

# Neoliberal Urbanism

## Public Space, Liberty, Equality, and Community

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**Public space is premised on the free and equal access of citizens but its 'order' is always a precarious balance between homogeneity and diversity, freedom and oppression, superficial contact and deeper engagement. How is this balance tested and shifted by neoliberal urbanism when the city is both a site and agent in the process? Is the idea of public space still tenable with the increasing social polarization and diversification of citizens? How is the city shaped by commercialization and privatization, which are often blamed as the two main, related trends responsible for the recent transformation, or even alleged decline of public space? I argue in a few paradigmatic examples that we gain a less one-sided understanding of this transformation when it is viewed through an analytical lens that focuses on the reconfiguration of the modern republican matrix of liberty, equality and community, in which the ideal as well as critique of public space have historically been embedded.**

Public space has long been a constitutive part of what is customarily referred to as 'the urban experience.' As a spatially condensed crystallization of the tension between the physical proximity and moral remoteness of city dwellers, it is the clearest expression of the urban predicament of having to live among strangers.<sup>1</sup> In its concrete instantiations, public space is a designated, delimited, and demarcated place where people from various walks of life encounter and engage with one another, albeit mostly in a superficial manner. Above all, these ought to be places to which everyone has free access. This is an ideal conception of freedom, of course, which is premised, at least in principle, not only on equal access, but also abstract formal equality of status, derived from the idea of not charging anyone fees for this access. While this ideal has often been the subject of contestations and negotiations historically, it is nevertheless important to highlight that this very definition rests on the two pillars of modern democratic politics: equality and liberty.<sup>2</sup>

However, public space as the site of socio-historically emergent freedom also carries the seeds of its own transcendence and can potentially turn superficial social interactions into a durable community of like-minded people. This may, of course, happen under the aegis of emancipatory politics, in the sense of the third term of the revolutionary republican triad: fraternity. While the working of public space may indeed generate such grassroots democratic collective projects,<sup>3</sup> the transcendence

1 Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (University of Chicago Press, 1971). Lofland builds on his argument in Lyn H. Lofland, *A World of Strangers. Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (Basic Books, 1973).

2 Étienne Balibar, *Equaliberty* (Duke University Press, 2014). Originally published in French in 2010.

3 Dilip Gaonkar, *After the Fictions. Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Multitude*. e-Flux

of superficial interactions in public space can well be of the negative kind too. After all, communities, especially when united by perceptions of shared commonalities, are also built on exclusion. If we want to understand some of the fundamental antinomies of public space—the tension between diversity and unity, equality and liberty under neoliberal urbanism—it is absolutely essential to triangulate the twin notions of equality and liberty with this third concept of community.

The socio-spatial proximity of many *different* people has never worked seamlessly, however. In addition to the perennial challenge of mixing social classes, generations, ethnic or religious groups, public space is also structured by its larger urban context, that is, the physical, social and political transformations of cities. Order has historically been tested by every extension and reconfiguration of the public, with each wave of democratization, radical political change, or spiraling inequality. The contemporary neoliberal city is a globalizing city shaped, among other things, by an increased mobility not only of capital and the fast pace of change it generates but by an ever wider range of movement of people as well. This city is polarizing fast socially in the absence of definitively rolled-back Keynesian policies to counteract this trend. The globalizing city collects and attracts a disproportionate number of residents with partial citizenship rights.<sup>4</sup> These social processes put the urban fabric under increasing pressure and raise the uneasy question whether the very idea of public space is still tenable today with the increasing polarization and diversification of citizens. The pressure is all the more formidable as it is backed by the seductive and pervasive ideology of neoliberalism—the rejection of egalitarian liberalism in general and the Keynesian welfare state in particular—as well as by actual neoliberal policies dismantling redistribution, which aim to remove interventionist artifacts, such as public housing and generously funded public space, from cities.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this context that citizens today make diverging, and increasingly irreconcilable demands on public space, which renders it excessively difficult to maintain the idea of an all-accommodating and unifying place. The bourgeoisie makes different claims from the 'misfits' of restructuring, the homeless, the unemployed, and low-class immigrants, many of whom live in public space and rely on it to make a living. Openly restricting democratic access to public space would meet the resistance of the *demos*, including its 'unruly' parts. In fact, their push for public space to become more public, more inclusive and accommodating, has been a recurrent theme of popular demands, social revolutions and part of what we call progress in general. In short, limiting the access of the poor, those who look different, and those who don't fit should, in theory, be politically inconceivable today. However, the practice of designing out undesirable people and activities as well as regulating what is primarily framed as antisocial behavior are all the more widespread.

The political-economic parameters of the complex regulation of public space that brings together an increasing variety of people are set by commercialization and its twin process, privatization. Privatization, however, does not translate into purely private control and we have quickly learned that a private public space is a living paradox. Partnerships of private and public players are promoted instead as the only effective way not only of controlling public space but also of urban regeneration as such, with the various public-private constellations truly testing the meaning and boundaries of public. The triad of private management, public ownership and public access has become the new recipe and norm for public space regeneration closely followed by the model of privately owned public space, such as the shopping mall.

While the privatization of public space captures a robust trend in what's happening to public space today, it may be more productive to see it not simply as a clear-cut shift of the public/private divide in one direction but rather against the backdrop of the continuum running from the graduated privateness of the home to the graduated publicness of the urban realm. The design of the house embodies this principle: the private space of the home starts with the inner circle of spaces that do not even have windows, followed by the rooms which no visitor is to see, and continues with

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Journal, 58 (October 2014).

4 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City*. New York, London, Tokyo (Princeton University Press, 1991); Saskia Sassen. *Expulsions. Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

5 Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City. Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (Cornell, 2007).

the living room with large windows to the outside, from where through the front hall one can reach the front porch, the garden, then the street. The street as the most public space leads to parks with or without gates, to the market place, which is either temporary or permanent and which closes or does not for the night, to festival halls, cafes with wide open doors and chairs on the sidewalk, bars, where one needs to ring the bell to gain admission, museums, which are free on some days but charge admission on others, private sports clubs, train stations, airports, or temporary spaces awaiting redevelopment. The street can also lead to an exclusive shopping center on top of the hill and a more pedestrian one in the city, whose publicness is determined in a complex system of design, regulation and everyday practice. This reality of graduated publicness clashes with the ideal of public space, free and equal entry to which is the sine qua non premise of democracy.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this minimum requirement of democracy that keeps key debates about public space alive, including, for instance, intense debates about its recent privatization, which many see as the dominant trend in urban transformation.

Let me briefly discuss a few paradigmatic examples that capture the neoliberal transformation of public space through new constellations of public and private.

## Brazen appropriation, or smart utilization of public resources?



**Figure 1.** Amazon lockers placed in public parks, Chicago, Photo: Rossana Rodriguez

Chicago park-goers were surprised to run into Amazon lockers in their parks one day in 2021. They quickly learnt that thanks to a deal Amazon made with Chicago's parks department, more than a hundred Amazon lockers were deployed in public parks around the city.<sup>7</sup> It is part of a business deal, though hardly a particularly good one from the perspective of the city. Public records revealed that "the city would receive, at most \$37,600 in payment from Amazon, which made a \$7.8 million profit last quarter alone." Residents protested claiming that "parks are not for sale."<sup>8</sup> The resource-strapped municipality saw the arrangement as a smart utilization of public property, part of their complex business of maintaining and financing public infrastructure and institutions under their rule. They only followed what had become unquestioned orthodoxy: namely, that municipal governments should behave as eco-

6 Judit Bodnar, Reclaiming Public Space, *Urban Studies*, 52, 12 (2015), p. 2099.

7 Pat Garofalo, Chicago is Being Amazonified, *Jacobin*, 09.02.2021.

8 Garofalo, 2021.

nomically efficient, business-friendly, anti-deficit entities.<sup>9</sup> They found an innovative form of commercializing public space by responding to the logistical needs of 21st century e-commerce. While the historical analogy with placing collection mailboxes in the streets of major cities by the end of the 19th century may seem appropriate at first sight, on closer look, the similarities prove to be superficial and point at the blatant and selective commercialization of public space.

The placement of Amazon lockers in public parks figures as an obtrusive appropriation of public space, however, more inconspicuous forms of putting public space into private use abound. Some of them are temporary, many of them seem insignificant, yet they suggest a trend.



**Figure 2.** *Sorpresa (surprise) Pop-up/public dining*

The photo captures a pop-up thematic dinner (Basque cuisine) that took place in a park area along the Danube in Budapest. A private fee-paying event moved out into public space. The company that organized the dinner advertises itself as an “experience- and catering studio” whose philosophy is focused on uniqueness and surprise (*sorpresa* as the name of the event says): unique venues, unique design.<sup>10</sup> It is not dinners or meals they offer, but events, which are indeed unique, not reproducible. Pop-up dining in public space becomes a brand, one can say a creative and exciting use of space, while others would describe it as temporary encroachment on public space. It is a small example in the larger trend of the temporary use of urban space, which includes even tourism when visitors in great number provisionally inhabit cities. Given the contemporary prevalence of such temporary use, one of the most intriguing questions is whether the temporary commercial use of primarily non-com-

<sup>9</sup> Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> <http://konyhakor.hu/stories/>

mercial public space has implications for the nature of that space in the long run. Does temporary use reconfigure the general terms of operation? At which point do functions become non-temporary?

## The satire of commercialization and the implementation of the satire: the private bench



**Figure 3, Pay & Sit—The private bench, 2008** Photo: Fabian Brunsing

In 2010 a news story reported that in a Chinese park “park officials put spikes on benches to discourage idlers.”<sup>11</sup> Each of the park’s benches was fitted with retractable steel spikes and a coin-operated timer that must be fed like a parking meter. When the user inserts a coin, the spikes retract, and one can sit on the bench. When time is up, there is a loud beep, the steel pikes shoot up, and make sitting singularly uncomfortable, if not impossible. It was also reported that park officials were inspired by German artist Fabian Brunsing’s art installation from two years earlier, who meant it as a satirical comment on the commercialization of public space.<sup>12</sup> The story went viral and was quickly picked up by a National Public Radio program in the U.S. where the contestants have to guess which unbelievable story is true. In order to convince the incredulous contestants, the reporter invited the artist to confirm that the original idea was his work and it was indeed implemented. The story was presented in a funny tone as the most recent repression of the Chinese government by “going medieval” on people’s buttocks, also noting that the satirical tone of the art installation was “lost in translation.”<sup>13</sup> The original newspaper report gives some background to the unbelievable initiative.

Like many people elsewhere, the Chinese tend to flee the crowdedness of big cities and flock to nearby green areas on weekends. The problem is the scale of the population: there are millions of escapees and only a limited number of parks, so one cannot even dream of sitting on a comfortable bench unless one arrives very early. Outraged

<sup>11</sup> Mumbai Mirror, August 17, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> For the original installation, see the video at <https://vimeo.com/1665301>

<sup>13</sup> NPR, Bluff the listener, Sept 11, 2010.

by such behavior, officials of the Yantai Park in Shangdong province, decided to put an end to injustice and ensure that all “facilities are shared out evenly and this seems like a fair way to stop people from grabbing a bench at dawn and staying there all day.”<sup>14</sup> Equal access to public facilities trumps the idea of free access, and the irony of achieving this by charging for the use of a public bench and thereby restricting access for some people (the idlers) is definitely not lost in translation. For park officials, equality is implemented at the cost of free access when the infrastructure cannot keep up with democratization and increasing demand, which is initially generated by free access to public space and its facilities.

The bench has figured prominently in the history of public space. It was part of Haussmann’s pattern-setting public space organizing principle, the infinitely repeatable triad of ‘a tree, a bench, and a kiosk,’ which made Paris modern and attractive, its boulevards more commercial but also more inviting and more accessible to the public. While paying for a seat in public space was not unheard of (e.g. pedestrians could rent folding chairs in prominent public spaces, in parks, or promenades to watch crowds at their leisure), charging people for the use of fixed street furniture was not part of urban practice, and points to broader questions about the intrinsic tensions of public space. Consider, for example, the initiative of charging visitors for free-standing chairs, which would provoke protests when the idea that public space should be free for all took roots. When *The New York Times* reported with disdain in June 1901 that “Oscar F. Spate Lets Green Rockers at five cents each” as he set up “his private business at a public recreation ground by permission of Commissioner Clausen,” they did not know that the new scheme of renting green cushioned rocking chairs in a few prominent New York parks would be so short-lived.<sup>15</sup> A riot of men refusing to pay in Madison Square Park during a heat wave only a few weeks later quickly put paid to the new system. The same paper mentioned that Mr. Spate defended his idea by saying that “under the pay system lazy loungers, none too clean, who have heretofore monopolized the benches, will hereafter have all the room they want, and that others can group together by moving their chairs to places which suit them—that is, by paying for the privilege.”<sup>16</sup> Historians Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig note that the introduction of the scheme followed a period of major economic depression when the increasing presence of lower class and homeless people in public space made “respectable” New Yorkers feel that they were being displaced from their “rightful seats.”<sup>17</sup> Some park-goers “recognized the scheme as one imported from Paris” where the institution of the green pay chairs certainly existed and lasted well into the 20th century.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, however, the idea that street benches should be free and accessible to the public held firm. Not even the (in)famous barrel-shaped ‘bump-proof’ benches and other types of defensible street furniture which appeared in the late 1980s and early 90s questioned this.<sup>19</sup> These aesthetically ‘avant-garde,’ socially exclusive pieces of street furniture emerged in reaction to a new cycle of depression, the ensuing polarization of the public and the increasing presence of homeless people in the streets, and along with the general practice of designing undesirable people out of public space became the early symbols of neoliberal urbanism. They were quickly followed by aesthetically less interesting, functionally more straightforward designs, which simply added a cheap iron bar dividing the seating surface in order to prevent sleeping on the benches. We have come full circle from democratizing access to public space by providing free street furniture to a dystopian vision of the commercialization of the urban commons captured by Brunsing’s public art installation (itself co-opted through ‘translation’ into actual practice).

Ultimately, it is the contradictions of liberty, equality, and community that loom large behind such apparent paradoxes. Historically, it has never been easy to strive to-

14 Mumbai Mirror, 2010.

15 The New York Times, June 23, 1901 <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1901/06/23/t19077590.html?pageNumber=2>

16 The New York Times, 1901.

17 Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig. “The Park and the People: Central Park and Its Publics, 1850–1910” in Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske, eds. *Budapest and New York. Studies in Metropolitan Transformation, 1870–1930* (Russell Sage, 1994), pp. 122–23.

18 The New York Times, 1901.

19 Mike Davis, *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Verso, 1990).

wards and sustainably create the working conditions for the smooth and harmonious encounter of various social classes in public. However, some of the framework conditions have also changed by now: middle class avoidance of public space has been rendered possible at a massive scale. Limiting involvement in public space on a routine basis became an option with individualized transportation, urban sprawl and the proliferation of virtual publics. One could say that being in public space may not even be a necessity any longer; it mostly happens by choice. 'Venturing' out into public space means literally going out to socialize and do something enjoyable with people similar to oneself, which has consequences for the public one seeks and encounters. This puts a lot of pressure on public space to make the visit worth the trip: it is not only expected to be cleaner and less gritty, but something unique and interesting needs to be offered for a highly segmented (and selective) clientele.

Public space has a social and a political efficaciousness as well. While it is grounded in the thin sociality of fleeting encounters across class lines, it carries the remote possibility of those encounters growing into the thicker sociability of a community. In other words, politically it could foster a cohesive experience of unity-in-diversity. Nevertheless, the sociality of public space always threatens to remain relatively thin and fragmented, too, insofar as communities tend to bind similar people together, without transcending the narrow confines of homophily. The separation of public space by social class encourages this even more. Commercialization serves this well by catering to different levels or patterns of consumption, further fragmenting the public.

The fact that public space can attract people—as potential customers—in great numbers certainly has a strong market potential, which may seem to act against this logic of commercially driven fragmentation. Indeed, the constant sensory bombardment (also relayed through social media) promised by unique events lures ever more consumers to visit public spaces. This festivalization of the urban landscape is well known. The spectacle it provides is all-encompassing, but this neoliberal spectacle unfolds in a profoundly uneven manner: it squeezes the highest bid out of highly prized places while leaving others deserted and barren. Such uneven development of public space builds on and complements uneven development at the urban scale, on which neoliberal state policies and practices consciously capitalize, instead of even attempting to alleviate in any way; it is seen as a necessary basis for economic growth rather than a barrier to it.<sup>20</sup>

One cannot say with any certainty that funds for the maintenance of public space have objectively diminished, but one can certainly say that the availability of funds depends primarily on the commercial potential of specific places, and development capital will flow where business is already thriving, projecting an aura of even more potential growth and profitable accumulation. This resonates, of course, with the general neoliberal rhetoric of improvement, which frames public expenditures be in terms of enhancing competitiveness and growth.<sup>21</sup> Thus, investment will tend to go into urban spaces that already benefit from a concentrated influx of funds. In fact, this disproportionate and uneven distribution of investments often ends up in an overcrowding of public spaces that some of the local residents actively protest and organize against. A telling example of this strange paradox—some organize due to the lack of development, while others organize against a surfeit of commercially driven overdevelopment—is the recent wave of demonstrations against overtourism sweeping across European cities this past summer. "There is a stream of people that are consuming the city and not really inhabiting it," as demonstrators recently complained in Málaga.<sup>22</sup> The anger that accompanies these protests cannot be explained merely by pointing out that tourism drives up rents for local residents as well, but the visibility of tourists in, and their transformative effect on public space must also be taken into account. It is the relentless pursuit of improvement and investment ratcheting up the dynamic of uneven development between and within cities that turns public space into a privileged site of contestation under neoliberal urbanism.

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20 Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford, 2004).

21 Susan Fainstein, *The Just City* (Cornell, 2010), p. 2.

22 Guy Hedgecoe, "Málaga tourism: 'People feel the city is collapsing'" BBC, September 2, 2024

## Public space as provisional political community



**Figure 4.** *Demonstration against the internet tax, Budapest, 2014; Photo: Tóth Gergő/Népszava*

Density, concentration, and large numbers, as I have argued, benefit commerce and may thus ultimately serve the process of accumulation. Public space, however, is not only a privileged site of selective commercialization, entirely subordinated to the logic of market valorization. The very density on which commerce thrives, can serve a political function as well. As I noted earlier, seemingly superficial encounters can develop into a purposive community of like-minded people who are connected not only socially but forged into a collective political subject too. Is public space in the modern city then also a privileged site of political action? While Simmel and the proponents of urban civility suggest that great numbers and density instill the need to adjust to others, Hannah Arendt identifies an enabling moment that comes from numbers – the ‘ability to act in concert,’ which she calls power. Spatial proximity and co-presence can make things happen that are beyond the capabilities of individuals, as power emerges at the moment individuals come together as a group.<sup>23</sup> This is what happened in Tahrir Square in 2011, Taksim Meydani or the Kyiv Maidan in 2013, and in the streets of Dhaka in 2024: the majority came together in concerted action and exercised its power in public space. That public space suddenly became ‘more public’ was evident in the transformation of the streets and squares into a veritable political theater. When Wall Street, the potent symbolism of which encapsulates the abstract idea of global finance, was confronted head-on by the Occupy protesters, they attempted to turn public space into “a political commons,” reminding everyone that “the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked.”<sup>24</sup> Even the concrete physical location of Wall Street itself, an ordinary conduit of transient traffic, became a site imbued by the spirit of lively conviviality and a common cause.

It is this transformation of public space and its public which my last photo captures. A series of demonstrations were sparked in Budapest in 2014 by the proposed introduction of a hefty data mobility/internet tax. A Facebook support group formed in defense of the ‘economic freedom’ (affordability) of the internet with an unheard number of supporters – 200,000 – but culminated in a traditional demonstration – with tens of thousands of participants – occupying prime public space. The regime

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Verso, 2012), pp. 161-162.



was not overthrown but the cell phone lights in the night were a memorable sight, testimony to the capabilities of the multitude, which ultimately forced the government to abort its plans for the proposed legislation. The participants of the internet tax demonstrations became comrades in arms, unified by a common cause, and public space the site of political community. On the side, the Facebook generation also made a point that for all the seductive popularity of virtual public spheres in the digital realm, the 'old-fashioned' street still mattered.

The contemporary neoliberal urban landscape "cannibalized"<sup>25</sup> by the ruthless economic imperatives of ever-expanding commercialization and commodification, but as the example(s) above suggest, this should not be a reason for despair. After all, public space can still generate forms of political resistance and solidarity, mobilizing communities striving for equality and liberty. Far from having become completely dominated by the logic of capital, it can also accommodate a whole range of disruptive sites of 'insurgent citizenship,' where citizens articulate and experiment with alternative discourses of urban belonging, reclaiming public space for alternative uses that defy its selective and exclusionary appropriations by the market.<sup>26</sup> Such counter-currents, however, also point to the inherent limits of our tacitly accepted notions of urban civility, and even the limitations of modern political imaginaries invested in liberal democratic decorum. As Dilip Gaonkar reminds us, following Partha Chatterjee, we are living in a time of historical transition, where the centering "fiction" of the people as an abstract, indivisible amalgamated aggregation of sovereign individuals does not hold any longer, so that our societies are haunted by the "specter" of "crowds in streets and squares." In the ostensibly uncivilized public spaces of overcrowded slums, "the street is theater—the mirror in which people recognize themselves as poor and oppressed and yet strong and indispensable."<sup>27</sup> It remains to be seen whether the staging of such "micropolitics of crowds, mobs, and multitudes"<sup>28</sup> in public space will give rise to a community beyond property, properties, and propriety.

## List of Figures

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