Laissez-Faire Public Spaces: Designing Public Spaces for Calm and Stressful Times

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Under extreme conditions, such as wars, pandemics, and climate events, the role of open space and public rituals alters dramatically. Extreme conditions remind us that daily life is fragile. What should dictate the development of public spaces? What does Covid-19 teach us about public space, its use and future design? Should planners and designers address the unexpected when designing public spaces? These questions are the departure point for discussing the social value and design of public space during both extreme conditions and calm times.

Crises or disasters are unforeseen events. The unexpected – be it a pandemic, a climate or environmental event – often sheds light on the obvious and pushes societies to reflect and assess their norms, practices, and organizations. These times provide moments of insight into a situation or experience, beyond the empirical routine of some activity. Moments, argued Henri Lefebvre, are within everyday life, and are the means and mediations offered to the individual for change (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 176). They facilitate a shift from individual consciousness to questions of social reality and reflection on social structures. The Covid-19 pandemic provided numerous moments of this type. Different from more local events such as wars, hurricanes, earthquakes or tsunamis, Covid-19 is a global event which has raised many universal and epistemological questions. Not surprisingly, the ongoing lockdowns meant that public space became a central issue.

The daily press around the world has acknowledged the importance of public space during Covid-19, with stories covering creative appropriation and use by inhabitants. In the West, where there is a significant infrastructure of public spaces, there was a discussion of issues concerning health and accessibility, and about future planning of the public spaces, with a focus on flexible and adaptive design. In other parts of the world, where public spaces infrastructure is lacking, discussion focused on pop-up design, the need to support the population by providing temporary facilities for children, and about the guidelines required for future development. At both ends of the spectrum – rich, planned cities and poorer, informal cities – it was clear that the digital age, which supports an individualistic, virtual lifestyle (Turkle, 2011), has not diminished the need for nature, outdoor spaces, and meeting people both familiar and unfamiliar. Public spaces remained an essential amenity for supporting public health, just as vaccines do. These insights have been

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further elaborated in reports and articles that called for re-thinking the future of public spaces.

Using this emerging body of reflexive literature, this article seeks to place the discussion of public space during Covid-19 in a wider context. It briefly addresses the multiple layers of the public space discourse in calm times, followed by a discussion of those layers that received greater attention during the Covid-19 pandemic. It argues that the main contribution of this latter discussion is the priority given to public space as a social space over its function as an economic space. Yet, it is hesitant about the discussion regarding future design of public spaces, and argues that they should *not* be planned with a focus on extreme events or the unknown; rather this crisis should be used as an opportunity to re-conceptualize public space as a *laissez-faire* space that supports the agency of people defining their own activities. This approach calls for resistance to the commodification of public space, and to giving an active role to the user.

Exploring the Discourse on Public Space during Calm and Stressful Times

The discourse on public space is dynamic and heated. It is multidimensional and includes complex debates over definitions, categorization, politics, social groups and management (Carmona *et al.*, 2008) (figure 1). Scholars do not always agree on the role of public space and emphasis depends on the analytical perspective adopted and the geographical context. The urban normative perspective tends to emphasize the role of public space as a meeting place, addressing spatial form, accessibility, and amenities (Sennett, 1976). The economic perspective focuses on consumption and commodification (Clarke, 2003; Clarke and Bradford, 1998; Kotler, 2002). The political approach focuses on the civic role of public space in negotiation or resistance, and a social approach tends to discuss social anomalies and difficulties (Hatuka, 2018*a*; Mitchell, 1995). Finally, a pragmatic approach addresses management and technology, including surveil-

Figure 1. Discussion concerning public space.

lance and digitization processes (Graham and Wood, 2003; Mehta, 2014). Among these different approaches, a few trends are clear in contemporary literature:

◆ The Western binary distinction between private and public is less distinct than previously.

◆ Social media and digital communication blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual.

◆ Public space is viewed as a range of spaces rather than a unified, solid category.

These trends have pushed scholars to conceptualize public space *as a process* rather than a thing, with a focus on human engagement and daily life. Although this shift is very evident in theory, in practice many public spaces still suffer from over-design, generic design and intense processes of commodification. Economics have a decisive role in the contemporary design and functionality of public spaces. The generic design

of public spaces reflects this shift from the perception of a place as an arena of cultural and social affairs to its conceptualization as a product whose purpose is to drive the market and generate value (Hatuka, 2018*b*).

The complex discourse on public space during Covid-19 has been reduced and particular dimensions have been emphasized over others. Two key dimensions have been highlighted constantly during the pandemic: the social and the management (figure 2). Regarding the social dimensions, the discussion focused on appropriation (Jasiński, 2020), equitable distribution, socialization, recreation, claims-making, community building, and connectivity. It has been shown that spaces have been used mainly for play, recreation, and exercise. Women and children received particular attention during the pandemic, as public spaces provided them with a place of refuge. Public spaces have also provided forums to protest racial injustice throughout the US and elsewhere (Boston University Initiative on Cities, 2020). Cities like Paris, Barcelona, and London dramatically reallocated and transformed use of pub-
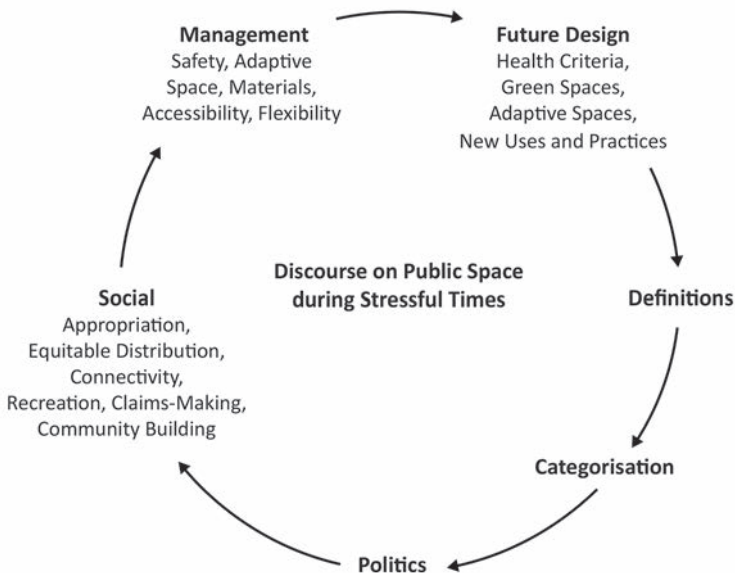

Figure 2. Discussion about public space during Covid-19

lic spaces (*ibid.*, p. 6). During Covid-19, the agency of users, creative uses and appropriation of public space has increased. Commodified public spaces, such as pedestrian malls and commercial streets, were the ones hit hard (Gehl, 2020), with scholars predicting that users of economic spaces who transitioned away from physical stores to online delivery of groceries and cooked meals will remain with e-commerce (Low and Smart, 2020). In that sense, the role of public space as a social space has regained its power. This shift in hierarchy, in which economic use has become secondary to social use, might be momentary. The question of its longevity remains.

Management has also been discussed, with emphasis on safety, accessibility, flexibility, design, and materials (Florida, 2020; Sepe, 2021). Scholars discussed the interface of public space with public health, questioning how to leverage the crisis to build more just, healthier and greener cities (Honey-Rosés *et al.*, 2020). Across the United States and around the world, mayors responded to the pandemic by reclaiming and repurposing the public realm for new uses that let people gather, play, dine, or simply move – at a safer distance – through the city. However, most reports suggested that more remains to be done to create public spaces that are welcoming, accessible and safe for all residents, and that also promote both human and ecological health (Boston University Initiative on Cities, 2020, p. 18).

The emphasis on the social role of spaces and management issues, has led designers and planners to question the future of public space. New frameworks have been presented, calling for the design of public spaces that are multifunctional and adaptable (Roberts, 2020). For example, temporary food markets can be set up in spaces, like parking lots, to reduce congestion in existing markets. Small neighbourhood spaces can be transformed into pop-up community health centres, food distribution centres or gardens for growing food. The streets and spaces can

be organized to allow street vending on particular days or times of day, and/or for leisure activities, like exercise classes, showing films or presenting plays (UN-Habitat, 2020). The key question is to what extent do we need new models for designing public spaces? Should these guidelines refer to all places? To all typologies of public spaces, parks, squares, promenades, gardens in the city? Indeed, some studies have shown that people used public spaces with wide surfaces most successfully (Sepe, 2021).

Four points emerge from this discussion.

1. *The Major Role of Public Space during Times of Stress.* During Covid-19, as during other collective, stressful events, public spaces become a place of refuge, functioning as a social and physical shelter or protection from danger or distress (figures 3 and 4).

2. *Public Space Discourse is reduced during Times of Stress.* During these events, the discourse on public space shrinks and often focuses on social roles and management practices. Questions of politics and categorization are obscured, and public space is approached as a unified term for varied types of open spaces.

3. *The Real and Virtual in Public Space is tightly linked during Times of Stress.* Social media and digital communication blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual, but do not waive the need for and power of physical space, outdoor spaces, action and public gatherings; rather, they feed one another.

4. *Stressful Times are an Opportunity for Re-Assessing the Design of Public Space.* The experience from the Covid-19 pandemic is viewed as an opportunity that might lead to richer partnerships across sectors, including health care, public housing authorities, community development finance, and community-based organizations, as well as philanthropy and research, which could influence policy.

Systemic change does not happen without supportive policy. There is a need to create a shared policy agenda where urban planning, community development, architecture, green building, and public health all have incentives to work towards better places (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Taken together, culture, climate, and geography play a crucial role in influencing public spaces. However, during Covid-19 it became clear that the social role of public spaces has always been their prime one. Space becomes a public space (or 'sphere') when (and if) it is not only 'mapped' by sovereign powers (including supranational organizations), or economic forces (the 'automatic domination of the market'), but also is 'used' and 'instituted' (or 'constituted') by civic practices, debates, forms of representation, and social conflicts (Balibar, 2009, p. 201). Society defines and gives power to public spaces. This statement was validated by the outbreak of protests worldwide, revolving around two main issues: democracy and the economy. The rules of social distance did not stop activists and contributed to elaborate, aesthetic performances during demonstrations. Some protests were tighter, more shaped and better planned, with disciplined use of body and symbols, while others seemed more spontaneous, using a variety of personal signs and voices (figure 5 and 6). In addition to the social role of public space, it is also becoming clear that the twenty-first century citizen is a conscious, knowledgeable, and educated citizen. The contemporary citizen demands and needs public spaces, consistent with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous phrase, 'less is more'. Designers and planners should recognize this shift and offer the public *laissez-faire* spaces.

Figure 3. Public event during Covid-19. Socially distanced chairs in a field. (*Photo*: Forest Simon on Unsplash)

Figure 4. Public park and social distance. Dolores Park West Pathway, San Francisco, CA, USA. (*Photo*: Sand Crain on Unsplash)

Less is More: A Guideline for Designing *Laissez-Faire* Public Space for Calm and Stressful Times

Temporality is a human condition. It should also influence the design of public spaces. A good public space should be designed as a *laissez-faire* space, based on the principle that government should not interfere with the action of individuals; rather, it should allow them choice. Design, in its essence, limits choices by defining walls, places to sit, the location of playgrounds etc. In fact, recent decades have seen overdesign of public spaces, which are also regulated and monitored by surveillance means. Public spaces look like images on Instagram, beau-

tiful but also mass-produced, meaningless, and part of economic production. The only way to fight this trend is by designing *laissez-faire* spaces that are complex, developing, changing, and have depths that surprises users. These spaces contrast with flat space, which is often designed to support the economy of space, and are characterized by a dominant image, prominent use, or a cluster of uses that integrate into two dimensions.

A *laissez-faire* space is a place that aims to imitate nature. It does not dictate perceptions; it allows them to evolve. *Laissez-faire* space is open space, but also sometimes closed, sometimes exposed, and sometimes tangled. It is an inconsistent, conflicted

Figure 5. Protests for democracy. Black Flags Movement. Place: Jerusalem. (*Photo*: Roy Noyman, Israel 2020)
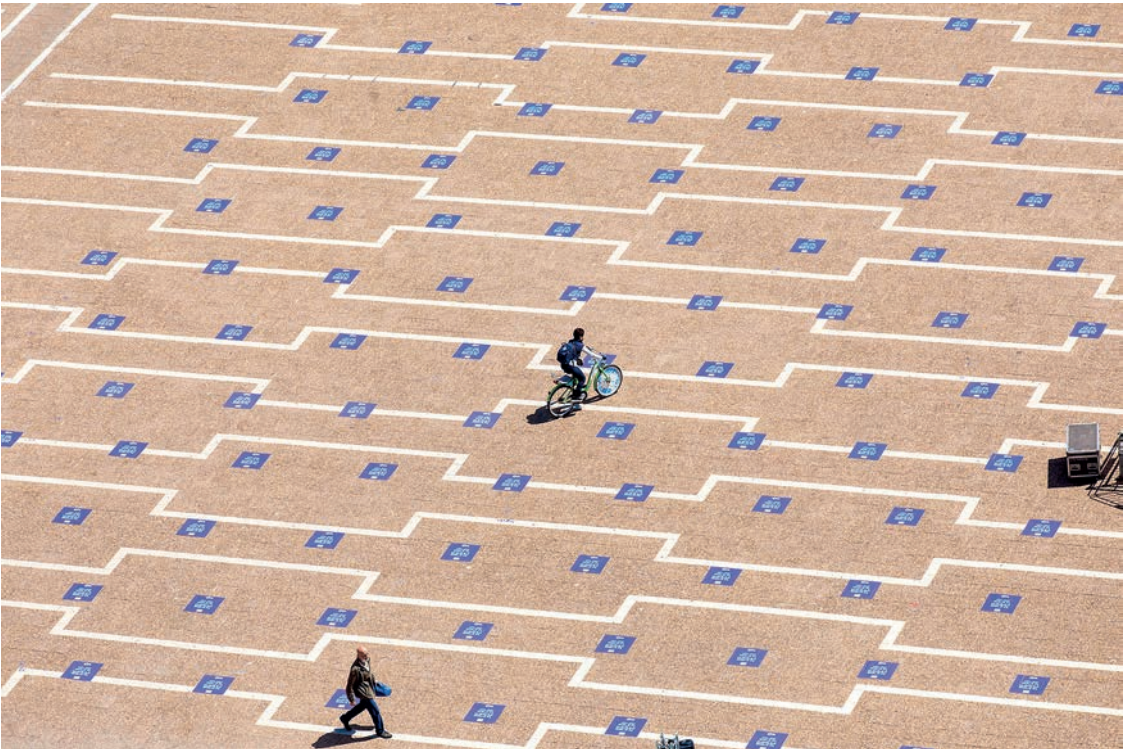

Figure 6. Tel Aviv gives demonstrators Rabin Square – with distancing stickers. Place: Rabin Square, Tel Aviv. (*Photo*: Din Ahahroni Rolland, Israel 2020)

space. It is dynamic, not fixed by artificial means designed by an architect (e.g. lighting or mechanical elements) but can be adjusted by the users who influence it. It is a space that allows a range of personal and group experiences that are not defined by the 'omniscient' landscape architect, politician, or the market, but rather by the user. It has varied scales, ranging from a small garden to a spacious park.

Thus, a *laissez-faire* space is based on three basic principles (Hatuka, 2018*b*):

(*a*) *Programme: Placing the Experience of the User in the Centre.* This implies designing public parks and spaces as landscape arenas for personal interpretation. *Laissez-faire* space is about reducing planning and design efforts; it is about enhancing visual silence, and cultivating experiences of discovery, curiosity, personal ceremony, boredom, which might boost a different look at the familiar. In a *laissez-faire* space, nature is a major actor and, like nature, a laissez-faire space is a place where people can get lost, break away. The implementation of this approach requires the renunciation of an activity-oriented programme, the quantification of areas and uses, and the adoption of a qualitative programme based on creating a range of landscape experiences, which are multiage and multi-purpose. All activities in the round space – for example: stay, convergence, intimacy, disengagement, ritual – are defined by the users themselves, both at the individual and group level.

(*b*) *Design: Landscape as a Multi-Dimensional Space.* This principle is based on the use of various characterization methods, and combinations of materials and vegetation, in order to activate the senses. Going into a natural environment, the eyes are often excited by the site of trees, the nose by varied smells and the person by the informal, unregulated array. This approach to public space, which was dominant in the early twentieth century, should be re-introduced

in cities. People of the twenty-first century aspire to get escape from urban locations. This escape could be achieved by enhancing experiences of discovery and concealment that use a three-dimensional approach to the landscape design, activating the senses of hearing, touch, and smell. This principle also seeks to restore climate comfort to the space by using natural materials, and designing parks to be three-dimensional so that the landscape will also be able to provide spatial complexity and not be seen all in one glance.

(*c*) *Management*: *Landscape as a Space of Wellbeing*. This principle is based on the development of an urban landscape that focuses on the welfare of the residents, rather than the economy of cities. This means planning public spaces based on long-term thinking; it also implies that the professionals have an active role in challenging contemporary conditions; they must be able to think and fight for design that serves the needs of the city's residents. This does not mean pleasing the public but rather prioritizing their needs and the idea that public spaces are a place of refuge. Bringing back nature to the city, minimalistic design, and distancing public spaces from the consumer culture are fundamental principles in achieving this goal.

Covid-19, like other disasters, has taught us that designers, regulators, and politicians must place the user and nature at the centre. Architects, politicians, or entrepreneurs are secondary players in the formation of these spaces in the city; they have received their mandate from the people. Public spaces have never been so essential as in our times, and should offer a refuge from the rushed, flooding experiences of the digital age, from the ceaseless noise generated by modern life. This approach, which supports creativity, imagination and choice, is an alternative to planning parks and squares 'on steroids', and will advance the natural and cultural ecosystem of our cities as a

whole, as a system that is neither fixed nor defined in space and time.

As a starting point, cities should map their public spaces infrastructure, and re-assess their condition, with the aim of creating *laissez-faire* spaces. These spaces should be located in prime sections of the city that are relatively accessible to residents. In calm times, they will provide a space to escape from the intensity of daily life; in times of crises and stress, they will provide a place of refuge. As George Simmel wrote, in his seminal essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1950) 'Money, with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability'. Covid-19, with all its horrible consequences, reminded us that public spaces can function as spaces of hope. The goal is to use this opportunity to maintain and fight for the hierarchy created during the pandemic, in which the economic role of the public space is secondary to its social role.

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