of artifacts and conveyances.

In fact, much more of public life utilizes the medium of images rather than words, with images taking on far more power than before. We are becoming very sophisticated in the use of visual language, which is not just a shift of mode, but has a profound effect on content and meaning. There is rich opportunity for the designers of public images.

There are highly imageable, publicly offered presentations and productions made by individuals and subcultural groups, including showing off and personalizing mass-produced things and re-presenting them. These are especially public life when they can be altered by the responses of an audience of strangers, when there is an interaction. Examples include: street entertainers; skateboard and roller-skating daredevils; dressing up and strutting, strolling, and cruising; customizing cars and vans; street gambling and street scams; sidewalk portraitists; spray-on graffiti; and acting out the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Most people act the obverse role in public life, as audience, and are best when being evaluative, responsive and expressive.

Mass subcultures are often publicly expressive. The forms of expression stem from innovations or borrowings, not from tradition; they exhibit minor variation over space and major variation over time. Both the forms of expression and one's tenure in a subculture may be short-lived, contributing to the often-seen stridency of public expression in their dress and behavior. Obvious examples of these urban subcultures would be Bohemians, skateboard "packs," bikers, Eurotrash (who all look like Giorgio Armani clothing ads), preppies, and punks.

On the other hand, such free use of public open space necessarily involves offense, for we prize the right to speak and act as

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Society must draw the line Wisconsin legisla

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we wish. Sometimes there are confrontations among subcultures and, more often, between subcultures and institutions or the state. Also, an open society makes open space the "natural home" for the homeless, vagrants and ambulatory psychotics, whenever the society provides no alternative. Moreover, free use may involve danger, because access to victims is a requirement of certain criminal tasks and because expressive subcultures may be volatile when their ways are publicly challenged.

At times we are one public. Public remembering of real history through the making of public remembrance rituals and public monuments continues to tie strangers together with the idea of a common heritage and a common covenant to remember that past. Examples include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the July Fourth Liberty Weekend television extravaganza in 1986, and John F. Kennedy's funeral.

We can use our bodies symbolically to count for something. This happens when we attend a political, religious, or social rally, or a protest where a head count will be of public interest. By marching on City Hall for any reason whatsoever, marching in the Doo-Dah parade as a critique of the Tournament of Roses parade, and standing between strangers as one link in Hands Across America, we make ourselves count.

Extraordinary events are, by definition, public events. These have been often noted as events that make all strangers somehow more available for interaction and more reciprocally empathetic. Examples are urban techno-disasters such as blackouts and transit strikes, natural occurrences such as blizzards, triumphs such as winning the playoffs, and public spasms such as assassinations.

When trade has a social emphasis, commerce, and consumption can become public theatre. There is theatre in watching others bargaining with street vendors, at flea markets, and at block-long garage sales—anywhere prices aren't set. There is theatre in how items of material culture are used in public—dress, adornment, mode of personal transit, ambient

Media are becoming interactive and can serve as "virtual space" conduits for discourse that formerly was conducted face-to-face, in public spaces. Several days after this announcement was run, the newspaper published people's responses. USA Today.

entertainment, and pets. These may be used to follow a trend, to be personally creative, or to make a social statement. There is theatre in the multi-level shopping architecture of the giant malls and the Festival Markets, making us both spectators and audience in a "spectacle of consumption," the only built expression of Saint Elia's architectural visions.

Urbanity breeds enormous choice among a dizzying range of public life opportunities. We want trusted scouts. And so we have critics, interpreters and commentators, most often specialized in particular areas. In some ways, they can alter public opinion, and thus alter the nature of upcoming presentations. Most of this takes place in the "virtual space" of media, and not in the coffeehouse or on the boulevard, as it once did.

We are building very few more large, permanent, public open spaces in the middle of cities, where the highest natural densities are, because we cannot aggregate land there. Instead, city governments have been using incentive formulas embedded in zoning laws to encourage developers to provide, at first, outdoor open space and, now, indoor spaces. In fact, the revenue potential of indoor public space gets them built without public incentives. Consequently, a substantial portion of urban public life is shifting from parks and streets to indoor spaces, tending to decrease the density and diversity of activities outdoors.

These indoor spaces, which tend to be privately held and managed, are harbingers of the increasing privatization of places offered for public use. There is an increase in the scale of and concentration of control over the private places offered for public use. Malls, atriums, and festival markets are getting bigger; and most are packaged and managed as "experiences" under a single entrepreneurial vision. In private spaces social controls operate so as to reduce diversity, often by excluding "undesirables" with subtle and not so subtle cues. While lauded by most citizens, this is an erosion of civil liberties that will not be redressed in a right-wing climate.

Public life is moving not only to indoor, privately-controlled places, but also to the “virtual space” of media—a publicly accessible space, but not one in which you can see or touch the strangers with whom you interact. Media mediates more strongly than it did in previous social learning; we don’t learn much any longer from political rallies in the square or gossip in the coffeehouse. While there is much more information available in the public realm, our “consumption” of this information is now much more efficient, and more private. And with the remarkable specialization of media catering to expressive subcultures, information is also more tailored to individual tastes.

The public forum has not been lost, but relocated. Print and electronic media, once operating only in the one-way “broadcast” mode, have become fairly interactive, permitting audience members to reverse roles and be heard. Moreover, media distribution networks extend the numbers of people an individual may reach, creating a more powerful form of public expression. Examples are “man in the street” interviews, letters to the editor, radio call-in shows, and some forms of anyone-can-broadcast cable television and desk-top publishing.

Except for the proliferation and vitality of subcultures, urban public life seems now to provide us with a less than a full range of experiences of social groups, classes, and values, for at least four reasons. First, as subcultural life becomes increasingly validated by the media, more prominence will be given to a multivalent public life catering to and structured by distinct but class-blind and expressive subcultures; less prominence will be given to a public life for either a diverse, democratic public or one segmented by class. The design of public space may well start to reflect this particularity of publics, as in Charles Moore’s Piazza D’Italia.

Second, because of the spending power of young people, their tastes for high stimulus levels, and their energetically responsive subcultures, a fair portion of public life will be stratified by age and thus be less age diverse in any one place or time.

Third, urban housing economics act to force many households that have children or are middle class from the city. This tends to concentrate elite groups and the poor, and thus, for social learning, public life presents only certain behaviors and values, rather than a continuum of them all.

Finally, fear of crime, especially at night, and of offense by alien subcultures empties public open space of certain classes. The space in turn becomes “home” to undesirables who naturally try to extend their control to the daytime, further reducing use. In the absence of any humane and reasonable strategy to prevent this, more and more public life will have social controls which represent private values, furthering segmentation, and making a diverse public life less probable.

Consequently, a narrower range of “strangers” are met in public space, and, increasingly, experiences of public life are with a more homogenous group of others.

Some Conclusions: Using the Ontology as Framework

Trying to draw conclusions about the complex mosaic of public life is a risk, taken in public, and thus appropriate here. It is a risk since the phenomena are, with the resources available, sensed rather than measured. For every conclusion, one can find evidence of its opposite, but in general, I sense the following:

The relocation of much of the Forum, the discursive and interactive part of public life, to the “virtual space” of electronic media has given us access to more strangers and more information about them; but we have less interaction with them (for they are images) and we both mistrust the information and misuse it to reinforce our stereotypes. The increased emphasis on public as audience, on spectating, has dampened verbal interaction, and the increased richness, power, and sophistication of visual images have deverbilized public life. Thus, fewer public behaviors and presentations are altered by evaluative and expressive interaction. Much public place architecture is like theatre-without-stage, audience-viewing-audience.

Public expression of opinion is increasingly geared to its reportage in media and the actual locations of events less relevant. “Stand up and be counted”: using your presence as empowerment, rekindles the desire for direct participation in public protest, but insulation from antagonists removes any doubt or complexity about positions taken, which become simplistic and stark....caricatures.

For many, participation (even short-lived) in publicly expressive subcultures is a continued emancipation from tradition, a major energizer of today’s public life, and a revitalizer of public place. Consumption-as-public-theatre seems on the increase, authentically in flea-markets, block long garage-sales, Renaissance fairs, and farmers’ markets, and inauthentically in Rouses’ Festival Markets, but most of it in a way which reduces offense and increases pleasure in strangerhood.

America’s economic and class segmentation and stratification reduces localized diversity, offense, and danger, and unfortunately, adventure. It makes much of our social learning about a narrower range of strangers. The parallel privatization of public spaces and their use by fairly homogenous groups leaves tolerance of diversity somewhat untested, and makes moot the anonymity gained through the freedom from social controls that public life can confer. Our much-vaunted cultural pluralism has seemingly enhanced civility towards diversity, but may simply be masking geographic segmentation, and a loss of diversity.

A comedian uses a fountain in New York's Washington Square Park as a stage and can hold the attention of hundreds of onlookers. Public presentations are a common form of public life, and many allow the audience to respond and express themselves.



Hands Across America, an attempt to raise millions of dollars to battle hunger, momentarily joined thousands of people in a human chain across the country. The assemblage and cooperation of people who were strangers to each other was a public expression that reaffirmed the individual's ability to "count," as well.

