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Review: The Design of Protest: Choreographing Political Demonstrations in Public Space by Tali Hatuka

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Hatuka, Tali. 2018. *The Design of Protest: Choreographing Political Demonstrations in Public Space*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 352 pp. \$55.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4773-1576-7.

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Consider Occupy Wall Street. In less than three weeks in the fall of 2011, protesters erected a kind of city in microcosm on a small parcel of land in lower Manhattan. They put up tents to house hundreds of people, and established a library, a kitchen, sanitary facilities, a portable generator, and a dedicated space for a democratic assembly. From the standpoint of conventional planning, we would have to regard this miniature city as a failure: the temporary housing was substandard, crowded, and ill-suited to New York in autumn; provisions for sanitation were woefully inadequate; the land was overcrowded; the people who gathered there disrupted traffic in the area; and so on. From another standpoint, it was arguably a great success. Protesters deliberately chose to set up a tent city whose poverty would make a vivid contrast with the monumental architecture of the New York Stock Exchange a few blocks away. They intended their installation to be temporary. They *wanted* to disrupt traffic. By doing so, they focused the attention of the world on rising inequality. They inspired dozens of other encampments around the world. They may even have won some policy concessions from the federal government. One of the protesters' first demands was to tax the rich, and one of their most famous slogans was "we are the 99 percent"; within weeks, the Obama administration had proposed to raise taxes within a new top income tax bracket that closely approximated the richest one percent of personal income tax filers.

The architectural theorist Tali Hatuka wants us to consider temporary installations like Occupy Wall Street—and even more temporary performances, such as the Women’s March of January 21, 2017—as exercises in urban design. *The Design of Protest: Choreographing Political Demonstrations in Public Space* is an impressive and serious-minded effort to build an analytical framework that would allow us to evaluate protest actions as design interventions on their own terms.

Hatuka defines protest as “a planned event in space that is envisioned in the minds of its organizers, who aim to challenge sociospatial distance” (p. 13). By sociospatial distance, she means both unequal political power and unequal social esteem: protest challenges authority and also asserts a kind of equal dignity among the protesters. This is socio-*spatial* distance because power and inequality are both enforced in daily life through spatial separation (p. 15). Massive architectural monuments set the seat of political authority apart from everyday life; freeways divide neighborhoods and isolate residents of different commuter suburbs from each other; and so forth (p. 27-33). The protesters of interest to Hatuka are those who deliberately challenge authority and inequality by using space differently from how it is used in everyday routine (p.7). As the reference to choreography in the book’s subtitle would suggest, Hatuka characterizes protest mainly as a kind of dramatic performance, and her focus is chiefly on visual aspects of the environment and the performance itself that affect what is communicated, to whom, and with what results.

The Design of Protest makes many interesting arguments, but the thesis that is most easily summarized is negative: “There is no winning spatial choreography in the making of change” (p. 120). By this, Hatuka means that there is no *singular* winning choreography in protest, any more than there is a single best choreography in dance. The free play of creativity is

part of what makes protest effective, when it is effective, because it is creative that design allows protesters to surprise authorities and attract attention. The same unpredictability is also what can cause skittish authorities sometimes to respond to protests with violence (pp. 95-6). Hatuka assumes that it is not possible to predict the course or the outcomes of protest with great certainty, but that it is possible and desirable to exercise critical judgment in evaluating the performance of protest. She aims to provide the analytical tools for such criticism.

The book is rich with case studies that illustrate the multiplicity of the forms and tactics of protesters. One especially strong chapter compares the performances of three Israeli activist groups that oppose the Israeli occupation of the West Bank: Women in Black, MACHSOM (Checkpoint) Watch, and Anarchists Against the Wall. All three groups express similar values, share a common aim, embrace a similarly decentralized form of organization, and engage in frequent protest actions, in multiple sites, with the aim of drawing global attention to state violence that they believe to be illegitimate (p. 59). Their tactics and strategies differ with respect to their use of space. The Women in Black hold mourning vigils by major motorways inside the 1967 borders of Israel. The activists of MACHSOM Watch monitor army checkpoints in the occupied West Bank in order to deter human rights abuses and publicize acts of repression that would otherwise go unreported by the news media. The Anarchists Against the Wall join Palestinian protesters in West Bank villages where land is being expropriated for the construction of a separation wall, in hopes that their visible presence as Israeli citizens will lend some protection to Palestinian protesters by causing Israeli soldiers to exercise restraint in their use of violence against the crowd. Each group's performance responds to a different set of spatial conditions. The Women in Black attract attention in part because their solemnity and stillness creates a visual contrast to the bustle of a busy intersection (p. 62); the strategy of MACHSOM

Watch requires the activists to drive to where the checkpoints are, which means that their circuits of protest “are dictated by the central government” (p. 64); and the anarchists’ approach requires deference to the spatial and temporal order of the Palestinian village, where protesters gather by the mosque after Friday prayers and walk down village streets to protest at the wall (p. 65). By drawing attention to this variety of protest practices, Hatuka effectively illustrates how the affordances of the built environment—the square, the wall, the checkpoint, the intersection—may constrain the performance of protest, while still leaving many different possibilities open to protesters.

Most of the book is then given over to the development of a vocabulary for describing the variety of protest performances. Hatuka approaches this project as a taxonomic exercise. She begins with a basic distinction between three types of protest called spectacle, procession, and place-making, each of which has further sub-types and variations. *Spectacle* involves defined roles (such as “the speaker”), spatial distance between performers and audience, and “a set of agreed-upon symbols” in a well-defined space (p. 112). Spectacles may be further subdivided into spectacles of theater, ritual, and “bareness,” each dependent upon its own characteristic spatial affordances. The theatrical form of protest, for example, often exploits such features as central squares and architectural monuments to set the stage for a rousing speech. In contrast to spectacles, *processions* are informal, participatory, and ambulatory; they exploit the existing network of streets; and their subtypes include varieties that Hatuka calls the target, conjoining, synchronicity, and elasticity (p. 116). Finally, *place-making* aims to change the meaning of a place over a longer span of time, and its varieties include re-iconization, city design, and narrative (p. 117). This list is best appreciated as a heuristic rather than an exhaustive analytical typology. Each of these subtypes is explained at length and illustrated with a vivid, chapter-

length case study, but some are defined more clearly than others, and the distinctions among them do not always seem very hard and fast. I am not entirely sure, for example, why Occupy Wall Street is classified here as “narrative” rather than “city design,” or why the mourning of the Women in Black is classified as “bareness” rather than “ritual,” and I am still struggling to figure out how I can recognize the choreography called “elasticity” when I see it. I nevertheless found stimulating insights in these case studies and I expect to re-read them.

The Design of Protest is not likely to be the last word on its subject, but it is very nearly the first word, and a book like this is, indeed, long overdue. The scholarship of urban social movements has had very little to say about planning and urban design: urban sociologists have told us in very general terms where social movements come from, but surprisingly little about *what protesters actually do* in and with urban space *at the site of protest*. Yet the affordances of built environment, and the choreography of protest in urban space, are often major themes in the tactical discussions of protesters—and also, I suspect, in the tactical deliberations of those who are tasked with policing protest. *The Design of Protest* will give them some new and useful terms to think with. I think this book will find a place on the bookshelves of many activists, and of planners who recognize protest as an important and legitimate part of the urban scene.