
The changing publicness of urban spaces

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. Public spaces have long been the main element of the urban structure. However, the social and spatial configuration of the contemporary city have radically altered the role of public space and inherent public sphere in the set of urban dynamics. Privatization schemes have created new arenas for public life, distorting the traditional urban public spaces. Still, there needs to be a way to characterize public spaces. This paper will set the framework for a new form of evaluating a space's publicness, forging the path for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of these spaces' dynamics. This will allow a better assessment of the features that constitute a successful urban space and how the public can experience and take advantage of it, contributing to redefine the public/private paradigm.

KEYWORDS: public space, publicness, privatization, management, contemporary city

Miguel Lopes* _ Sara Cruz _ Paulo Pinho*****

*CITTA - FEUP

Rua Dr. Roberto Frias, s/n
miguel.nuno.lopez@fe.up.pt +351 22 508 1486

** CITTA - FEUP

Rua Dr. Roberto Frias, s/n
scrucz@fe.up.pt +351 22 508 1484

***CITTA - FEUP

Rua Dr. Roberto Frias, s/n
pcpinho@fe.up.pt +351 22 508 1486

1. Introduction

Public spaces are key elements of the urban morphology and essential to understand its several features and dynamics. Throughout ages, public spaces have accompanied the urban physical and societal changes and adapted to them. Although studies regarding public space come from a long way, recent social and spatial urban shifts have changed the way public spaces are seen, valued and used. New social needs, values and routines, and different forms of space provision and management have called for the need to study the features that make a space public. As a result, public spaces are not just spaces provided by the public sector. The potential for a place to be called public is vast, and several studies regarding urban publicness have been developed. Still, they focus only on a limited number of aspects, therefore failing to include all the inherent dynamics and features that characterize urban space. This paper is framed in the first part of a PhD thesis which tries to develop a new comprehensive framework for the evaluation of a space's publicness, in order to determine a space's overall relevance in the network of urban public spaces. Still, to study the concept of publicness it is necessary to first study its origins, the true essence of 'public' and related terms. This is not an easy task, as it covers a wide variety of notions.

2. Public Space

2.1. Meanings and definitions

We all know the meaning of the word 'public' as it is used in a variety of combinations, such as general public, public domain, public interest, public life, etc. A common denominator among them is that, in general, it represents the opposite of private. These are interconnected terms which only make sense when related to each other. This distinction has a great influence in society, politics and economy, (ARENDT, 1958; MADANIPOUR, 2003), with direct repercussion in the city, as the private and public ownership of land generally influence the overall urban shape.

Different authors describe public space using different attributes. For Benn and Gaus (1983), the most important attributes for a public space to be distinguished from its private counterparts are access, agency and interest. The first one represents access to the place, physical and social, as well as the activities in it, the second the locus of control and decision-making present, and the last one the targeted beneficiaries of actions or decisions impacting on a place. This definition was one of the foundations for further public space studies.

Kohn (2004) defines public spaces as sites owned by the government, accessible to everyone without restrictions, fostering communication and interaction among its users. She defends the need to study the relationship between space and users, in a quality called 'intersubjectivity'. Low and Smith (2006) focus on more direct aspects such as the role of rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry, the nature of authorized behaviour and access rules. This last element is seen by some as the only relevant one, as is the case with Mitchell and Staheli (2006). If a space allows one to be there, without restrictions, then it is a public space. Others defend a more democratic dimension, such as Watson (2006) that comments the need for spaces for protest and expression of minority interests, and Worpole and Knox (2007), recognizing their value for shared use and activity, meeting and exchange, regardless of ownership. Therefore, almost any place offers potential to work as a public space.

How can all this be translated into physical spaces? Public buildings, for instance, do not have to be open to the public, as the simple fact of them housing state institutions makes them public spaces. It can therefore be understood as a broader concept, by the inclusion of a set of social locations, such as the street, the media, the Internet, national governments and local neighbourhoods, enveloping "the palpable tension between place, experience at all scales in daily life, and the seeming spacelessness of the Internet, popular opinion, and global institutions and economy" (LOW & SMITH, 2006, p.3). With this in mind, it can either be expanded to define all those physical spaces that are not strictly private, including not only publicly owned spaces but also all those spaces in which social and civic functions with a public character are performed, regardless of ownership (ELLIN, 1996), including the so-called 'semi-public spaces', such as cafés, book stores, bars, etc. (BANERJEE, 2001). On the other hand, by moving into a managerial perspective, it can be narrowed down as in the responsibility for local government public-space services, referring specifically to state-owned parks, civic spaces and most ordinary streets and squares (DE MAGALHÃES, 2010). Generally speaking, public space includes "all those parts of the built and natural environment where the public have free access" (OPDM, 2004, p.10).

Although all definitions rely on the opposition between public and private spaces, the potential for variation between what is public and what is private is still considerable. As the traditional concepts of public space is no longer valid, a multiplicity of concepts can be attached to it in order to provide a more comprehensive interpretation.

2.2. Overview on related terms

Public space, by combining key physical and social roles in the urban framework originated several concepts. Several authors use the term 'public realm' to go beyond its sole physical aspects. For Tibbalds (1991, p.1) it corresponds to "all the parts of the urban fabric, to which the public have physical and visual access". It represents the spaces in the city which are not private (MADANIPOUR, 1996), which allow public access (CARMONA et al., 2003), and those who tend to be inhabited by people who are strangers to one another (LOFLAND, 1989). The public realm allows, then, a proper division between public and private spaces.

Social scientists, on the other hand, coin this social realm as 'public sphere' (VARNA & TIESDELL 2010). In Jurgen Habermas (1991) perspective, the line between space and society divided the public sphere from the public realm. Contrary to the physical public space, the public sphere is understood as an abstract realm in which democracy occurs. Still, the appearance of new places to meet, gather, and interact, like electronic communities, televisions chat shows, or 'the media' can be enough to the creation of a new public sphere (MITCHELL, 2003). The public sphere, therefore, provides information about the transformation of social and political processes that take place in the physical public realm (MADANIPOUR 1996).

The political community also have their own concept by defending the existence of a sphere of common concerns and subsequent discourse, calling it 'public domain'. This means that the problems that rise to public awareness are, by definition, of general concern.

All these concepts are targeted to ensure public order, the practice through which the public is ordered, managing thresholds, and setting boundaries. Civility and our collective sense form one's right to use the public, while at the same time shape and form it. For Francis (1989) this defines public space's publicness. Although

some insights on the term were given by other authors such as Benn and Gaus (1983), during the 1990's the concept was left apart of the public space discussion. This situation persisted up until recently when it was brought again to discussion, visible in a new branch of explanations about the symbolic value of the term (KOHN, 2004; VARNA & TIDESDELL, 2010; NÉMETH & SCHMIDT, 2011). Therefore, and summarily, publicness can be easily understood by the essential features and qualities that give a public space its specificity, what can make a given space be, in fact, called a public space (DE MAGALHÃES, 2010).

2.3. Public space dynamics in the contemporary city

Throughout times, public spaces formed the backdrop for public life, commercial transactions, social exchange, entertainment, protest and contemplation. However, recent societal changes seem to have placed such spaces under threat. Richard Sennett (2002) observed a decline in public life, as streets and squares have been replaced by 'suburban living rooms', turning them into passage only sites. Over the years, globalization, privatization schemes, urban dispersion, and a growing ease of communication by electronic means contributed to the decline of these spaces (BANERJEE, 2001; ELLIN, 2003, MADANIPOUR, 2003).

Globalization pushed the development of networked cities, where cities compete in global markets, to attract investment. Projects grew in size, maximizing the developers' profit, frequently ignoring the need for green and other types of open spaces. Public spaces became an instrument to sell the city (MADANIPOUR, 2003). Exchange value started to guide urban development, replacing symbolic value. Space started to be treated, therefore, as a mere commodity (KOHN, 2004; MADANIPOUR, 1996, SORKIN, 1992). Faced with financial constraints, public authorities moved to large scale privatization schemes, and public spaces and goods were delivered to private agents, being exposed to their strategies. Corporate and commercial interests have guided this process, mainly through the closing, redesign, and policing of public parks and plazas (LOW & SMITH, 2006), the development of business improvement districts that monitor and control local streets and parks (NÉMETH & SCHMIDT, 2007; ZUKIN, 1995), and the transfer of public air rights for the building of corporate plazas 'superficially' open to the public (MILLER, 2007; NÉMETH, 2009). Former industrial centres and run-down places are now promoting themselves as tourist destinations. Public spaces become threatened as they start to become the result of occasional 'surgical interventions' or simulated through the so-called 'semi-public spaces' such as commercial centres, theme parks, and closed condominiums (CRUZ, 2003). Privatization is, therefore, both a cause and a consequence of the decline of public space and widespread urban fragmentation.

Large extents of the city became 'deserts', relegating public life to these new locations, creating a public realm deliberately shaped as a theatre (CRILLEY, 1993), 'disneyfying' the space (SORKIN, 1992; ZUKIN, 1991), and where all activity is carefully staged, creating spectacle in the city (MADANIPOUR, 2003). Globalization also pressed the development of new information technologies, simplifying communication and reducing the need for conventional forms of social interaction. Overall, this lead to a shift in what policy-makers and designers consider important.

Despite all this, public spaces are still the most important elements of the urban context as they provide basic human needs. They are the common ground where people carry out their communal activities, being the arenas over which a civil society can develop (CARR et al., 1992; MADANIPOUR, 1996). As people know that these spaces are there, they use it for a variety of different activities and purposes. They define the city, provide it with identity and meaning, and usually reflect

whether its citizens relate well to the city and to each other. In the end, although public space is generated by our free activity, that same activity is conditioned by this space (MENSCH, 2007).

Green public spaces pose additional benefits associated with the quality of the environment, health, real estate and tourism, and urban quality of life. They provide neutral ground for all sectors of the society, offering spaces for recreation and relaxation. When adequately 'populated', public spaces can contribute to the reduction of crime levels and anti-social behaviour (JACOBS, 1961). In the end, public space is made to be used by people. So, if people start to reduce its usage, then there is less incentive to provide new spaces and maintain existing ones.

Apart from the more pessimist views, Gehl and Gemzoe (2001) have noticed an improvement and return to traditional forms of space with the purpose of regaining public life and giving back the city to its citizens. Recent phenomena of space appropriation by citizens such as farmer's markets, antiques fairs, open-air cinema displays, among others, show that society has apprehended new and interesting dynamics. For Worpole and Knox (2007), contrary to conventional negativist assumptions, public space is not in decline but is instead expanding. Therefore, public space needs to be flexible to the social dynamics, and new forms of public life will require new spaces. The readjustment of the concepts of public space and publicness will, most likely, be necessary.

3. The publicness of spaces

3.1. Essential features of publicness

Although some methods have already been developed that try to define and classify the publicness of several urban locations (VAN MÉLIK ET AL., 2007; VARNA & TIESEDELL, 2010; NÉMETH & SCHMIDT, 2011), they only focus on simple physical and operational features, such as imposed control schemes, access restrictions, and activity levels. So, any attempt to hypothesise publicness must comprise inter-connected components, considering the largest amount of urban dynamics, and avoid the tendency to create a simple list of desirable features.

Defining publicness is more than assigning a label of public or private, or checking if a space meets some criteria (KOHN 2004). It is expected that urban public spaces work well, in order to respond to the needs of their residents, incorporating and balancing the widest range urban dynamics. Therefore, the features commonly identified as describing successful spaces and realms should form the groundwork for the definition of publicness' components.

As public spaces are deemed to be used by urban residents, the evaluation of its activity is the first step to be made. Jane Jacobs (1961) was one of the first to defend activity in order to achieve a successful public realm, identifying four key determinants: a mixture of primary uses, intensity, urban form permeability, and a mix of building types, ages and sizes. This opinion still persists today, in public space studies such as the ones of Carmona et al. (2003).

Carr et al. (1992) gave greater emphasis to the established connection between space and its users, identifying the need to respond to the users need for comfortable, peaceful, sociable, and stimulating spaces, defined by five terms: comfort, relaxation, passive and active engagement, and discovery. The definition of this connection includes, for instance, the contribution to democratic inclusion by encouraging interaction between acquaintances and strangers (KOHN, 2004). Jacobs and Appleyard (1987) had, in fact, already suggested this by presenting their goals for the creation of a good urban environment, where issues of

maintaining a discoverable space, with a strong communal and public life, where issues of sustainability, equality of access and control, and democracy are considered. Although referring to a broader urban context, one can identify a considerable emphasis on the need for a strong user-space relationship. For Shaftoe (2008), the opportunities a space provides for the experience of joy and delight can be broadly achieved in three ways: through the provision of good landscaping, public art and entertainment. This generates 'convivial spaces', establishing a connection between physical design, psychological stimulation and activity. Gehl (2001) defines public space quality through three main categories: protection, comfort, and enjoyment, all related to the way users perceive and feel the space.

For Montgomery (1998), three main features must be in place in order to achieve successful urban places, being those activity, image and form. As one's opinion regarding a space relates in a great manner to what 'meets the eye', its physical appearance and conditions, i.e., its design features are also vital to define its quality. The Project for Public Spaces (2000), a non-profit organization that carries on the work of William H. Whyte, its founder, developed a systematic process to program and design space, identifying four key qualities: access and linkages; uses and activities; comfort and image; and sociability. In a way these qualities combine the three main elements that consensually define a successful public space: high levels of activity, a strong connection between the space and their users, and a 'good' image and form. Still, the on-going privatization and other management changes over public spaces require the study of the implications of distinct management strategies over the way they operate and the way they are seen by its users. Hence, in order to develop a more complete publicness analysis, a division in four themes seems appropriate, being those activity, physical design, space-user connection, and management.

3.1.1. Activity

All good cities have distinctive identities and characters, in what is normally referred to as a 'pulse', a rhythm of everyday life, or simply an 'urban buzz'. For this activity, it is essential for public spaces to provide choice, for different activities and uses, besides the presence of the individual's level of freedom. The uses that surround it are also fundamental to achieve the needed user flows that allow natural surveillance. It is also interesting to assess the variety of user types, regarding aspects such as age, gender, or race. However, the physical aspects also have a great role in defining what can and cannot happen in a space.

3.1.2. Physical design

A focus on good design is essential in order to avoid the on-going trend of public space deterioration and abandonment. Also, the design of a place affects the choices people make at various levels, ranging from its physical availability and presence, the opportunities for use and the extent to which people can put their own stamp on a place. Physical features also have an influence on the degree of comfort of a place, regarding aspects such as seating, quality of the materials, urban furniture, inclusive design, and consideration over shading and microclimates.

3.1.3. Space-User

In fact, physical space needs to be contextualized in human practices in order to provide a fuller understanding of the place. Therefore, users must possess a positive interpretation of the space, regarding identity, sense of place, comfort, and relaxation. People must be able to fulfil their needs, to test themselves, intellectually and physically, or they'll lose interest. On the other hand, they are

also entitled to some rights, such as free access, appropriation and other kinds of 'soft' possession.

3.1.4. Management

All these features, although essential, cannot be the sole foundation for the definition of a space's publicness. Management is a very sensible subject regarding public space, as the slightest shift from the equilibrium point can pose severe constraints on aspects such as control, security, and maintenance. Despite these elements, when studying the management of these types of spaces, aspects such as resource coordination, partnership mechanisms, and user involvement in the operation processes and schemes should be taken into consideration.

3.2. Methodological proposal for the study

Each space should be analysed by the use of a clear methodology, in order to reduce the amount of subjective interpretations to the minimum. This will allow a greater validity of the results, as well as a greater degree of replication to different case studies. Still, some subjectivity will exist as each user values distinct features and will view public space differently. While the assessment of the spaces is strongly based on simple visual observations, a special consideration has to be made regarding indicators with a strong component of time dependency, such as the ones related to activity. Specific weather conditions, special events, celebrations or occurrences, certain of a given day would provide an inaccurate representation of the reality, valuing or devaluing unjustly a space. The different features would then require an extended period of analysis, which demand an evaluation over distinct periods, to evaluate the differences between day and night, peak and off-peak, workday and weekend periods, and weather conditions. User surveys are essential elements to evaluate how the space relates to their users and vice-versa. Finally, conducting structured interviews with the entities responsible for the design and operation of the spaces are one of the most effective means to determine the management dimension of publicness. The evaluation results will allow an easy comparison between different spaces and assess its strong and weak points.

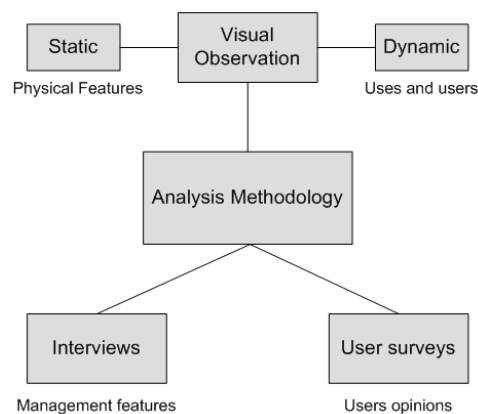


Figure 1 – Analysis Methodology components

4. Conclusions

Public space and its connected concepts show its complex nature and the inherent difficulty to describe and classify it. Despite the single complexity of the term, social and economic changes led to changes not only in the way it is structured but also in the way it is understood and interpreted. The study of its publicness appears therefore as a way to classify its most important elements and allow a systematic classification.

As urban public spaces envelop a large number of the city's elements, they can be characterized using a variety of functional and symbolic tools. The study must then start by the assessment of its public life, followed by design, which sets the use patterns and overall operation of the space. Still, as these spaces are made to be used by people, the assessment of their relationship with its users is key to achieve success. Finally, as public spaces are not created out of thin air, neither possess the idealized features out of the box, management must then be understood as the way to achieve the means.

Still, it is not easy to define a successful public space, neither replicate their success elsewhere. Therefore, the development of a clear and concise methodology must try to incorporate the specificities of each case.

5. Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the National Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), for the grant that funded this study.

6. Bibliography

- ARENDDT, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 1958
- BANERJEE, Tribd. The future of public space - Beyond invented streets and reinvented places. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 67(1), 9-24. 2001
- BENN, Stanley; GAUS, Gerald. *Public and Private in Social Life*. London, Croom Helm. 1983
- CARMONA, Michael; HEATH, Tim; OC, Taner; TIESDELL, Steve. *Public Places Urban Spaces - The Dimensions of Urban Design*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2003
- CARR, Stephen; FRANCIS, Mark; RIVILIN, Leanne; STONE, Andrew. *Public Space*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1992
- CRILLEY, Darrell. Megastructures and Urban Change: Aesthetics, Ideology and Design. In KNOX, Paul (Ed.), *The Restless Urban Landscape* (pp. 127-164). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 1993
- CRUZ, Sara. *Fragmentos utópicos na cidade caótica: Condomínios Fechados no Grande Porto*. PhD Thesis. Porto, University of Porto, 2003
- DE MAGALHÃES, Claudio. Public Space and the Contracting-out of Publicness: A Framework for Analysis. *Journal of Urban Design*. 15(4). 2010
- GEHL, Jan ;GEMZOE, Lars. *New City Spaces*. Copenhagen: The Danish Architectural Press. 2001
- ELLIN, Nan. *Postmodern Urbanism*. Oxford, Balckwell 1996

- ELLIN, Nan. Fear and City Building. *The Hedgehog Review*. Fall 2003. 2003
- HABERMAS, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of the Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1991
- JACOBS, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, Random House. 1961
- KOHN, Margaret. *Brave New Neighbourhoods: The Privatization of Public Spaces*. London: Routledge 2004
- LOFLAND, Lyn. Social-Life in the Public Realm - a Review. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 17(4) 1989
- LOW, Setha; SMITH, Neil. *The Politics of Public Space*. London, Routledge 2006
- MADANIPOUR, Ali. *Design of Urban Space: An inquiry into a Socio-spatial process*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons 1996
- MADANIPOUR, Ali. *Public and private spaces of the city*. London: Routledge 2003
- MENSCH, James. Public Space. *Continental Philosophy Review*. 40. 31-47. 2007
- MILLER, Kristine . *Designs on the Public*. Minneapolis MN, University of Minnesota Press. 2007
- MITCHELL, Don. *The Right to the city: Social justice and the fight for public space*. New York, The Guilford Press 2003
- MITCHELL, Don; STAHILI, Lyn. Clean and Safe? Property redevelopment, public space and homelessness in Downtown San Diego: in: LOW, Setha; SMITH, Neil (Eds) *The Politics of Public Space*, pp. 143-175. London, Routledge. 2006
- MONTGOMERY, John. Making a city: Urbanity, vitality and urban design. *Journal of Urban Design*, 3(1), 93-116. 1998
- NÉMETH, Jeremy. Defining a Public: The Management of Privately Owned Public Space. *Urban Studies*, 46(11), 2463-2490. 2007
- NÉMETH, Jeremy; SCHMIDT, Stephan. Toward a methodology for measuring the security of publicly accessible spaces. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 73(3), 283-297. 2007
- NÉMETH, Jeremy; SCHMIDT, Stephan. The privatization of public space: modelling and measuring publicness. *Environment and Planning B-Planning & Design*, 38, 5-23. 2011
- OPDM. *Living Places: caring for quality*. London, RIBA Enterprises. 2004
- PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES. *How to Turn a Place Around: a handbook for creating successful public spaces*. New York, Project for Public Spaces Inc. 2000
- SENNETT, Richard. *The fall of public man*. London, Penguin Books. 2002
- SHAFTOE, Henry. *Convival Urban Spaces. Creating Effective Public Places*. London. Earthscan. 2008
- SORKIN, Michael. *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1992
- VAN MÉLIK, Rianne, VAN AALST, Irina; VAN WEESP, Jan. Fear and Fantasy in the Public Domain: The Development of Secured and Themed Urban Space. *Journal of Urban Design*, 12(1), 25-42. 2007

VARNA, Georgiana; TIESDELL, Steve. *Assessing the Publicness of Public Space: The Star Model of Publicness*. *Journal of Urban Design*, 15(4) 2010

WATSON, Sophie. *City publics: the (dis)enchantments of urban encounters*. *Questioning Cities*. London, Routledge. 2006

WEBSTER, Chris. *Property rights, public space and urban design*. *Town Planning Review*. 78(1). 2007

WORPOLE, Ken; KNOX, Catherine, *The social value of public spaces*. York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2007

ZUKIN, Sharon. *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley, University of California Press. 1991

ZUKIN, Sharon. *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge MA, Blackwell. 1995

7. Biography

Miguel Lopes is a civil engineer, with a Masters in Urban Planning from the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto - FEUP. He is currently getting his PhD at the same institution and a researcher at the Research Centre for the Territory, Transports and the Environment - CITTA.

Paulo Pinho is a Full Professor at FEUP and the director of CITTA.

Sara Cruz is an Assistant Professor at FEUP and a senior researcher at CITTA.