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ALTERNATING NARRATIVES

The dynamic between, public spaces,
protests, and meanings*Tali Hatuka***The narration of public space**

Public spaces are public when (and inasmuch as) they *are not only* “mapped” by sovereign powers (including supranational organizations) or imposed by economic forces (the domination of the market) “but also ‘used’ and ‘instituted’ (or constituted) by civic practices, debates, forms of representations, and social conflicts, hence ideological antagonisms over culture, religion, and secularism” (Balibar 2009, 201). Thus, public space represents the sociopolitical dynamics of a particular time and place. That is, why every public space developed or initiated by formal institutions (e.g. governments, municipalities, planning authorities) is a political space, but not every political space is a public space.

People and powers are aware of both the political and temporal dimensions of public space. This temporality is most evident during protests, when protestors use their power to interpret the symbolic attributes of place, by adding to or modifying its meaning. Protestors’ underlying rationale is that symbolic signs have arbitrary relationships to specific objects and are constructed through social and cultural systems. As a result, when society changes, the significance of its symbols changes (Edelman 1964). Hence, while physical forms clearly have an impact on human behavior, human actions can also modify the form and meaning of places. Thus, urban form and symbolism are interlinked and evolve through an ongoing process of interpretation and negotiation. As Murray Edelman notes, “The conspicuousness of public structures, together with either emptiness of explicit meaning, enables them to serve as symbolic reaffirmations of many levels of perceptions and beliefs” (Edelman 1995, 90).

The discussion of the role and power of narration of public space is associated with the debate surrounding historical narration, the ways in which it is constructed, and those who construct it. The unsettled conventions of historical narration have led to the contemporary perception of narration as a function of social power, a social expression of contextual settings. Thus, for example, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) proposed that social groups—families, religious cults, political organizations, and other communities—develop strategies to maintain their images of the past and the present through places, monuments, and rituals of commemoration. Benedict Anderson argued that “imagined communities” are constructed as public memories to concretely affirm abstract ideals (Anderson 1991).

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From this perspective, public spaces are important venues for exposing and celebrating social, cultural, and political narrations as reminders of a group's power.

Parallel to and in association with the debate surrounding historical narration, a shift has occurred in the citizen's role in the construction of places. Citizenship has been perceived not only as membership in a polity but also as a reminder of the right and power to participate in the public sphere (Hatuka 2012). With the turn of the 21st century, these features have been developed and enforced, with governments focusing on enhancing civil participation and civil engagement as a tool that reinforces democratic legitimacy and power. This approach has significantly changed the citizen's approach in the production of place—today, the citizen is viewed as an active agent who participates in the development of the built environment (Hatuka 2018).

Most importantly, contemporary conceptualization of historical narration and citizenship, are similar in terms of their perceptions of time. Both are rooted in presentism—a counterpoint to the historicist idea of “progress” (Huyssen 2003, 2). Adopting presentism implies that history is no longer conceived as a continuous grand narrative, ideas which have informed the understanding of historical time in the modern age. With the growing significance and influence of these discourses, public spaces became the concrete sphere of negotiation over narratives. The physicality of places and the ability to experience them in daily life became more significant than historical textbooks. Moreover, citizens had the opportunity to negate or challenge a place's symbols, memories, and images as conceived by professionals. This acknowledgment of the mutable nature of narration defined new (and complex) relationships between place, symbols, and spatial practices in cities worldwide.



Figure 28.1a Public spaces are public when they are not only “mapped” by sovereign powers but also “used” and “instituted” by civic practices, debates, forms of representations, and social conflicts. Washington Mall, Washington, DC

Image credit: Tali Hatuka

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Figure 28.1b The discussion of the role and power of narration of public space is associated with the debate surrounding historical narration, the ways in which it is constructed, and those who construct it. Tiananmen Square, Beijing

Image credit: Tali Hatuka

Challenging narration during protests

Offering narration (either supporting or negating a regime), is fundamental to all protests. All human beings can participate in challenging public spaces' narrations and meanings, highlighting existing boundaries and limits of an existing paradigm, and such participation is one of the basic modes of human progress. Protestors produce the new values "around which institutions of society are transformed to represent new values by creating new norms to organize social life" (Castells 2012, 9).

Different strategies are designed to address the narration or memory of place during protests. Generally, three key approaches are identified: continuity, reconstruction, and negotiation (Hatuka 2018). Each of these strategies results in a different approach to the narration of place.

First, *continuity* works well with protests that accept the legacy of a place and communicate with that place by adding another layer to the story, which works well with its underlying premises. Using this approach will also affect the performance of protest, with a tendency toward agreed-upon or known protest narration. A well-known gathering is the November 4, 1995 rally in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv. On that day, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated during the "Yes to Peace, No to Violence" Rally in support of the Oslo Accords. The event took place in the city's main public square. The rectangular geometry of the space with its

raised terrace, establishes an elevated hierarchy between the crowd and the speaker/performer (Hatuka and Kallus 2008). Similar to many other assembly areas, the architectural characteristics of the space were used to shape the November 4th event, when thousands of youngsters in the square waved banners and called for peace in Hebrew and Arabic while leaders stood on the balcony giving their speeches. After the assembly, the Prime Minister walked down the service stairs and was shot in the back by a young religious Jewish person. Rabin's assassination exposed the deep fissures in Israeli society and triggered ongoing public debate about how to heal them. The square became the locus of memory of the murder and a constant reminder of the tensions that led to it. As a memorial ritual, the name of the square was changed and a monument was placed at the exact site of the assassination (Engler 1999; Hatuka 2009; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2009). These acts reinforced the political formalization of the space and its assemblies, adding further symbolic meaning and thus magnifying the importance of the square's ritual and theatrical dimensions (Hatuka and Kallus 2008).

Second, different from continuity, *reconstruction* is the approach being held in reserve from the existing narration; this approach aims to reconstruct the meaning of space with what has been lost, adding missing components or emphasizing neglected parts. An example of such an event is the innovative performance of the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, whose members marched in circles around the pyramid in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires wearing embroidered bandanas that displayed the names of their "disappeared" children and relatives. The performance of the Madres shows how groups appropriate space by redefining its access, appearance and representation and reclaim the space by using some of its physical attributes and modifying its cultural origin (Taylor 1997, 2006; Arditti 1999; Torre 2000; Bosco 2006; Allmark 2008). This well-known example reveals how an innovative act emerges from both the space's design (the paved circle around the monument) and the legal limitations of protesting against the government. Thus, despite the incentive to abandon the plaza for a safer location, the mothers sustained a symbolic presence in the form of a silent march around the May Pyramid. That form, so loaded with cultural and sexual associations, became the symbolic focus of what started as a literal response to the police's demand that the women "circulate." Thus, the ritual of the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo involved challenging political and social ideas by acting in proximity to key national symbols, acting in proximity to political powers, and creating intimacy in the form of a march in which they carry their message on their bodies (Taylor 1997). Their action dramatically challenged the narrative told by the regime, alternating, and reconstructing the history of the people and this central public space.

Third, *negation* is the most radical approach. This approach implies the total disruption of a place's narration, resulting in the destruction or replacement of existing symbols, renaming, or the creation of new elements. Negation is also about creating new symbols that convey meanings, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that have not been thus attributed in the particular context that is associated with the action. At the same time, this "new" icon must be legible to the public at large. It must simplify meaning but not dilute it. Protestors play a key role in creating and spreading the symbol or new icon; thus, the number of actors that support the symbol is vital to its dissemination and influence on the public at large. However, the power of this type of approach is about not only creating the symbol but also displaying it. Furthermore, the relationships between the symbol and the place are critical to the meaning of the event as a whole. Spaces, especially monumental places, often include many symbols that carry particular contextual meanings; thus, the act of presenting something new is a powerful act of appropriation which can also be perceived as a violent act. Thus, in its radical form, this approach will take place at a key

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Figure 28.2 Reconstruction is an approach aims to reconstruct the meaning of space with what has been lost, adding missing components or emphasizing neglected parts. Plaza De Mayo, Buenos Aires

Image Credit: Tali Hatuka

focal public space in the city, one that includes symbolic icons of the ruling powers and which might dismantle these icons or replace them with new ones. When successful, i.e., when it is adopted by the public, the icon is impossible to repress. If it leaves a mark on a space, it might irrevocably change the place's symbolic meaning, even if it is only displayed in that space temporarily. An example of this approach is the Tiananmen Square protests, which were led by labor activists, students, and intellectuals in the People's Republic of China (PRC) between April 15 and June 4, 1989. The participants were generally critical of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), and they demanded democracy and broader civic freedoms. The demonstrations were focused in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, but large-scale protests also occurred in cities throughout China (Dingxin 2001; Wu 2005). The action that was perceived as violating the political symbolic order was the placement of the Goddess of Democracy, a seven-meter-high stature that was placed in front of Mao's portrait on May 30. Although inspired by statues such as the Statue of Liberty (a young woman holding a torch), the goddess was not a replica; she projected an image of a young Chinese woman. The goddess functioned as the students' monumental symbol, which was placed in the square and added to the five monuments that would stand there permanently. These acts were all part of the place-making process—a means of externalizing and spreading protestors' intentions. After its placement, the Goddess of Democracy served as an icon that represented the movement's needs and desires. The PRC government's subsequent military crackdown on the protestors in Beijing left numerous civilians dead or injured. Protests in other cities throughout China, including Shanghai, remained peaceful. The Goddess of Democracy was destroyed when

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a tank drove into it at full speed during the military crackdown in the square (Dingxin 2001; Wu 2005). However, although the Goddess of Democracy was destroyed, her ghostly image continued to haunt the regime. The icon could not be erased from the minds of the Chinese people.

Many public spaces have been modified after protests. Such modifications frequently involve renaming places, redesigning a particular object to memorialize a protest, or destroying objects or placing new objects that negate the existing paradigm. Therefore, although narrations may be physically manifested in stone and concrete, they are all replaceable; this impermanence reminds us that symbols and narration carry a dimension of betrayal and forgetting.

Public space, narration, and civil action

In sum, public space is a social frame where different powers work to establish and maintain social and political order. This order is based on the relationships established among key actors, including government, religious parties, political parties, capital owners, etc. This order is in constant flux, as it is based on repetitive actions by social groups and citizens to support order and the regime. Public space is not merely a place of political power representation but also an arena of confrontation over worldviews. Protests and collective actions are common methods of challenging narratives told by the regime and the symbols that represent it in public space. Thus, public space should be viewed as a dynamic category that is always under negotiation by the people who use it and define its meaning. In that sense, the physicality of space has no meaning in itself and could be perceived and understood in different ways throughout history. Thus, although the configurations of some public spaces are quite important, it matters more what social and political performances are conducted within them, and thus what symbolic associations are built up


Public space, narration and civil action: key strategies		
Continuing	Reconstructing	Negating
Accepting the legacy of place and communicating with it by adding an additional layer.	Adding to narration, adding what has been "lost", or emphasizing neglected parts.	Replacing existing narration, symbols, re-naming, constructing new elements.
		
Modifications frequently involve renaming places, redesigning a particular object to memorialize a protest, or destroying objects or placing new objects that negate the existing paradigm.		

Figure 28.3 Alternating narratives of public spaces

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over time. In other words, the physical (i.e. scale, size, topography, architecture, and furniture) and symbolic attributes of a public space are only important in terms of the ways in which they are used and interpreted.

Finally, the process of alternating public spaces' meanings could be viewed as *Revisioning Moments*, or socio-temporal processes that change our perceptions of agreed meanings (Hatuka 2010). In their radical form, revisionist moments, whether spontaneous or planned, aim at re-establishing the social order. The collective memory is critical to the construction of the revisioning moment, which formulates new social meaning. In that sense, despite its dynamic and temporary features, the protestors' actions in public spaces are part of a war on the memory of truth, order, worldviews, and power. The process of altering meanings should not be seen as autonomous points in time and space but as a socio-spatial chain of actions. The value of perceiving the processes of alternating meanings as revisioning moments assists in shifting the discussion from an analysis of public spaces as objects to an analysis of the socio-physical processes of the built environment. Furthermore, it is a tool for understanding the personal and collective dimensions of political actions that take place in public spaces, which further allows exploration of the unexpected influences on the fundamental values of a society (Hatuka 2010).

Indeed, over the last decades increased privatization, technological control, and personalization have changed public spaces and have been given various names, such as *The Fall of Public Man*, *Bowling Alone*, and *Alone Together*, metaphors that characterize the decline of civic engagement in the public sphere (Sennett 1976; Putnam 2000; Turkle 2011). Undeniably, the private and the personal have taken precedence over the public; private spaces have replaced public gathering spaces; and society has become generally less interested in public matters and more driven by private interests and personal desires. As Zygmunt Bauman writes, there is currently no easy and obvious way to translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern and pinpoint public issues in private troubles. Nevertheless, the wave of worldwide protests in the 21st century has shown that people are able to challenge Bauman's argument and engage in modifying and challenging public spaces narrations, orders, and meanings.

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