OPEN/CLOSED

Public Spaces in Modern Cities

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2010
“There is no reason why paintings, cartoons, public displays such as graffiti or advertising billboards or any other visual image could not be used for visual representation of the ideas produced in social sciences; however until now photography is dominating in this field”.

Harper D. “Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation”
The exhibition OPEN/CLOSED, on display at the Department of European Ethnology of the Humboldt University in Berlin, from April to July 2010, has taken an inquisitive look at urban public spaces in European cities. Neither the exhibition nor this catalogue is claiming to have found the answers to our list of questions. Rather, it is an endeavour to try and understand what is happening with the city spaces today.

- What is public space?
- What makes space "public"?
- What does it look like or what is a new aesthetics of urban public space?
- What role does public space play in the life of cities today?
- How is public space changing and why?
- Who organises and who rules public spaces?
- Are we witnessing a decline of urban public space?
- Are urban public spaces OPEN or CLOSED?
About the project

This catalogue presents the perspective of seven researchers on the public lives in four European cities: Lviv, Manchester, St. Petersburg and Sofia. For two years (2006-2008) a group of sociologists, cultural studies specialists, anthropologists and social geographers were observing the everyday lives of these cities; the meeting of the spheres of work, consumption and leisure; the intersection of issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender; the changes in design and architecture of public places; and the citizens’ attitudes to current developments and emerging problems.

From the very start the project participants decided not to limit their investigations into public spaces to fieldwork and interviews but to include the visual representations of public life in their cities. We decided to use photographic observation as a method and, moreover, to visualize our results. Thus, we have added a photographic, visual dimension to the discussion of our ideas stemming from the socio-anthropological analysis of our research. This combination is one way to convey important further facets of our research, which could not be communicated (as clearly) through academic texts alone and to reach a wider, also non-academic, audience. Texts provoke thoughts, while images provoke feelings. Both together stimulate a more comprehensive reflection on the part of the viewers/readers.

For our presentation we have chosen the life of city squares, as traditional urban public spaces in Europe, from the various different research strands of our project.

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1 The material in this catalogue as well as in the exhibition is based on the work of the international research project “Re-imaging of public space in European cities and its role in social and ethno-cultural integration”, realized by the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR, Russia) in cooperation with South-West University “N. Rilsky” (Bulgaria); Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine); Manchester Metropolitan University (UK). Supported by INTAS and leaded by Prof. Svetlana Hristova.
What is public space?

The dominant understanding of public space is rooted in the ideals of Ancient Greece and is most often associated with citizens meeting in order to discuss public issues; to produce open and free public debate, and to formulate public concern. We find such a definition of public space in the works of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, the two most influential social philosophers who formulated the idea of public realm.

There is, however, also another approach of associating the public with “sociability” – with the potential of encounter and communication between strangers. This approach is more culturally concerned than politically and is most often related to the names of Richard Sennett or Ervin Goffman. It implies that people come to public spaces and stay there to encounter one another, to use this space for gathering and as a stage to perform particular social interactions.

The main features of public space are considered to be:

- **public (not private) stewardship**
- **open access, and the fact**
- **the space is “used by many people for common purpose”** (Sharon Zukin).

The question is, though, whether such an ideal public space, open to everyone, does exist in reality. Does it not always imply the domination by some groups? It seems that nobody believes in the coherent and harmonious public space of rational debate and consensus anymore. Rather, it is considered diverse, a conflict-prone and contested battlefield of and for power.
City square as a public space – OPEN/CLOSED

Since ancient times, a city square – be it agora, town hall square or market square – has been a public space: A centre of public, political and social life in European towns, a place of sociability where citizens could gather, for discussions, for spending their leisure time, etc.

More recently, however, we can observe that many city squares have been reconstructed, remodelled, aestheticised, privatised and commercialised. Their space has been divided and organised to support consumption rather than other forms of public life. These processes have changed not only the appearance of the squares, but also life on them.

To what extent can we perceive these regenerated and regulated spaces as “public”? And, in as far as the public is not coherent – for which groups of society is this space in fact “public”?
On the one hand, the squares have been developed; rubbish has been taken away, buildings restored, benches installed. On the other hand, all this was done by the means of private business; the “price” paid by these public spaces for private investment is that the squares have been commercialised and privatised, becoming a source of profit for the owners of new shopping centres. Their spaces have been organised to support consumption and the interests of politicians and businessmen rather than forms of public life and personal communication.

On the one hand, all squares are open – physically they are easily accessible; they are at the crossroads of streets and “hubs” of the flows of transport, people, goods, lights and sounds of the cities. On the other hand, they have filters and invisible, yet nearly impenetrable boundaries. They are not accessible to everyone; cameras, police and private security are watching and selecting those who “deserve” to be allowed into these spaces, and will “kick out” those who do not deserve.
Social life on four city squares

What was revealed in the cases we investigated? Many of the photographs presented here demonstrate that squares have preserved their social function as public space. There is a resistance towards total commercialisation. For instance, some public spaces are taken over by youth subcultures. Undesirable guests and troublemakers, these teenagers invade public spaces and their backyards. They use the city squares according to their own ideas of communication and leisure. They drink alcohol on the benches, sit on the stairs and banisters, use monuments and fountains not for spectatorship but for play and interactive communication.

Still, squares leave some space for idle walking unconnected with consumption. Frequently, they also become places for social protest against politics and the political economy of consumerist society. Thus, our research has shown that city squares stay contested spaces and their public functions are often hampered and limited.

What is it that we are witnessing on the city squares today? Is it the “fall of public man” as Richard Sennett called it, or, rather, various forms of what Michel de Certeau called “(re)appropriation” of public spaces by city dwellers using them for their own purposes?
In St. Petersburg homeless people and poor pensioners are hiding in the backyards of the buildings surrounding Sennaya Square which they used to live in. The square itself has turned into a transit zone occupied by shopping malls and car parks. This has made the square cleaner and safer; but has it made it more public?
“Look at Sennaya area. This is, actually, a consumer paradise. People walk there from one shop to another. Shops became museums! So there is only one possibility left to people – to consume!”

Female, ab. 40 y.o., Russian Museum employee, curator, critic (St.-Petersburg)

“It [Sennaya sq.] was always a ‘belly’ of Petersburg. And in perestroika times it became not just a belly... but also a center of communication. ... There gathered always some strange people, homeless... Right there were outstanding artists from [cultural] underground: poets, alternative musicians, there one could find real, not fake art! And then reforms came... Sennaya square became clean... But the appearance [of the new square design] is miserable! While before there was some action, something unuttered, something that makes the spirit of the city... The spirit’s gone. The place became strange... what is called ‘waste land ’ in English. This is to say the spirit’s gone.”

Female, about 50 y.o., university professor (St.-Petersburg)
"I had a mate get fined for skateboarding, there wasn't anyone around, it was well empty, and it's not like he was doing any harm was he? It's totally unfair..."

Dave, 17 y.o., male (Cathedral Gardens, Manchester)

"Well, traditionally in Manchester, ...skateboarders and cyclists have been a nuisance basically...they've tended to operate in an unsociable manner and sort of invaded certain areas and excluded other people from them...so we don't want them jumping all over bits of [street] furniture which cost us lots of money...So we don't want them in Piccadilly Gardens."

Manchester City Centre Development Officer
On Cathedral Gardens in Manchester security guards are protecting buildings from the teenagers who are occupying the square. And the teenagers themselves are limiting – although mostly symbolically – access to the square by other social groups. Does this mean the square is open and/or public?
Battenberg Square in Sofia is sometimes open for the manifestations of public opinion and civic activism. But isn’t civil society often reduced to the commercialised festivities of consumption and politicised demonstrations? Do any of these activities make the square a “public space”? 
Market Square in Lviv accommodates official unveilings and public protests as well as families with children, subcultural youth and performing street musicians. However, none of these, or any other, public activities could take place on this central square without official or unofficial sanctioning by the city authorities. Does this very fact allow considering Lviv’s Market Square an open public space?
Transforming images of the squares

City squares today represent one of the best examples of the processes of “visual aestheticization” of urban space. The modernist ideas of beauty, order and “purity” have changed the appearance of European cities. As strict shapes, beautiful buildings and clean spaces have become the standards of urban spatial design, squares as the quintessential public spaces have experienced significant transformations and become subject of the “passive spectatorship” (Richard Sennett) of looking, rather than living.

Another trend of late modernity – the domination of market relations and total commercialisation of social life – also has consequences on the aesthetics and visualisation of cities and their squares. It resulted, for instance, in the mushrooming of advertisements in myriads of possible forms and shapes. The image of the square has been commercialised by a profusion of small shops and department stores, by shop windows and neon lights, by giant billboards and “sandwich men”.

Furthermore, the visual aesthetics and actual appearance of the squares and other public spaces in contemporary cities have also been politicised by slogans and symbols representing political power, by events like demonstrations or protests, by people, such as the police, as well as by buildings like those of the city or state authorities.
In fact, the space of the city squares is permeated by a variety of contradictory and competing forms of image-making or “visualisation”.

In spite of the fact that the squares are flooded by video surveillance cameras and other means of visible and invisible control, their spaces are (re-)appropriated by “visual tactics” of the city dwellers – by their mobile and temporary activities like vending or open air gatherings, by private advertisements, asphalt drawings and graffiti, or by defiant appearance.

Artists offer their own repertoire of visual aestheticisation of urban public spaces. They bring trash aesthetics or “chaos” of public actions and carnivals to the squares; they use a bricolage tactic of re-coding and re-interpreting the signs and texts already existing in public places; they re-appropriate the means of advertisement (like projections and neon lights, billboards and posters), turning them into art tools and applying them to the symbolic re-conquering of urban space.
We will live like – in Europe (corrected to: in shithole)
КАК
В ЕВРОПЕ!
Re-thinking public space?

The current anxiety of philosophers and social scientists about vanishing public spaces in cities is rooted in the very fact of the blurring and disappearance of two key characteristics of urban public space – the notion of gathering and the notion of public-ness. Should we not – instead of mourning the “good old public space” – take the changing realities of late or post-modernity into consideration and adopt a new approach to “public-ness” in order to understand public spaces in European cities today?
We cannot deny the fact that city spaces are gradually transforming into “places of transition”. Today “space of place” is more often replaced by the “space of flows” (Manuel Castells). Places are lacking their roots and authenticity; they become “other-directed” places full of people from elsewhere, going elsewhere. Gatherings in contemporary cities are of temporary character and replaced by events. Squares become sites of temporary stay – people come here not to be together or interact, but to wait for the friend(s) who they will go to the shopping mall or to the multiplex with.

Does this mean the end of the gathering-oriented public space like the ancient square? Or should we think of urban public space in new terms – movement, flows, mobility? Why should public space always be considered as permanent, in the context of staying and stability? Could it instead become temporary, flexible, movable – and still remain public?
Public-private and the individual

Since its inception, the term “public” has been opposed to the notion of “private”. Privatisation of public space has, for a long time, been considered the main threat to public space. Nowadays, however, public space is threatened not only by privatisation, but also by *individualism* (Zygmunt Bauman).

The danger is not just that somebody is interested in appropriating public space for private interests like private business; another trend is the lack of interest in public concerns among individuals (Norbert Elias). “The individual is the worst enemy of the citizen”, - said Alexis de Tocqueville. Public issues are not much in demand.

As long as public space is constituted by activities physically filling it and by actors performing them, the vanishing of the public itself means the vanishing of public space. This is why public space is more and more often characterised by the “void”, by categories of negation, such as the “non-places” by Marc Augé or the “placeless” by Edward Relph.
Public space in transition

The question for us is – how to correlate these new concepts of space and place with the original notion of *public* space? How much of public-ness and which part of it remains in public space in the age of mobility and individualisation? Could public life in any of its traditional understanding be performed by individuals in the urban spaces characterised by the “fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (Marc Augé)?

Probably, we should admit that public space in the city is not a goal in itself, but a *means* – of performing public life. So, public space only makes sense as a condition to be used by the “public”.

Perhaps the gatherings of numerous citizens for discussing public concerns in city squares particularly designed for this purpose are outdated? Are traditionally understood public places not too self-concerned, too static, too introvert? Should we follow Doreen Massey in perceiving the places as “events” and “processes”?

Should we indeed think about public space in the categories OPEN/CLOSED or would it not make more sense to analyse it from the perspective of STATIC/DYNAMIC, STABLE/FLEXIBLE or PERMANENT/TEMPORARY?

The ultimate question is, therefore, whether we should change our way of thinking about urban public spaces...
What for?

We have tried to let you feel the complex, and sometimes contradictory, ambiguous nature of the “public-ness” of urban squares in different city contexts. We decided not to put the names of the cities under the photographs. The idea was not to concentrate on a particular city and not to compare them with regard to the extent of their openness-closeness. We wanted to confront the viewers with the life of the squares, to provoke reflection about public spaces as such, to illustrate different aspects of the lives of the city squares in contemporary Europe. Our aim is to let you decide for yourself whether the spaces represented in the pictures are OPEN or CLOSED, or both, or neither, and to allow you to raise totally different questions, as we finally did ourselves.
Space for your thoughts:


**Literature**


Fotoausstellung OPEN/CLOSED
Stadtplätze und urbanes Leben in Manchester, St. Petersburg, Sofia und Lviv.

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