OPEN/CLOSED
Public Spaces in Modern Cities

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Introduction

This photo essay[1] 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 observed the everyday lives of these cities: the meeting of the spheres of work, consumption, and leisure; the intersections 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.[2]

From the start the project participants decided not to limit their investigations of 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, non academic audience. Texts provoke thoughts, while images provoke feelings. Both together stimulate a more comprehensive reflection on the part of the viewers and readers.

This essay is focused on the life of *city squares* as traditional urban public spaces in Europe. We hope you will feel the complex, and sometimes contradictory, ambiguous nature of the "public-ness" of urban squares in different city contexts. We wanted to confront viewers with images of these city squares to provoke reflection about public spaces as such, and to illustrate different aspects of 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 did ourselves in the end.

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 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 to formulate the idea of public realm (Arendt 1958, Habermas 1962).

There is, however, another approach to public spaces, which associates them with "sociability"—with the potential of encounter and communication between strangers. This approach is more culturally than politically concerned, and is most often related to the work of Richard Sennett and Ervin Goffman (Goffman 1963, Sennett 1974, 2010). It implies that people come to public spaces and stay there to encounter one another, to use the space for gathering and as a stage to perform particular social interactions.

Traditionally, the main features of public space are:
- public (not private) stewardship
- open access
- "used by many people for common purpose" (Zukin 1995).

The question is, though, whether such an ideal public space, open to everyone, exists in reality. Isn't there always the potential for domination by some groups? It seems that nobody believes in the coherent and harmonious public space of rational debate and consensus anymore. Rather, public space today is considered to be a conflict-prone and contested battlefield of and for power.

City squares are palimpsests containing and exhibiting numerous historical, social, and cultural layers representing the lives, interests, desires, ambitions, and struggles of city inhabitants.

Open/Closed

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

More recently, however, many city squares have been reconstructed, remodeled, aestheticized, privatized, and commercialized. The public space has been divided and organized 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 for private investment is that the squares have been commercialized and privatized, becoming a source of profit for the owners of new shopping centers. Their spaces have been organized to support consumption and the interests of politicians and businesses rather than forms of public life and personal communication.

The squares are still open. Physically they are easily accessible; they are at the crossroads of streets and at "hubs" of the flows of transport, people, goods, lights, and sounds of the cities. However, these new commercialized spaces are filtered, and they have 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 remove those deemed undeserving.

Since its inception, the term "public" has been opposed to the notion of "private." Privatization 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 privatization, but also by *individualism* (Bauman 2001). 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; as Alexis de Tocqueville said, "The individual is the worst enemy of the citizen." (Elias 1939). Public issues are not much in demand.

The vanishing of the *public* itself means the vanishing of public space. This is why public space is more and more often characterized by the "void," by categories of negation, such as the "non-places" described by Marc Augé or the "placeless" by Edward Relph (Augé 1995, Relph 1976).

Static/Dynamic

Many of the photographs presented here demonstrate that European city squares have preserved their social function as public space. There is a resistance towards total commercialization. For instance, some public spaces remain sites of cultural expression and identity, while others are taken over by youth or other subcultures. Squares still leave some space for idle walking unconnected with consumption. Frequently, they also become places for social protest against the political economy of consumerist society. Our research has shown that city squares are 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? (de Certeau 1984, Sennett 1974)

On Cathedral Gardens in Manchester, England, security guards protect buildings from the teenagers who occupy the square. Undesirable guests and troublemakers, teens invade city squares and use them according to their own ideas of communication and leisure. They drink alcohol on the benches, sit on the stairs and banisters, and use monuments and fountains not for spectatorship, but for play and interactive communication. The teenagers themselves limit access to the square by other social groups, though mostly symbolically. Does this mean the square is open and/or public?
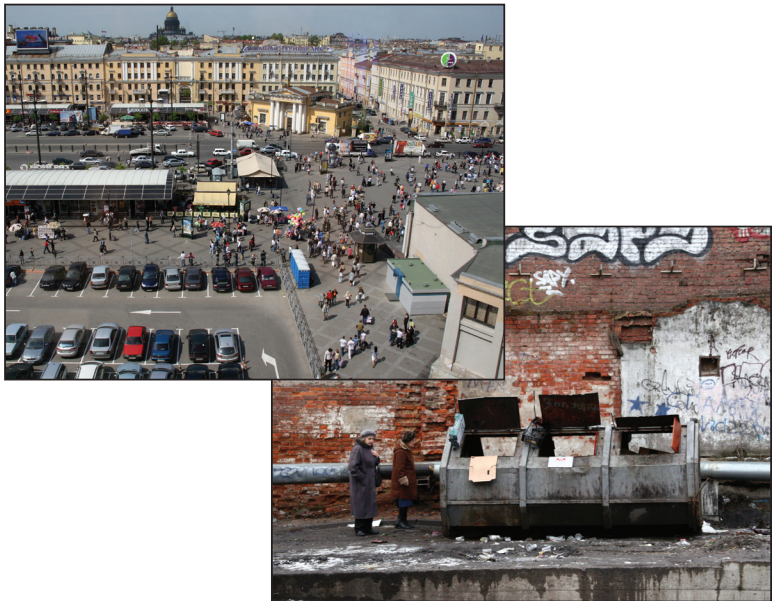
In St. Petersburg, Russia, homeless people and poor pensioners hide in the rear courtyards of the buildings surrounding Sennaya Square, where they used to live. The square itself has become a transit zone occupied by shopping malls and car parks. This has made the square cleaner and safer; but has it made it more public?

This square near the National Theater in Sofia, Bulgaria is sometimes open for the manifestations of public opinion and civic activism. But isn't civil society often reduced to the commercialized festivities of consumption and politicized demonstrations? Do any of these activities make the square a "public space"?

Market Square in Lviv, Ukraine 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 Lviv's Market Square to be considered an open public space?

Stable/Flexible

The space of the city square is permeated by a variety of contradictory and competing forms of image-making or "visualization." 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 to the "passive spectatorship" of looking, rather than living (Sennet 2010).

Another trend of late modernity—the domination of market relations and total commercialization of social life—also has consequences for the aesthetics and visualization of cities and their squares. It has resulted, for instance, in the mushrooming of advertisements in myriads of forms and shapes.

Furthermore, the visual aesthetics and actual appearance of the squares and other public spaces in contemporary cities have also been politicized by slogans and symbols representing political power, by events like demonstrations and protests, by people, such as the police, as well as by buildings like those of the city or state authorities.

The image of the square has been commercialized by a profusion of small shops and department stores, by shop windows and neon lights, by giant billboards and "sandwich men."

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" used by 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 the visual aestheticization of urban public spaces. They bring trash aesthetics or the "chaos" of public actions and carnivals to the squares; they use a bricolage tactic of re-coding and re-interpreting signs and texts already present 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.

Permanent/Temporary

Changing public spaces in cities are rooted in the blurring and disappearance of two key characteristics of urban public space—the notion of *gathering* and the notion of *publicness*. 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" (Castells 1989). Places are lacking their roots and authenticity; they become "other-directed" places full of people from elsewhere, going elsewhere. Gatherings in contemporary cities are temporary in character and replaced by events. Squares become sites of temporary-ness—people come here not to be together or interact, but to wait for the friend(s) with whom they will then go to the shopping mall or the multiplex.

Yet why should public space always be considered permanent, in the context of staying and stability? Could it instead become temporary, flexible, movable—and still remain public?

In contemporary public spaces, people from all walks of life mix and mingle, creating interactions that are enabled by the presence of public transit. Should we begin to think of urban public space in new terms—in terms of movement, flows, mobility?

Public life in contemporary city squares is likely to take place in the form of events that are ephemeral in nature. Should we think of the city square today as a performance space hosting processes of public life?

Conclusion

The question for us is thus: how can we correlate these new concepts of space and place with the original notion of public space? We should acknowledge 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." But what is the public, and which part of it is enacted in public space in this age of mobility and individualization? The notion of gatherings of numerous citizens for discussing public concerns in city squares that were particularly designed for this purpose appears to be outdated.

The ultimate question is, therefore, whether we should change our way of thinking about urban public spaces. How do individuals perform public life in urban spaces characterized by the "fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (Augé 1995)? Should we perceive urban public space as "events" and "processes," rather than as places (Massey 1984)? It may not be necessary to rethink public space in terms only of OPEN/CLOSED—the dichotomies STATIC/DYNAMIC, STABLE/FLEXIBLE, or PERMANENT/TEMPORARY may make more sense.

Perhaps, instead of mourning the "good old public space," we should take the changing realities of late or post-modernity into consideration and adopt a new approach to "publicness" to understand public spaces in European cities today.

Endnotes

1. This photo essay was adapted from the Catalog of the exhibition "OPEN/CLOSED", on display at the Department of European Ethnology of the Humboldt University in Berlin, from April to October, 2010.

2. The international research project "Re-imaging of public space in European cities and its role in social and ethno-cultural integration", was a cooperative effort lead by Prof. Svetlana Hristova of South-West University "N. Rilsky" (Bulgaria), together with the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR, Russia),; Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine); and Manchester Metropolitan University (UK).

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