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Politics and aesthetics of public space: the "American" model

Even a brief visit to Barcelona confirms the observation that public space is still important. Neither the popularity of television and videos, nor the efficiency of the Internet, has eliminated the need of men and women to seek social meaning in streets, parks, markets, and plazas. Public space is not only a visible means of integrating social diversity. It is also what tourists and visitors see of the city; it is the living room of the young, the old, and the poor, and an advertisement of a city's image. Although it belongs to "everyone", and is historically organized by local government, there is always great competition over its control. Whoever controls public space sets the "program" for representing society.

Since the late 1960s, regimes of public space in all cities have become more democratic, inclusive, and tolerant. Political demonstrations, performances, and festivals have made public spaces more dynamic, more attractive, more open to different social groups. But public spaces have also attracted people who once were limited to narrow areas of the city, including drug users, dealers in illegal or illicit goods, and the homeless. For the past 15-20 years, in American cities, these combined conditions of festivity and dereliction have led first to a devalorization and then to a revalorization of public space, primarily at the city's center. "Valorization" of urban space occurs in several senses: financial, in terms of property values; moral, in the sense of social values; and visual, in aesthetic values suggesting "good" or "bad", "dangerous" or "safe", evoked by relations between a public space's users, uses, and design. Financial, moral, and visual values are always connected. During the 1980s, in most American cities, the desire to re-establish an aura of social coherence in central urban spaces—to make them less dangerous, more inspiring, and more profitable—encouraged various movements to re-aestheticize the center. Many of them shifted authority over urban space from government toward the private sector.

Beginning in the 1970s, support for preservation of old buildings (or "landmarks"), a movement of artists and professionals into old districts (or "gentrification"), and capital investment in new "festival" and "themed" shopping malls joined with the revalorization of old food markets and new restaurants, the installation of public art and building of art museums, and a new appreciation of historic urban identities. By the 1990s, re-aestheticization of public space depends on a large and growing "symbolic economy": on the one hand, on Planet Hollywood, Imax movie theaters, and Disney stores—all of which can be found today in Barcelona and nearly 100 other cities—and on the other hand, on new contemporary art museums (which, in Barcelona, Bilbao and other cities, represent such brand names as "Richard Meier" and "Frank Gehry"). In the United States, this model of re-aestheticizing public space has gone to an extreme by considering retail space—shops, restaurants, coffee bars—as public space. Similarly, streets and parks are designed as if they were spaces of consumption.

In this "American" model of public space, the ideal city no longer influences the real city. Instead, the stores, entertainment complexes, and art museums that are important interventions in public space are shaping an ideal city based on consumption. The common symbols of public space are increasingly derived from the nexus of aesthetic display and commercial culture. In New York City, for example, the projects of "public space" people talk about—without irony—include growing numbers of coffee bars, "Disneyfied" streets, and large interior shopping complexes that attempt to provide an overarching spatial metaphor for social identity. Let us take a closer look at three such projects: a public park, a commercial street, and the flagship store of a multinational corporation.

Bryant Park

This nine-acre park sits behind the main building of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, close to Times Square, in a central commercial district of office towers and stores. For most of the 20th century, the park has been difficult to control. During the Great Depression,

unemployed people tried to sleep in the park, and during World War II, soldiers and visitors to the city used the park for illicit trysts and meetings. In the 1970s, drug dealers used the park, even during the day, making others, especially women, afraid to enter. The impression of the park as a sinister place was aided by its design, planned by the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in the late 19th century. Tall stone walls and trees isolated the park from the view of passers-by. The feeling of nature Olmsted had desired was used, instead, to isolate the interior from the streets and led to the park's abandonment. Toward the end of the 1970s, the New York City Parks Department yielded to the request of a private association of owners of office buildings and their corporate tenants around the park, and turned over the park's management to them. This BID (Business Improvement District) raised funds for a study, under the guidance of William H. Whyte, of how and why people used this and other small parks in the center of Manhattan. The BID paid for new design plans and landscaping evocative of the Jardins du Luxembourg, new park furniture imported from Paris, and new kiosks—designed on the Beaux Arts model of the Public Library—to sell fancy sandwiches and coffees. They aimed to use the design of the park to attract a critical density of "normal", law-abiding users. The aesthetic program, one could say, was to make the park more "civilized". I would call it "domestication by cappuccino".

Significantly, under private management, the public space of the park is protected by a large number of public police officers and private security guards. The BID has posted rules for using the park at each entrance: no one may be in the park after sunset except at a cultural event organized by the BID, no one may pick things from the garbage except for homeless people associated with one church near the park, no one may drink alcohol except in one area of the park. Some rules are the same as in all public parks, but Bryant Park was, I believe, the first park to post rules on signs in the park and to employ security guards to enforce them.

Despite the privatization of control over Bryant Park, the park is safer and more attractive than it was prior to the 1980s. On a sunny day, several thousand people eat lunch in the park, and there are as many women as men who feel at home there. The BID organizes poetry readings and performances during the day, and, in the summer, shows movies once a week at sunset. For several years, they have rented space in the park for showings of the collections of fashion designers, and a new restaurant—rather expensive—has opened in a handsome new building in the park. Although the private association has succeeded in creating a public space that is much more useful than the old park, it has also created a model of privatization—through consumption spaces and private management—that is being applied in other public spaces.

Bryant Park is important in its own right, but it is also the gateway to:

The revitalization of 42nd Street as a Disney colony

Like Bryant Park, Times Square—especially the historic and symbolic core of Times Square on 42nd Street—has been a hard area to control. From the time of the Great Depression, the number of "legitimate" commercial theaters steadily declined and the number of "low-brow" burlesque, pornographic shops, and movie theaters steadily rose. Buildings became dilapidated and were not modernized; illegal sex and drug businesses took over the street. 42nd Street bothered all municipal administrations for many years because the public authorities could not control it. Its degradation repelled private investors, corporate offices, and real estate developers from that whole area of the West Side of midtown Manhattan. No redevelopment strategy attracted much interest until the 1980s, when the expansion of the stock market and financial and legal services persuaded the city and state governments that the time was ripe to redevelop Times Square as a commercial center like Wall Street or Park Avenue north of Grand Central Terminal. The city and state governments offered big financial incentives, and used the power of the state, to tear down old buildings, evict low-class and illegal uses, and transform 42nd Street into a financial district.

Significant opposition to this plan came from elite groups (notably, the Municipal Art Society) with an interest in revalorizing the aesthetic qualities of the city, especially the special aesthetic qualities historically identified with Times Square. They criticized the architect Philip Johnson for designing buildings that were too tall and insufficiently interesting for this space. Criticism was

directed specifically at the lack of bright lights, big advertising signs, and moving electric message boards —the visual "noise" that had represented Times Square and the cultural hegemony of New York City in popular culture (represented, in turn, by Mondrian's painting "Broadway Boogie Woogie") for most of the 20th century. Ironically, the defense of Modernist commercial culture defeated the undistinguished Postmodern architecture of the office buildings. When the crash of the stock market in 1987 caused an indefinite delay in the financing for redevelopment, the idea slowly emerged of transforming Times Square into a new public space of commercial culture: of re-aestheticizing 42nd Street according to the American model that developed during the 1980s.

This time, instead of developing new theaters that would demand new forms of dramatic writing and performance, planners and architects (advised, in part, by the architect Robert A. M. Stern) proposed that old theaters be renovated and joined by new stores and restaurants under the theme of family entertainment and "safe" commercial culture: a virtual theme of "42nd Street". The commanding presence, on which commitments for financing depended, was that of the Disney Company. Disney's three-part contribution to 42nd Street more or less constituted its first "urban" intervention anywhere. The Disney Company opened a new Disney Store, renovated an early 20th century theater to produce Disney plays based on Disney movies, and took an investment share in a project for a new hotel. A large public was expected to fill these spaces, but this public was no longer a local, urban one. Instead, 42nd Street was reborn as a public space for tourists, suburban residents, and families on vacation. It is on an aesthetic plane with Las Vegas and Orlando —glitzy but grittier.

Since this strategy to re-aestheticize 42nd Street emerged in 1990-1991, many New Yorkers have criticized the "Disneyfication" of the city. Disneyfication originally referred to a themed visual coherence, an imperviousness to urban context, that one finds in Las Vegas and Disney World, and sometimes in preserved facades of historic buildings, often to the point of kitsch. Now, however, Disneyfication is no longer a metaphor. It refers to the real presence of the Disney Company's projects in urban redevelopment strategies —a decisive presence in raising financial, moral, and, superficially, visual values. City government officials like the way Disney World works as a public space, although it is a space people pay to enter. The cleanliness, the relentless optimism, and the visual coherence seem to justify private control over an unknowable and potentially unruly public. Almost without resistance, Disney icons have become unifying symbols of urban public space.

But Disneyfication at its worst signifies the influence of a single, large corporation over the city, itself. Several years ago, the New York City Parks Department permitted the Disney Company to hold the premiere of the animated feature movie "Pocahontas" on a meadow in the middle of Central Park. This year, in June, the city government permitted the company to hold a candlelight and neon light parade on Fifth Avenue, Manhattan's most important public space, to promote the opening of another animated feature movie, "Hercules." All traffic was banned from Fifth Avenue; traffic, street, and building lights were turned off so the illuminated floats could proceed in the dark. The logistics of the parade required much coordination in advance by corporate and government agencies. A large number of police officers guaranteed order during the evening, facing a friendly, local public, including many children, over the barricades. But this was a large, public festival for a private company's product.

Blending the public and private appears to be a logical result of the model established by Bryant Park. It makes us question what is "public" about public space, whose values are symbolized in the space, and who really controls it.

Nike Town: store or art museum?

Nike Town is a flagship store for the Nike Company, which has designed it as both a shrine to sneakers and a tourist attraction. New Yorkers generally go to cheaper sporting goods stores or sneakers stores to buy athletic shoes. When I stood at the entrance to Nike Town one spring morning, almost everyone who walked in was already wearing Nike shoes, and many carried shopping bags from the nearby Disney or Warner Brothers store. The exterior of Nike Town suggests both a public school, where many teenagers play sports, and a monument; the entry

looks like a place of transit for a mobile shopping public, with turnstiles, "gates", and signs flipping, letter by letter, to announce different attractions. Giant video screens dominate the tall atrium. Every 15 or 20 minutes, when videos promote different Nike products, customers stand still in the atrium, gazing up at the video screens. Each floor specializes in Nike products for a different sport. Nike caps and baseball bats are displayed in glass showcases, along with Jackie Robinson's autobiography. Athletic shoes and soccer uniforms, all bearing the Nike "Swoosh" logo, are artfully arrayed.

From the late 1980s, the rhetoric of marketing in the United States has advocated making shopping into an "experience" in order to persuade customers to spend more time in stores and spend more money. A number of large corporations have invested money in the design of their stores to make them public spaces according to the new model: safe, clean, visually coherent. They are betting that their products —like Disney's icons— will become the symbols of a public of consumers. Cultural institutions are following this example. If an organization wants to establish its identity, it opens two "public" spaces —a store and a Website— to which members of the public relate by consumption.

In contrast to heroic, historical models, and everyday, vernacular models, the contemporary American model of public space derives meaning from such symbolic commodities as Nike shoes and Mickey Mouse. The immanent meaning of society in the vernacular, and the transcendent meaning of society in the monument, are obliterated by the unmediated consumption of the shopping space. These spaces have lost a connection with the collective events that have shaped the course of cities. "In a few moments, the topography of Barcelona had changed", Abel Paz recalls in his memoir of *The Spanish Civil War*. "...Everywhere, barricades of paving stones were beginning to rise... There were battles on Plaça d'Espanya and on the Paral·lel... Their advance was halted on Plaça de Catalunya..." Remaking this topography by building an Imax movie theater or a Hard Rock Cafe poses the most difficult challenge for the future of public spaces.

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