

Protest Cultures  
A Companion

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## A Companion

Edited by

Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Martin Klimke,  
and Joachim Scharloth



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# Public Space

*Tali Hatuka*

## General Definition of the Term

*Public space* as a product of socio-spatial relations is always under construction.<sup>1</sup> The word public—defined as the opposite of private—is that which is open to general observation or knowledge, and thus public actions are performed and carried out in full view, without concealment. Social and anthropological theories consider public to be the domain of people, united by sociability and a constructed normative order. Space has multiple meanings, yet when associated with public it denotes an area or extension of an area. Thus, public space indicates affiliations between the public and space, creating a physical area for open interactions and practices. Consequently, public space is a place that belongs to the people as a whole, affecting or concerning the culture of a community or a nation. This sense of belonging makes public space: (1) a sphere of multiplicity and plurality and (2) a significant location for cultures to negotiate, protest, modify, and present their values and traditions.

Public space has raised much discussion about its role and contribution to public life. Anthony Giddens<sup>2</sup> argues that understanding the manner in which human activity is distributed in space is fundamental to analysis of public life. Ervin Goffman<sup>3</sup> used the concepts front and back to illustrate a fundamental divergence in social spatial activity. For Goffman, a front region is composed of those places in which we put on a public on-stage performance, acting out stylized, formal, and socially acceptable activities, while a back region is an area where we are behind the scenes, where we prepare ourselves for public performance, or where we can relax into less formal modes of behavior.

These spatial differences of public space are a key concern in architecture and planning, disciplines engaged in transforming the concept of public life into a physical reality. If we wish to define public space without imposing aesthetic criteria, we are compelled to include all spaces between buildings for public, not private, use. In architecture and urban planning, public space indicates such components as streets, squares, alleys, and parks. These spaces, though they are part of the collective assets of citizens, are usually under the control of the local authority, which is responsible for their maintenance. In the contemporary reality of cities, this authoritarian control can include gates, surveillance cameras, and other restrictions that limit the public's actions within these spaces. These surveillance practices alter the interplay between property (as a parcel of owned space) and people by regulating their use and accessibility, becoming a means of excluding some people and classes of people from otherwise publicly accessible property.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing critique regarding the impoverishment of contemporary civil life. Scholars have pointed out the significance of public experience, beyond the private sphere, for the self-development of men.<sup>5</sup> These writings address public space as a social relations' product—relations that are often conflicting and unequal, without romanticizing the concept of public space as an empty free space equally accessible to all.

## General Cultural Functions

Of all the various types of public spaces, three key urban typologies have received significant attention from architects, town planners, and social groups—the square, the street, and the park, all arenas for dissent.

Traditionally, the square is created by a grouping of houses around an open space, which affords a high degree of control over the inner space and facilitates a ready defense against external attacks. This kind of courtyard has symbolic value and was, therefore, chosen as the model for the construction of numerous holy places (agora, forum, mosque courtyard, etc.). This spatial pattern became a model for public and private developments, with many houses being built around central courtyards or atriums.<sup>6</sup> Today, the secular civic square, around which government and cultural buildings are located, is the modern equivalent to a holy place. These civic squares recruit architectural elements, such as scale, symmetry, monumental buildings, and symbolic icons, to place the individual in a meaningful social hierarchy that promulgates implicit power relationships.

Unlike the square, the street is the product of a settlement's expansion. It provides a framework for the distribution of land and gives access to individual plots. More functional than the square (which, by virtue of its size and arrangement of buildings, is more attractive and often monumental), the street serves as a channel of traffic and movement, with the residential street used mainly by residents, and the commercial (sometimes pedestrian) street used as a bustling public arena for the city's inhabitants and visitors—thus serving as the socioeconomic vein of a city.

Unlike the street and square, the urban park is a relatively recent development that emerged in the nineteenth century due first to the allocation, in Europe, of royal land for public use; and, second, to the creation of non-utilitarian, landscaped urban areas with woodlands and pastures designated for public recreation. Owned and maintained by the local government, the urban park, with varying uses and scales, exists as a modern typology in cities all over the world.

These physical definitions of the square, street, and the park have often been challenged, not only with reference to epistemology, but also on the grounds that urban form is itself bound by historical and social processes and by hegemonic power structures. That is, economic relations and forces of production, as well as social, political, and cultural histories, have an impact on the form of space and its meaning.<sup>7</sup> One of the social strategies that significantly affects public space is protest. This is a strategy by which political powers and citizens alike manifest their ideology in public.

## Role in Protest Cultures

As a planned ideological action, a protest expresses a conviction of wrong or injustice.<sup>8</sup> Since protesters are seen as unable to correct the objectionable situation directly by their own daily efforts, this action is intended to draw attention to grievances, to provoke the taking of ameliorative steps by some target group. As such, protesters depend upon a combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group to action on their behalf. In attempting to achieve this purpose, protestors carefully plan their event, taking into account the action's public location, which affects the attention the action receives as well as its meaning.

As suggested, the square, the street, and the park have a significantly different use value and spatial definition from one another (Table 29.1). All play a significant role in terms of the impact of the protest and its visual representations. Thus, protests that take place in a square, which is a pause or extension within the city's network, are often static congregations that use

or challenge a space's symbolic value. The enclosed space increases a sense of ritual and solidarity. In contrast, protests that take place along streets, defined as the city's structural movement network, are often more dynamic, with active marching. In this latter type of action, traffic in the street halts, and the march paralyzes the city's network, enhancing the impact by drawing viewers and passersby. Still other conditions are created when a protest takes place in a park, which is often an isolated piece of nature in the midst of the bustling urban nature of the city's network. This protest is often a large-scale activity, a festive event, in which the enclosed, detached nature of the park creates minimal interference for the daily dynamics of the city.



**Figure 29.1.** Square/London 2007. © Photo by Tali Hatuka



**Figure 29.2.** Street/Athens 2007. © Photo by Tali Hatuka



**Figure 29.3.** Park/Bakaa el Arbia [Israel] 2009. Photo by Tali Hatuka

These basic spatial differences play a significant role in the public experience of space and the social meaning of the protest. Yet, these voids, or spaces, in the city are defined by the built form surrounding them, which also carries significant meaning. Public institutions such as governmental buildings, transit hubs, private consumption spaces such as malls, or labor buildings such as factories with their adjacent public space often become sites or even targets of contestation. In some cases, the design of the action itself may carry a *counter-meaning* to the representation of the building or institution as a part of the protest's performance and the message's craft. In that sense, it is impossible to separate the built form from space, and they should be seen together. Furthermore, many protests use various spatial qualities to enhance their impact (e.g., marching in the streets and congregating in the square, in front of a governmental building). Moreover, particular account should be paid to the fact that cities differ significantly from each other in terms of scale, planning, social rules, and cultural traditions, all of which affect the public spaces' accessibility to dissent. This is particularly true for laws that govern public space and that allow or prevent its use for protests (often through negotiation and permits with authority).

**Table 29.1.** Public Space's Role and Meanings in Protest Culture: The Square, the Street, and the Park

	<b>Square</b>	<b>Street</b>	<b>Park</b>
<b>Use</b>	Meeting	Traffic/movement channel	Recreation
<b>Key value/Concern</b>	Symbolic	Functional	Leisure
<b>Spatial definition within the city</b>	A pause within the city network	The city network	An isolated, enclosed pause within the city network
<b>Influence of protests</b>	Static congregations, challenged symbols displayed in space; enclosure that increases the sense of ritual and solidarity	Dynamic marching, crowd's growth, enhancing impact by affecting accidental viewers, paralyzing city's network	Large-scale events, festival-oriented, minimal interference of the daily dynamic of the city

As a secular ceremony, the protest is intended to strengthen the existing cultural-ideological construction of a group or a society. In this context, public spaces are viewed as forums for voicing disagreements, or as physical locations for resolving them.<sup>9</sup> As such, a protest is a mode of action that contributes to the reciprocal interactions between space and social practice, with the symbolism and iconography of public spaces constantly defined and re-created by users. As Henri Lefebvre argues,<sup>10</sup> social space is a social product, so that any transitions in the form of social relations must entail the production of a new space. This process of the appropriation and transformation of space has become a focal issue in much of the literature on politics and space, and on how societies negotiate their identity and claims through modifying their modes of operation.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the appropriation—or possession of space during protests challenges the established social order identified in, or with, a particular space.

## Theoretical and Empirical Research Perspectives

With increasing interest in the spatial dimensions of protests, there is a growing body of research in geography, anthropology, and architecture and planning, concerning the relationships between public space and protest. Most of this literature employs an interdisciplinary perspective, yet there are significant differences in their initial disciplinary reference points of observation. Thus, in general terms, architecture and planning focuses on the impact of built space and the physicality of dissent; geography gives much more weight to the territorial and control strategies used during dissent; and, sociology and anthropology deals with the meanings associated with the settings and locations of rituals and ceremonies.

On the role of built spaces in constructing a sociopolitical identity, scholars such as Sibel Bozdoğan, Kim Dovey, Lisa Findley, Abidin Kunso, and Lawrence Vale<sup>12</sup> have focused on the built space as a cultural artifact within intricate power geometries. Particular attention has been paid to the architectural concept of buildings as mediators between civic society and its urban image. These researchers see the public space as a spatial-cultural phenomenon and insist on the need to envisage it as representing power relations in a specific cultural arena, that is, in relation to the groups that affect the space's design and definitions. Detailed studies that address the relationships between specific public spaces and dissent can be found in relation to Plaza de Mayo (Buenos Aires), Rabin Square (Tel Aviv), and Tiananmen Square (Beijing), to name a few.<sup>13</sup>

Significant attention has been given to the control of public space, and the way it influences concepts of publicity, citizenship, and democracy. For example, Donald Mitchell and Lynn A Staeheli<sup>14</sup> aim at understanding how modes of access and possibilities for association in publicly accessible space vary with individuals and classes of people, and with the role public spaces play in shaping democratic possibilities. Bruce D'Arcus examines how public and private space is symbolically mediated, and the way power and dissent are articulated in the contemporary media.<sup>15</sup>

On the symbolic and political uses of space, Murray Edelman and Anthony Giddens<sup>16</sup> have both pointed out that a setting is actively involved in social interaction; J Nicholas Entrikin<sup>17</sup> has commented that the control over the meanings of setting is an important expression of power.<sup>18</sup> More directly, Ervin Goffman has studied symbolic interaction in public space, and Don Handelman has examined public events' design and organization as a means of understanding the ritual in relation to the world within which it is created and practiced.<sup>19</sup>

## Research Gaps and Open Questions

The above perspectives share the assumption that the socio-spatial array of the city forces us to adjust to particular social contexts, behavioral codes, and political regulations. However, at the same time, this spatial array also provides us with a space in which to negotiate, oppose, and resist. This particular dialectic of constraint and freedom is what makes public spaces so crucial to political dissent, so strategic as a tool allowing people to negotiate their claims. Will the role of public space as a significant location and as the material of dissent diminish? What civic role will public space play in the future with the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs)? It is true that ICTs contribute to social movements (though they also contribute to information overload, misinformation, access restriction, and predominance of use by elites). However, it is not expected that these technologies will replace direct actions; rather, they will continue to complement and enhance them.<sup>20</sup>

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*temporary Tel Aviv*, was published both in English (Austin, TX, 2010) and Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 2008). Her work has been published in a wide range of journals, including the *Journal of Urban Design International*, *the Journal of Architecture*, *the Journal of Architecture and Planning Research*, *Planning Perspectives*, *Political Geography*, and *Geopolitics*.

## Notes

1. Doreen B Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005), 9.
2. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, CA, 1984).
3. Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 1971).
4. There is extensive literature on these issues; see, for example, the works of Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, 2003), especially 1–12; Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 1–48.
5. In particular, see the work of Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York, 1990); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977); Ali Madanipour, ed., *Whose Public Space?: International Case Studies in Urban Design and Development* (London, 2010); Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City* (London, 2003); Don Mitchell, “The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85(1995): 108–33; Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*.
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7. Manuel Castells, “The New Historical Relationship Between Space and Society,” in *Designing Cities*, ed. AR Cuthbert (Malden, MA, 2003), 59–68.
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- Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago, 2005); Susan Torre, "Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo," in *Gender, Space, Architecture*, ed. J Rendell, B Penner, and I Borden (London, 2000), 140–5.
14. Donald Mitchell and Lynn A Staeheli, *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public* (New York, 2008).
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  16. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley, CA, 1979).
  17. Nicholas J Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore, MD, 1991).
  18. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, IL, 1964).
  19. Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005); Goffman, *Relations in Public*.
  20. Martha McCaughey and Michael D Ayers, eds, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York, 2003).

## Recommended Reading

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- Dovey, Kim. *Framing Places*. London, 1999. Analysis of architecture and public spaces with a focus on power and meaning.
- Madanipour, Ali. *Public and Private Spaces of the City*. London, 2003. Reviews the role and meaning of public and private space, and relationships between them.
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