Public spaces of European cities

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Public spaces of the city have moved up to the top of the agendas of city authorities, private sector developers, and built environment professionals. Once they were merely considered as spaces leftover after development, while now public spaces have climbed the ladder of significance to become a key focus in the transformation of cities. This paper aims to explore the reasons behind this rising significance, and to develop a platform for debate and research into public spaces of cities. It starts by a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that need to be taken into account in analysing the urban space, before addressing some of the main themes and issues about the subject, including threats to and challenges facing urban public spaces in Europe.

A multi-dimensional, dynamic perspective into urban space

A distinction that is commonly made in the study of built environment is between objects and humans. Those who study architecture, for example, may insist that they are interested in the physical rather than the social environment, interested in the objects that make up the built environment rather than humans and their relationships. While this classification between physical and social is a fairly clear one, it does draw the line between humans and objects too sharply. Indeed, the study of objects without making references to humans may be impossible. When we study a physical environment, we often do not do so as scientists interested in the qualities of objects per se, but in their functional and symbolic interpretations by people who build or use them. Such investigation may measure buildings and spaces and describe their shapes and proportions, but it does not stop here. There is always a layer of interpretation overlaid on this apparently neutral description. There will always be a reference to the individuals and the society that created and used these objects. Objects can therefore only make sense in an interpretive context, when human agreement assigns meaning and value to them (Searle, 1995). This is not to say that they do not exist independently of humans, but merely to stress that our understanding of objects will always be inevitably human-centred.

In contrast, others who study urban sociology, for example, may insist that they are essentially focusing on the relationship between humans; for them the objects and

buildings in this relationship are not relevant to the investigation, or at best have a marginal significance. Some urban planners have characterized this as the distinction between process and product, arguing that paying attention to the product was not essential and it was the process that mattered most. This approach is also drawing a distinction between the physical and the social worlds too sharply. Relationships between humans is often mediated through the objects, they take place within physical environments, and cannot escape the material dimensions involved in social relations. Therefore, we can make a distinction between the physical and social aspects of the city, but we need to see them as interrelated and interdependent; in other words seeing the city as a socio-spatial phenomenon. In a sense, the idea of a complete separation between physical and social aspects of the urban space can be comparable to what is termed Cartesian dualism, the idea that body and mind are completely separate (Descartes, 1968). Most philosophers and scientists after Descartes, however, have argued that this distinction is not satisfactory and that the two work interdependently (e.g.; Greenfield, 2000).

If the study of public space is an investigation into a physical environment with its human significance, i.e., its social and psychological meanings, it is essential to find out how to conceptualize this physical environment. In our investigation of urban space, we often refer to 'space' as if it were an entity that we are analysing through uncovering its characteristics. However, we can also see how these characteristics are only referring to objects and humans that are associated with it, rather than the space per se. For example, the size of an urban square can also be expressed as a set of relationships between the buildings that surround it, the proportion of heights to widths, the location of the observer, the previous experiences of the observers, etc. This is partly reflected in a classical debate about the nature of space: does it exist as an independent object or is it merely a reflection of relationships among objects? The ancient geometer Euclid, and following him Descartes, had conceptualized space as an infinite entity, which could be measured, divided into parts, and could have various figures and sizes (Descartes, 1968:56). In reaction to this absolute notion of space, others have argued in favour of relational space, that space is no more than the relationship between objects. As Leibniz argued, space was an order of coexistences, denoting an order of things that exist together at the same time (Leibniz, 1979:89). This dichotomy between absolute and relational notions of space was exemplified by Newton and Einstein, and has been reflected in many areas of science and technology ever since. As Einstein asserted, however, both these ways of interpreting space can be seen as free imaginations of human mind (Jammer, 1955), particularly at the speed of everyday life, rather than the speed of light.

Interpretations of the city are embedded in normative theoretical and disciplinary frameworks. There are those theoretical approaches and disciplines that investigate matters from the viewpoint of an individual human being. Economic analysis, environment psychology and philosophical investigations are often drawing on such a paradigm. In contrast, there are those disciplines such as urban sociology and urban geography that analyse urban space through a filter of group dynamics. On both sides of the divide, there are those who argue for the extreme: that there is no such thing as society (famous words by the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher), or that there is no such thing as an individual (as exemplified by structuralists who saw individuals as mere agents of social structures). However, it is possible to recognize the interdependence of these two forms of seeing; that individuals are in charge of their own faculties and actions, but are also embedded in social and spatial contexts which have direct influence on them and are influenced by them in return (Bourdieu, 2000; Giddens, 1984). Urban spaces, therefore, are not created by impersonal processes, whereby no one is responsible in making choices and altering the processes of creating them. They are not created, either, by individuals working alone, out of context and beyond their social and historical disposition. Investigating urban spaces becomes more sophisticated by recognizing the interplay between these broad processes and individual contributions, between human agency and its social contexts. Our understanding of urban space, therefore, depends on the frameworks that we adopt at analysis; these frameworks in return depend on our disciplinary biases, our social groups and upbringing, and our cultural values and norms. A study of urban space undertaken by architects and urbanists, therefore, will not be a purely scientific investigation of the subject within timeless laws of physics, but an interpretation of that space as developed and used by a particular society (Lefebvre, 1991). Furthermore, this is an interpretation

from the particular disposition of the investigator. This is not to say, either, that these different dispositions are so alien from one another that they cannot understand each other or come to some agreement about their interpretations (Williams, 2002).

Embeddedness in a particular context leads to another form of distinction, between different perspectives of those involved in a process. As phenomenologists had argued, this meant interpreting the world from the first-person viewpoint, seeing the world from the position of the observer. The natural consequence of this position has been relativism, to say that all observers can have an equal claim to truth, and as such no truth claims can be made. While for some, this would lead to a denial of objective knowledge about the world, for others it was the shortcoming of a first-person viewpoint, demanding that a third-person viewpoint be adopted. The third-person viewpoint is the viewpoint of science, looking from outside-in, accounting for behaviour without being able to account for the expression of feelings and mental states that a first-person viewpoint may include. This objective viewpoint can explain the instrumental actions of individuals and groups in their decisions; it can explain the political and economic frameworks of a society and how each part of the urban space is produced, exchanged and used in a particular way. This perspective allows the observer to investigate these actions according to the instrumental aims of maximizing monetary rewards and political power. It is, however, rarely able to account for the expressive dimension of human action; the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of urban space need also to be taken into account. It is therefore essential to view beliefs and actions, objects and spaces, from the first- as well as the third-person viewpoints, to be able to account for their functional and instrumental uses, as well as for their expressive and cultural aspects, for their impersonal as well as personal dimensions (Lefebvre, 1991; Madanipour, 1996).

In analysing urban space, it is essential to have this capacity to move from one vantage point to another, i.e., to have a dynamic viewpoint. The classic example of a view from outside is the large-scale maps and aerial photographs that are used to study an area. While they are essential tools of acquiring knowledge and deliberating on future action, they are mere lines on paper, hiding the real lives of people who live in these places and may be deeply attached to them. An architect or urban planner may decide to change some lines on the map for some functions to fit better into a particular place; for people on the ground this may mean the loss of a well-loved place. It is important to look at the place both from the bird's eye view and the street level, from the impersonal and professional viewpoint as well as from the personal and emotional. This means analysing the place not only in terms of numbers and figures, but also stories and memories; not only in terms of the views from outside-in, but also from inside-out; not only in terms of the exchange value that a place may generate in the marketplace, but also in terms of the use value that it has accrued for those who have used it for long. The theoretical framework for analysing urban space, therefore, would require a dynamic and multi-dimensional approach, which can account for the multiplicity of the perspectives as well as the complexity of issues involved.

In the built environment the best example perhaps was the debates between the modernists and their critics, as partly expressed in the dichotomy between the notions of space and place. While space was an abstract entity that could be shaped for various functional needs, place was imbued with value and denoted social and psychological meanings and relationships. Place is seen as holistic, laden with memory and emotion, as distinctive from space which is cold and detached from human involvement. Space and place dichotomy also reflects the distinction between society and community, between contractual and impersonal versus historically evolved communal ties. These reflect the potentially contrasting interpretations of the abstract space of society, or the relational space of community; a functional space in a network of urban spaces, or a particular location embedded in social and psychological webs. The implications of these related dichotomies for a study of public space is to be aware of the underlying assumptions that we make, and that any particular space is formed of multiple layers of interpretation: while for some a public space is only carved out as a part of the urban space, for others it is a place of significance for a community.

All actions and events are spatial and temporal: they take place in some place at some time, and as such are conditioned by spatial and temporal frameworks. However, there have always been tendencies to argue in favour of paying more attention to one at the cost of the other, emphasizing space

or time. Disciplinary bias seems to have been prevalent in investigating the urban phenomena: some have entirely focused on the historical aspects of investigation, disregarding the spatial dimensions of the subject. This has been the major feature of Hegelian analysis, feeding the Marxian and other theories of interpreting social phenomena according to a temporal scheme. Events only made sense, according to this line of thought, if they fitted in a linear evolutionary interpretation. Others have focused mainly on the spatiality of the subject without much attention to its temporality. Spatial arts and sciences, such as architecture, town planning, or geography, have seen their essence as spatiality. On the one hand this has opened up the framework of analysis to simultaneity and has challenged the linear analysis that temporalists have promoted. On the other hand, too much emphasis on spatiality may mean looking at frozen moments, not being able to see things in their process of change. A building or a part of urban space may become a static object, timeless and unchanging, rather than acknowledging that it is subject to the various impacts of temporal change. Some have thought about time and space as mere issues of metaphysics: that they are not tangible entities, beyond reflecting duration and distance. In a more abstract sense, time and space are both frameworks in which our experience of the world takes shape, within which our buildings and urban spaces are formed and transformed. In a more tangible sense, all buildings and urban spaces, as well as people who build and use them, are material objects that are subject to duration and distance. It is with making a joint reference to time and space that we can analyse urban space: it its evolution and transformation through time, and in its relationships and dispositions in space. There is a tendency in temporal and spatial disciplines to address one without necessarily paying attention to the other, which needs redressing: a spatial investigation without time is too static and a temporal investigation without space is too linear; a dynamic perspective is needed to integrate the two.

Furthermore, an important clarification needs to be made about the meaning of the term 'public', which describes public space. The dictionary definitions of the term often contrast it with the private. A public space is open to all; it is provided and managed by public authorities on behalf of all people, and as such refers to both the state and the society. However, the society is also the realm of the private,

the households and individuals, and the market, which creates a degree of ambiguity. The other ambiguity is about the constitution of the public: how can there be a single understanding of the public in a diverse society in which there are many publics, each with a different set of characteristics and requirements? The feminist critique against the male domination of the public sphere challenges its historical and traditional definitions, as other forms of difference in society also tend to do. Is public sphere a sphere of interpersonal relationships or of impersonal ones? The public spaces of the city often take on diverse meanings and play different roles for different sets of citizens, and their 'publicness' often depends on how we characterize the private. Their common feature is that they are places outside individual or group control, meditating between private spaces, and used by diverse urban populations for a variety of overlapping functional and symbolic reasons. The less restricted these places are, the more public they become; it is around these restrictions that a whole set of challenges to urban public spaces can be identified.

Public spaces in transition

Our dynamic and multi-dimensional perspective requires us to investigate public spaces in their larger context of the city and through the changes that the city goes through. Contemporary cities are undergoing a profound change (Sassen, 2002; UN, 2001; Olds, 2001; Short & Kim, 1999). As the majority of the world's population live in urban centres, cities have become the primary locations for exchange of idea, goods and services (Toepfer, 1999). Two centuries ago, cities became the hotbeds of industrial revolution; their functions, populations and built spaces changed to accommodate this fundamental change. Now at the end of this period, the Western cities are witnessing a new phase of fundamental changes. There is a reconfiguration of industrial activities, whereby new areas of the world industrialize while the older industrial countries take up the role of centres of management and exchange in a globalized context. The decline of the old industries and the significant rise of the service sector have transformed once again the nature and function of cities. Rather than workshops of the world, as the industrial cities used to be, Western cities are going through a period of transition: some have suffered from decline while others have become places of innovation and

control, the key nodes of a network of a predominantly urban world.

This ongoing transformation in the role of cities has inevitable consequences for their inhabitants and their built environment. As institutions and functions change, urban spaces and urban lives are being transformed accordingly. Yet this is not a problem-free transition from one form to another. Like any other fundamental change, it poses serious threats and challenges to almost all aspects of the contemporary city. Public space is one of the areas that many of these threats and challenges are most evident (Sitte, 1986; Sennett, 1984; Walzer, 1986; Miethe, 1995; Punter, 1990; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993; Madanipour, 2003).

A wave of technological innovations made the industrial revolution possible and concentrated large numbers of workers and industries in its prime sites. Since then several major waves have transformed the shape of cities, allowing some cities to disperse at low densities across the countryside. Transport technologies, from suburban and underground trains to cars and buses, as well as communication and information technologies, have each helped creating the possibility of spreading the city in all directions. Even smaller settlements can now be envisaged as a thinly spread combination of low-rise houses, workplaces and leisure complexes. This stands in sharp contrast to the configuration of the pre-modern city, where a compact fabric was often focused on one or more major public spaces. The celebrated cases of ancient agora and forum, or the medieval market and church squares accommodated several key functions of the city and provided it with a heart where all the major events took place. This was a functional integration that made the public spaces of these cities an unrivalled place to combine many activities; simultaneously it could be a marketplace, a place of political assemblies, and a place for public ceremonies and rituals. This functional integration, however, started to collapse with the growing size of the city, where it was physically impossible to rely on a single centre. As the places of work and living were separated, and as movement across the large urban space became inevitable, the centre's hold started to weaken, and with it the role of its public spaces. It is now unimaginable to have the same degree of integration of economic, political and cultural functions in a single space. This was perhaps the biggest challenge that the modern period has posed to the historical role of the urban public spaces. As each function was changed in nature or was relocated to other sites, the public space lost one aspect of its functions one after the other. In many European cities, it seems that leisure is the only major function left for many public spaces that once were used to witnessing historically significant events.

One of the key losses of the public space was its political role. While at some point the public space and the public sphere were one and the same, now the public space only occasionally plays a part in the public sphere. The ancient Greek democracy could not take place without the possibility of the urban elite coming together in public spaces to discuss the affairs of the city-state. Now, the everyday deliberations and political debates in democracies often take place outside these physical, urban public spaces: in political institutions and through the mass media, as well as in many smaller spheres of communication and interaction of the civil society. The form of political debates in the public sphere changed dramatically after the introduction of the print and electronic media. With television and newspapers, and the enlargement of the political community to include larger sections of the population, the modern society's political deliberations could no longer take place in a single physical space. While some have regretted this enlargement, e.g., worries about the mass society by Habermas (1989) and Arendt (1958), which has had some negative impacts on the quality of the public sphere, there could be no doubt that this expansion was a step forward. There are many today who complain that the privatized shopping malls do not allow political demonstrations. While in principle this appears to be a fair objection, it ignores the changing realities of the public sphere in the modern period, irrespective of the shopping mall's impact. Nevertheless, public spaces still play a crucial role at the periods of upheaval, such as the use of many public spaces in the recent counter-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe or in political marches and protests everywhere. Although these spaces may not have the political significance they once had, limiting their openness any further may jeopardize some of the essential freedoms of the public. In this sense, as public spaces become more limited in their scope of activities, the political dimension of the public space is threatened even further.

However, a bigger challenge to public spaces is not political but economic. Signifying the current fundamental

changes in cities have been the recent structural changes in the global economy, which have forcefully promoted liberalization and privatization. The public sector, which was once seen as the generator of economic growth, is now considered by some to be a barrier to such growth. By transferring assets and activities to the hands of the private sector agencies, it is thought, these barriers will be removed and economic dynamism will emerge. This widespread strategy, however, poses serious threats and challenges to the provision of public goods. If the public sector is cutting back its involvement, who is there to provide the necessary public goods and services? Urban public spaces are among these public goods and services, which are not normally produced by the private sector as they do not provide any tangible rewards to a private investor. When the private agencies invest in the public spaces of their urban development schemes, their tendency is to limit access so that these spaces can be controlled, so that use and maintenance costs can be limited. The intention is to associate these semi-public spaces with the private development, rather than making them open to public use. As more and more urban development schemes were undertaken by the private sector, more and more new public spaces of the city could be privatized. A city, however, is not merely a collection of private territories; without open access public spaces, its economy and society cannot function. If a city's public spaces were converted into privately controlled spaces, then the movement of goods and services in an open market economy would be jeopardized. It would also undermine the freedom of the citizens in a democracy to move about the city. Privatization of public space, which is rooted in the changing balance of the public and the private sectors, therefore, is a major threat to the life of cities. The extremes of such privatization may be experienced in highly liberalized economies such as the United States. The extent of economic liberalization and the threat to public goods, however, also is rising in the European countries, where socially concerned administrations are giving way to economically liberal ones.

The combination of spatial dispersal and economic liberalization has had a social consequence: segregation. As cities in market economies have grown and spread, their social structures have become shaped by the economics of land. Land prices have reflected the socio-economic conditions of people who are using land. The new restructuring of cities has exacerbated this long-standing trend, by creating wider gaps between rich and poor. While for the optimist this is a short-term consequence of economic change, for others it causes serious challenges to the social fabric of cities. Rising tides of crime make some public spaces uninviting, places to avoid rather than to enter and enjoy. On the one hand, social segregation and polarization create fear of the others: while the poor are feeling unwanted and rejected, the rich feel vulnerable and threatened. Creating safe enclaves is part of the logic of gated neighbourhoods and privatized public spaces. This can reduce certain forms of problems, but it creates new ones, which include a fragmented and alienated urban population unable to tolerate others and even unaware of the problems the other individuals and groups are facing. The ability of a city's inhabitants to live together, to be aware of each other and to work together for the improvement of their environment, therefore, erodes in potentially dangerous ways. They withdraw from the city's public spaces, only go to semi-public spaces where they feel safe, and thus contribute to the emergence of a tribal fragmentation which can only lead to further divide and potential rupture of the social fabric.

The nineteenth century witnessed major efforts to improve the quality of urban life by introducing public parks and boulevards, where nature was brought into the city for hygiene and aesthetics. In contrast, the late twentieth century witnessed an erosion of these public spaces, and hence a decline in the quality of urban life. Decline in public spending meant unsafe and unkempt parks, badly lit streets and unpleasant public squares. Withdrawal from public spaces and privatizing new and existing public spaces was the solution that some put forward, to use private money for private use, rather than public money for general use. For others, attention was only paid to few showcases in the city, and neglecting the peripheral and marginal spaces. Public spaces of the city came under attack from under-funding, privatization, functional fragmentation, and loss of meaningful usage. However, a city without its public spaces is not a city, but a collection of fragments. Something needed to be done, which is why urban design found a campaign agenda: one of the core concerns of urban design has been the development and protection of public realm and arguing against its decline and abandonment. The European city, with its rich heritage of public environments was a clear model to follow.

Significance of public spaces for transforming cities

Compared with many other cities of the world, European cities are well supplied with high quality public spaces, which continue to be an integral part of social and cultural life. The beauty and richness of their architecture, the historic as well as the everyday significance of these places in people's lives have been well documented. Extension of privatization and decline to these public spaces is not even conceivable in many European cities. As well-maintained places they are joyful for the residents and visitors, and have for long provided examples for other parts of the world to follow. Viewed from the perspective of Europeans, these public spaces are part of the fabric of their cities which they value highly and with which they identify.

The significance of public space for the cities in transition has increasingly been acknowledged. Particularly, in the regeneration of the old industrial cities, large-scale new urban environments have been developed where it was essential to have a clear approach to the provision and maintenance of their public spaces. In the same way that threats to public spaces are multi-dimensional, the approaches adopted, and the challenges facing these approaches, are also multi-faceted. Partly as a result of campaigns by urban designers and partly by the pressures and needs of the regenerating cities, public realm improvement has come to the centre of agenda for built environment professionals, public authorities, private sector developers, as well as researchers and interested citizens. Each group seems to have a different expectation from improving the public realm, expectations that at times are contradictory and leading to tensions and contested outcomes.

One of the main reasons behind the new interest in public space improvement is the promotion of cities in the global economy. As economies have globalized, resources move with some ease from one place to another, and the localities become aware that they need to become distinctive and attractive destinations if they wish to benefit from these mobile resources. It is thought that mainly through these resources is it possible to create jobs for the local economy. Cities, therefore, compete with each other for attracting investors, encourage firms to relocate to their area, and invite tourists to visit their monuments and public spaces. As cities act as firms in competition, the city's public authorities perform their duties as the managers of these firms, seeking to develop their product, which is the city's environment, and promote it in the global marketplace. As buildings are often developed and owned by the private sector, the public sector focuses on the urban infrastructure and the public realm. Acting according to the business logic is a complete reversal of the public authorities' recent history. After the second world war, local authorities took up the task of producing and repairing the built environment, engaged in large-scale public works to create mass housing and renovate the cities in the aftermath of a devastating war. Now their role has changed from producers to enablers of development, putting in the necessary infrastructure for the private sector to build the city. Furthermore, they are now in charge of promoting and marketing their cities (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Smyth, 1994). By using major international sport and cultural events, developing flagship projects designed by superstar architects, and investing in newsworthy initiatives and public arts projects for public places, the cities engage in a marketing exercise that aims to transform their old image into a new one, or maintain their vibrant image in the global imagination. One of the most successful re-imaging experiences in Europe has been Barcelona, where investment in the city's public spaces was part of a purposeful strategy to change the image of the city and put it on the international map of desirable destinations. The producers of goods compete with each other for product differentiation: how do the consumers differentiate between so many items that crowd the shelves of a supermarket? Better, more imaginative packaging is certainly one of the options. The same challenge is facing the managers of city authorities who may use attractive appearances and particular images for differentiating their cities from the rest.

Improved public spaces are also a source of certainty and confidence building for the markets. Private sector investors feel confident that they can invest in an area after seeing expenditure commitment by the public sector in that part of the city. This is particularly the case with private developers who think of engaging in urban regeneration projects, which are often in locations where the property market is weak. Public realm improvement provides a degree of safety for such risks, as they signal long-term commitment to an area's future. It also reassures the firms that may think of relocating into a new area: if the public environment is dilapidated and there is no confidence in the future of an area,

the perceptions of risk will increase and the firms may consider going elsewhere. It is true that the cost of production and availability of workforce and public sector incentives may be more significant factors in deciding about locations, but if these factors are to be found in a large number of locations, additional factors such as environmental quality will also be significant.

It appears, therefore, that investing in urban public spaces makes sense for the public and private sector agencies: it promotes the city in the international marketplace, it builds confidence in the private sector, it adds value to and reduces the risk of investment, and it improves environmental quality to encourage relocation of firms and visit by tourists. These are overwhelmingly economic factors, which are important for the future of a city, but also pose serious challenges to the social and environmental dimensions of the public realm.

One of the requirements of our multi-dimensional approach is to view the issue from different perspectives, not only of those who have the power of transforming the city, but also of those who are affected by these processes but are often powerless and marginalized. A major challenge to public space provision is the distinction between centres and peripheries, between showcase public spaces and the marginal ones. If public space improvements are primarily driven by economic development concerns, most funds will inevitably find their way into major schemes, flagship projects, and city centre locations. As the city's display windows, these are locations that matter most for its overall image both to the city's residents and to the outside world. One of the major themes in the British urban 'renaissance' has been promoting the 'Europeanization' of the city. The ideal type continental European city is where the city centre is well maintained by the resident middle classes, and where visitors enjoy it for its beautiful architecture and magnificent public monuments. In contrast, Anglo-American middle class have abandoned the city centre for living in the suburbs, resulting in decline in the quality of urban environment. To remedy this abandonment, the urban renaissance planners aim to promote city living and recreating the city in an ideal type European image. It is hoped that the city centres of the suburbanized cities can once again become viable places.

In this process, however, the disadvantaged parts of the city remain on the margins. Peripheral neighbourhoods in the continental European city, and the inner neighbourhoods in Anglophone cities, remain places of disadvantage and decay. As concentrations of economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized groups, these neighbourhoods suffer from multiple-deprivation and social marginalization. The amount of attention and investment that goes to the city's showcases is unlikely to find its way into these parts of the city. These neighbourhoods are spaces of entrapment for diverse and vulnerable populations. Their public spaces are neglected by the public authorities, the private sector, and even the residents themselves, reflected in litter and vandalism. Public spaces in these parts of the city are contested among groups who wish to use them most at the cost of keeping the others out. Teenage boys who hang out in public spaces seem to frighten other groups, particularly the elderly and the children. Street drinkers frighten mothers who want to take their children out. The diverse vulnerable groups who live in these neighbourhoods have arrived there through the mechanism of land and property markets, whereby low-income groups are concentrated in areas with lowest rent. The other mechanism that concentrates the disadvantaged urban populations in particular parts of the town is the allocation policies of the public housing management. As public housing schemes have lost their status throughout Europe, they have become places to escape from rather than wishing to go to. While previous working class residents have left for areas with better residential qualities, the immigrants and the unemployed have been given their places, and many public housing neighbourhoods have lost their desirability on the housing ladder. They have become concentrations of disadvantage and displacement. A combination of public housing allocation mechanisms and private markets in land and property has created pockets of deprivation in many cities. In these areas, public spaces have turned into undesirable, contested, and at time dangerous places.

One of the main tests facing the public authorities is their treatment of these neighbourhoods. The challenge is to improve the quality of public spaces in these marginal neighbourhoods with the same interest and commitment as those of the city's showcases. If a city is a good place to live, it must be good in all or most of its areas, rather than a few display windows. This distinction between the centre and periphery has always existed; the challenge for democratic city governments, however, is to try to improve the

marginal public spaces for the benefit of a large section of vulnerable population, in the same way that they pay attention to the better off areas of the town and its central places of interest. The challenge facing the urban authorities is whether to focus all their efforts on the major public spaces of the city at the cost of ignoring others, in the logic that the wealth created by such prioritization would inevitably reach other parts of the city. This logic, however, cannot explain why the unfavourable conditions of urban environment in the marginal neighbourhoods should continue in the foreseeable future.

Improvements in public spaces would inevitably improve the quality of urban life for more citizens. It could therefore be a route to social integration in increasingly fragmented urban societies. As the diverse social groups that make up the urban populations are unable to access the public arenas for expressing and exploring their shared identities, they may have to be forced underground, or be frustrated at a lack of proper mechanisms for cultural display and expression. Public spaces that allow the symbols and self-expressions of different groups to be displayed in the public, to allow diverse groups use the same space and mingle with one another, and so to become aware of themselves and others are essential for the health of a city. In the absence of such channels for exploring the self and others, the fragmented social groups can remain separate and alienated from each other, with possible explosive results. The challenge that faces public authorities and private agencies is whether to use images and symbols that appeal to the tastes and identities of a narrow section of the population, in the name of economic development. If we build environments that are good for wealthier sections of the population, their logic goes, we would be able to promote a wealthier city, from which all would benefit. The challenge to this line of arguing is that cultural alienation of other sections of the population can undermine these aims. If others feel sidelined and unable to relate to these symbols and new images, the overall success of these city building schemes would be jeopardized.

In addition to the economic logic of paying attention to public spaces, there are several political dimensions too. On the one hand, politicians would be happy to be seen to be doing something for the city, as public space improvements are some of the most visible public works possible. This would help politicians prove their usefulness and improve the chances of their re-election. On the other hand, there is a chance for public space schemes to contribute towards good governance, a chance less often taken by the city authorities. Public spaces are where many urban residents have a legitimate interest. If the deliberation processes about a public space scheme can include the voices of as many residents and other stakeholders as possible, the scheme can become a vehicle of bringing different groups to the same table, starting a process of working together by agencies and groups that otherwise may not meet at all. The possibility of generating a forum for collaboration among diverse groups can therefore be a positive aspect of a public space scheme. Other built environment schemes can do the same, but a public space has a better chance of engaging a larger number of people, due to its open access and appeal to a larger number of urban residents.

The result of public space schemes may be improvement in economic prospects of the city. The residents' interest, however, may be mainly in the improvement in the quality of urban environment, both in functional and symbolic terms. The debates about environmental sustainability have partly promoted a compact city agenda, whereby high-density traditional cities of Europe are seen as less wasteful of environment resources. One of the key features of these cities has been their good quality public spaces, which would complement apartment living. It is partly in response to this demand for sustainable communities that some public space schemes have been justified. The challenge is to ensure that such reasoning be an authentic attempt to achieve more sustainable patterns of development, rather than being a dispensable companion to the economic development stories.

Conclusion

Urban space is often analysed in terms of limited dichotomies, interpreting it as physical or social, as abstract or relational, space or place, temporal or spatial, from the viewpoint of individual or society, offering first-person or third-person narratives. There is, however, a need to go beyond these dichotomies and adopt a multi-dimensional, dynamic viewpoint that can take into account the multiplicity of perspectives and actions involved in making, interpreting and using space, as unfolded through time and creating a particular spatial configuration.

The acceleration of globalization has initiated a process of urban transformation, posing some serious threats and challenges to the public spaces of cities, among others. As cities have grown larger and spread wider, urban functions have disintegrated and public spaces have lost much of their historical significance: their political role limited to the periods of crisis and their social role to providing leisure. Economic liberalization and social polarization and fragmentation have turned public spaces into subjects of contestation, reflected in neglect and decline or privatization and exclusion. And yet the cities that compete with each other in the global marketplace need to promote their distinctiveness and attractiveness, and build confidence in the private sector to invest there, which can partly be done through paying attention to their public spaces. This means new, heightened attention to public spaces, to but also an over-emphasis on the economic logic and the aesthetic preferences of a minority, which could lead to the neglect of the peripheries and of ignoring the social and environmental needs of the rest of the citizens.

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