Death of Public
Trade-offs in Defining Public Space

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Abstract

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We are experiencing an assault on our understanding of public space. To me, public space is publicly owned, controlled by our public agencies and accessible to all of the public most of the time. Throughout the world our definition of public space is being challenged and changed. What is that change and do we fight it or seek a new understanding of what the world now thinks is public?

In this paper I will explore our changing definition by looking at three challenges to our understanding of public space.

1. J.B. Jackson defined the “front yard” as a national space or national institution, at least in the United States. The front yard has always been where we represent ourselves to the public. Change is being forced on that front yard by our increasingly important focus on sustainability such as xeriscaping which tends to reflect highly personal and divergent design ideas not an adherence to a public norm.

2. Zoning requirements that mandate the development of public space but instead allow and encourage faux public spaces such as those that now dominate San Francisco’s SOMA neighborhood with the creation of privately owned public space controlled and maintained by the developer. Developers have been awarded increases in building size for providing “public space” that is neither public nor accessible.

3. Author Neal Stephenson describes burb-claves (sub-urban enclaves) as autonomous, secure developments providing all necessities for its inhabitants. Many of the developments in Dubai and other “new” cities meet this definition without publicly owned or controlled space. These giant, mixed-use developments ignore public space and the city as a whole. What qualities in these developments substitute for our traditional definition of public space?

The paper will explore positive and negative aspects of each of these challenges seeking an understanding of how we can define public space in today’s world. As a part of the paper presentation I would like to engage the conference participants in developing a new understanding of our definition of public space for the next millennium.
The Death of Public sounds rather ominous and if we are not careful we may be headed toward a world without a viable public realm. We are experiencing an assault on our understanding of public space. Cities are faced with the challenge of establishing meaningful public space for their citizens and then maintaining that space. Our digital native citizens think of “public” in a different way than older citizens. The reasons that we gather in public have changed. Our sense of belonging to a community has changed and therefore how we represent ourselves in public has evolved. Throughout the world our definition of public space is being challenged and changed. What is that change and do we fight it or seek a new understanding of what the world now thinks is public?

This paper looks at three trends happening around the world that challenge how we build, use, and maintain public space. At the heart of the discussion is how we define public. When I submitted the abstract for this paper Dr. Lennard asked me how I defined “Public”. My response was that public space is a physical space owned by the public (or agencies that represent the public), accessible to all people, all of the time (or at least most of the time), and maintained by the public. I believe that this is the essential definition of public space but it is not the only definition in use. To understand the complex ways that we think and talk about public space a range of definitions is necessary. The graphic on the following page is my attempt to expand our definition of public space as it is being utilized today. It creates a range of definitions from what I term “True Public Space” down to private space masquerading as public space.
1. “Truly Public Space” which is owned by the public, accessible to all of the public, and maintained by the public like a street and sidewalk.

2. “Supported Public Space” is publicly owned space, accessible to the public but maintained by an outside organization like Mint Plaza in San Francisco which is maintained and managed by “Friends of Mint Plaza”.

3. “Leased Public Space” is publicly owned space leased to a specific user limiting public use such as Dinwoody Park in Salt Lake City.

4. “Privately Controlled Public Space” is publicly owned space usurped by a private entity limiting public use such as the roof garden at the St. Regis Hotel in San Francisco.

5. “POPOS” is privately owned public open space” privately owned space pretending to be public space such as the streets and sidewalks in privately owned urban developments such as Arbor Lakes, Minnesota or most developments in Dubai.
Placing each development of our urban open space on this scale helps us to understand how “public” these spaces really are and how well they support the needs of the public. Truly public spaces provide the greatest access to all citizens while imposing the least amount of control. As we move from the top to the bottom on the scale we lose public access and increase control of individuals. Less access and controlled actions do not seem to be supportive of a livable city.

One of the responsibilities of city government is to provide public space that serves the public need for all of its citizens. Those needs include access, movement, recreation, and maybe most importantly, connection to other people and a sense of belonging to the city. Public open space that can be classified toward the top of the adjacent scale are the spaces that are the most effective at meeting the needs of the citizens. Public open space that can be classified toward the bottom of the scale tend to control the activities that can occur in the space and limit both the time of use and the types of people that can use the public space. Most cities will have public open space that fits into all of the definitions presented but it is my contention that a really successful city will have many more public spaces toward the top of the scale than the bottom. Cities should rise to the challenge to control the quality of the public open space in ways beyond design. We should be providing substantive public space at the highest level possible.

There are many challenges to the development and maintenance of public space around the world. I find three of these challenges interesting and worthy of our consideration as we try to understand what us happening to our public space.

**Giant Development Projects**

The first of these challenges is reflected in our public institutions allowing and encouraging gigantic developments that contain virtually no public space. Each of these developments, anywhere in the world, clearly falls within the POPOS definition. These projects are clearly privately owned allowing only those people they approve of into the project even though the design appears to include public spaces such as streets, sidewalks, park areas, fountains, etc. Neal Stephenson, a masterful author of science fiction and historical fiction has characterized these spaces, in his book *Snow Crash*, as burb-claves, suburban enclaves with limited access and autonomous governance. City Creek, a large, two-block mixed-use development in downtown Salt Lake City is a private development with wonderfully designed public spaces that only pretend to be public space. Private walkways connect to public sidewalks and are clearly signed with a warning that you are entering private property. At the time designated by the private owner, giant doors can be closed to keep people out of this imaginary public space.

*City Creek, Salt Lake City*
Arbor Lakes, a shopping district in Maple Grove, Minnesota is another example of a private development pretending to have public open space. Arbor Lakes has streets, sidewalks, gardens, fountains, and even public events such as “Sidewalk Chalk” day in spaces that are privately owned. This all seems fine until we try to do something that is not allowed such as protesting the hiring practices of one of the stores. A personal story illustrates the degree to which private developers will go to maintain the private nature of their faux public spaces. While taking photographs at Arbor Lakes for my urban design class I was approached by a security guard and told that I could not take picture in Arbor Lakes. When I asked why he said that the design of Arbor Lakes was secret and that it must be protected. He said that he would let me go but that if he saw me taking any additional photographs he would have to confiscate the memory card from my camera. This action is clearly something that does not happen in public space. The level of control is not conducive to creating community.

City Creek and Arbor Lakes are two examples of thousands of private development around the world that propt to have public space but have no public space at all. This has been a development trend for at least twenty years with no incentive to change the process or the results. Cities want the developments so badly that they have been more than reluctant to place expectations on developers on behalf of their citizens.

Probably the most outrageous example of the giant development pattern is the incredible city of Dubai. The new city of Dubai is clearly a car-centric city made-up of one gigantic private project next to another gigantic private project next to another private project stretching for miles. Each as self contained as possible; the burb-clave at its most obvious. Aerial views of Dubai or views from the Burj Khalifa clearly show this development process. The only public open spaces are the connections between each of
these gigantic projects; equally gigantic roadways with concrete sidewalks in this extreme desert climate. Although each individual project is well designed, landscaped and maintained there is virtually no public space in new Dubai. Veronica Simpson, writing about Dubai said, “A city without proper public space is a city without a soul.” Dubai Holding and the Municipality of Dubai must have come to understand this sentiment since they have now announced the development of an 800,000 square mile eco-friendly public park stretching throughout the city. Public open space as an afterthought in the development process cannot result in vibrant livable cities.

Mandating Public Open Space
Many cities throughout the United States have used zoning to leverage developers into providing public space for its citizens. Some years ago the public space being provided was required to be gifted to the city or at least open to the public, all of the public. In return, the developer was often allowed to build more space than basic zoning allows. The St. Regis Hotel and Condominium tower in San Francisco was allowed to build a bigger building because the project included a roof garden that was to be open to the public, a public space. Almost immediately the hotel began holding wedding receptions in the “public space” and eventually covered the space with a tent completing the privatization of the space. What the legalities of this transition are is not what concerns me. It is the fact that a public open space has been provided and then taken away from public use. Is this an harbinger for other public open spaces such as the large number of POPOS now dotting the SOMA district.

The current zoning code in the SOMA district of San Francisco states: “To provide in the downtown quality open space in sufficient quantity and variety to meet the needs of downtown workers, residents, and visitors.” The result of this zoning has been the construction of a very large number of POPOS throughout the district. There is even a city website listing all of the POPOS that are available within SOMA. Virtually none of the public spaces provided are true public spaces. Most of these spaces are beautifully designed and maintained and provide a much needed amenity for the people of San Francisco. My concern is with the degree of control exercised
by the private owners which limits the time the spaces are available and limits the people that can use the space. My experience with one of these public spaces illustrates the issue with POPOS in lieu of real public space. Walking on Market Street I noticed a sign for the Westfield Roof Deck public space. I walked into the building, found no signage or directions to the public space so I asked the security person about the roof deck. She informed me that I had to sign-in and provide valid identification which she looked at and recorded the ID number. We then went to the elevators where she had to use a special security card to open the elevator and select the roof deck floor. The space is nice but hardly open to the public. I have a hard time believing that the two homeless gentlemen in the adjacent doorway on Market Street would have been welcome at the Westfield Roof Deck. I would argue that these mandated public spaces are not public at all and do not meet the needs of the public. In addition, POPOS carry with them the distinct chance that they will be closed, fall into disrepair, or just be closed off to the public.

Even though cities around the world want large development projects, we cannot rely on private entities to provide public space for our citizens. If we value true public space then public agencies have lost their nerve and failed the public.

**Front Yard**

The third part of this paper deals more with an attitude toward public space than the space itself. J. B. Jackson observed “The front yard, I think, can be said to be a national institution or national space. That they all look so much alike, it seems to me, implies some loyalty to some prototype or to some tradition about how the smaller world should look; the domestic world, should look.” The front yard is the private space where we represent ourselves to the public. The similarity seems to indicate our belonging to that larger public. Although there are some individual differences the sameness of the front yard is staggering. It doesn’t matter where
you live in the United States the front yards have been relatively the same. Historically individual expression is saved for the back yard while the front shares similarities with our neighbors, until recently. This common approach to the front is strong but it does not make sense in many parts of the country. Large parts of the West and Southwest have very little water and rely on irrigation to maintain the lush lawns of the traditional front yard. The trend in these parts of the country is to replace the water hungry landscape with a xeriscape that requires very little water. This makes so much sense from an environmental perspective. In fact we have recently changed the front yard of our home in Salt Lake City to a xeriscape. Lots of thirsty green grass just does not make sense in the desert. The three front yards shown on the right are each very different from one another. They do not share a common plant pallet or design strategy like a traditional front yard. What does that say about how we relate to the public sidewalk and the community in which we live? The additional illustrations show the marked difference in the individual xeriscaped front yards. Each is designed and maintained well. They remain individual expressions that set each house apart.

The front yard is the same no matter where in the United States it is located.

Three xeriscaped yards adjacent to each other in Salt Lake City.

Additional xeriscaped front yards.
not linking it to the larger community. There is no sense that these home belong to the public realm. The tradition that J. B. Jackson talks about is being changed and challenged. I do not decry the change but I wonder how it will effect our sense of public and community? The illustration at the left shows two xeriscapes that do share a common look. Maybe, with time we will develop a prototype front yard for different climate conditions.

The three issues presented here are only those that I chose to explore about the erosion of our public space and our attitudes toward it. There are many more that we could explore. I believe that a strong sense of community is critical to creating enjoyable and livable cities. An abundance and variety of public open space clearly adds to our sense of community. It is the responsibility of each city to be stewards of quality public spaces and, in my opinion, those public open spaces should be concentrated in “truly public spaces” with a minimal number of POPOS.