PUBLIC SPACE A Discussion on the Shape of Our Cities

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Pleasures & Costs of Urbanity

The shape and character of public space is a central issue in city planning, and it has often been central, too, in political thought, especially on the left. Radical intellectuals live in cities, think of themselves as city people, imagine the good society as a large and splendid city. Socialist and republican politics alike require public spaces in which a common life can be enacted—and such spaces are available only in cities.

Curiously, the city figured more significantly in the social criticism of the 1950s and early '60s than in the activist politics that came later. Civil rights and Vietnam, race and war overwhelmed our speculations about urbanity and its physical requirements. Paul and Percival Goodman's *Communitas* (cloth 1947, paper 1960) and Jane Jacobs's *Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) were much noticed and talked about when they were published and republished, but the talk faltered after only a few years. When Rayner Banham's exuberant defense of Los Angeles appeared in 1971, there was no equal exuberance displayed in defense of other cities and alternative urban styles. The left had, or thought it had, more urgent issues. (How long has it been since *Dissent* carried an article on city planning?) Yet thinking about public space and its uses might have helped us, say, to think about racial integration. Thinking about government centers, medical centers, and housing projects might have deepened our understanding of the welfare state and its discontents. Thinking about freeways, shopping malls, and suburban homes might have led us to anticipate Reaganite politics.

Public space is space we share with strangers, people who aren't our relatives, friends, or work associates. It is space for politics, religion, commerce, sport; space for peaceful coexistence and impersonal encounter. Its character expresses and also conditions our public life, civic culture, everyday discourse. We need to talk about this again, and though I have no special expertise, I will try to begin, drawing freely on the Goodmans and Jane Jacobs and also on more recent books by Richard Sennett and Marshall Berman—but on my own experience, too; for cities are, like novels and movies, necessarily subject to lay criticism. So, too, though less gloriously, are the deurbanized wastelands we have created, even in the midst of the city itself.

II

We need to distinguish between two kinds of public space. The two probably exist on a continuum, but for the sake of clarity I will draw the line sharply between them. The first is *single-minded* space, designed by planners or entrepreneurs who have only one thing in mind, and used by similarly single-minded citizens. Entering space of this sort we are characteristically in a hurry. The second is *open-minded* space, designed for a variety of uses, including unforeseen and unforeseeable uses, and used by citizens who do different things and are prepared to tolerate, even take an interest in, things they don't do. When we enter this sort of

space, we are characteristically prepared to loiter.

Architects and planners write about single-purpose and multi-purpose space, but I want to emphasize "mindedness." It's not only that space serves certain purposes known in advance by its users, but also that its design and character stimulate (or repress) certain qualities of attention, interest, forbearance, and receptivity. We act differently in different sorts of space—in part, to be sure, because of what we are doing there, but also because of what others are doing, because of what it means to be "there," and because of the look and feel of the space itself.

My examples ought to be obvious to anyone who has moved around in cities. Zoned business and residential areas are single-minded, as is the modern dormitory suburb. The central city (as it once was) and also the "quarter" or neighborhood with its own stores and shops and small factories constitute open-minded space. The government center, medical center, cultural center, shopping center are all single-minded; the forum, the square, the courtyard are all open-minded. The highway—Le Corbusier's "machine for traffic"—is single-minded, the city street is open-minded; the green belt is single-minded, the city park or playground is open-minded; the housing project is single-minded, the urban block is open-minded.

We can take the contemporary shopping center, sitting on a highway outside the city, close to the suburbs, as the epitome of single-mindedness (the urban mall, when it is continuous with the surrounding streets, is less so: I will come back to this later). The shopping center is a place to shop, nothing more, and its owners characteristically resist all attempts to use it in other ways. The most revealing example of this resistance is their invocation of the laws against trespass to exclude political activity—leafletting, say, on their "property." They don't want the extra costs of policing such activity, but they also don't want the attention of shoppers diverted from their primary mission. The ideal shopper doesn't take up parking space except when actually shopping. Ideally, the shopper is in and out, or wanders from store to store only in order to stimulate the urge to buy—and does buy in the end. Buying is all; so

far as the shopper is concerned, this is not a place for conversation or play but only for getting and spending.

Other examples: the fast-food restaurant is single-minded, the café or pub or cafeteria, where people are encouraged to linger, is open-minded; the motel or motor inn is single-minded, the urban hotel, with its public rooms, bars, restaurants, shops, and its ready access to the surrounding streets, is open-minded; the airplane is single-minded, the long-distance train or ship is open-minded: one can write a novel about what happens on trains and ships, but not about what happens on planes. The movie is single-minded compared to the theater; this is less obvious but the point is worth making: theatrical time and space, the intermission, the bar, the lobby, the theater "district" with its restaurants—all this encourages a longer and more varied "evening out" than going to the movies; one more often hurries to a movie and home again. The exhibition center, like most centers, is single-minded (one exhibit at a time) compared to the old urban fairground; the department store or supermarket is single-minded compared to the row of specialty shops—because the row is on the street, and the street is open-minded space.

The square or piazza is the epitome of open-mindedness. Here public space is surrounded by a mix of public and private buildings: government offices, museums, lecture and concert halls, churches, shops, cafés, residences. Some of these have single, some have multiple uses, but joined together they give to the space they enclose and create a vital and receptive quality. In the square itself, people meet, walk, talk, buy and sell, argue about politics, eat lunch, sit over coffee, wait for something to happen.

This is the crucial setting for urbanity: without the square, write the Goodmans, "there is no city. . . . There is no substitute for the spontaneous social conflux whose atoms unite, precisely, as citizens of the city." In fact, of course, they unite in all sorts of other ways, and for reasons that have nothing to do with citizenship—commerce, worship, pleasure, love. That is just the point. They are different people, with different purposes, educated by the space they share to a civil deportment.

The university campus is another model of

open-mindedness, with its own squares and courtyards, its varied activities, its in-close housing. I am not sure what the appropriate comparison is here. In the night school and the commuter school this sort of space doesn't exist, and education is a more single-minded experience. Correspondence and television courses provide no space at all. These sorts of institutions and arrangements accommodate people under economic pressure, people in a hurry, and that is certainly a good thing to do. But the accommodation involves a loss of diversity and unexpectedness, of a certain sort of educational loitering.

I DON'T MEAN TO EQUATE open-minded/single-minded with good/bad. Nothing so simple: we need not be against airplanes or highways or even fast-food restaurants. Single-minded space is sometimes wonderfully convenient; we don't always want to notice or be noticed by other people; we don't always feel capable of civility. At certain times in our lives, at certain times in everyday life, we are and have every right to be single-minded, and we require space that fits our mood or enterprise. But the reiteration of single-mindedness at one public site after another seems to me something that civilized societies should avoid. I can't specify the effects of that reiteration, for the character of city life today has other, though related, causes—among them the causes, which I will come to, of single-mindedness itself.

But open-minded space has in the past been a breeding ground for mutual respect, political solidarity, civil discourse, and it makes sense to suggest that without it all these will be put at risk. Without it, as the Goodmans say, "our city crowds are doomed to be lonely crowds, bored crowds, humanly uncultured crowds."

But why should there be crowds at all? The real alternative to open-minded space is private space, and it is the (genuine) appeal of private space that shapes the contemporary city. Single-mindedness is designed to serve and facilitate privacy; it has no value in itself, and no one ever thought that it did (even the romance of the highway is largely the romance of the private car). The point of single-mindedness is career discipline at one end of our lives and home-boundedness at the other. The home, the crucial setting for privacy, is neither single-minded nor open-minded. Not single-minded, because it is designed to accommodate a variety of activities: cooking, eating, sleeping, loving, quarreling, talking, working, playing, raising children. And not open-minded, because the actual encounters and activities that take place are tightly controlled by the small circle of participants. Home is and ought to be predictable. Perhaps the best word for private space is Richard Sennett's "intimate." Single-mindedness serves intimacy, because it moves us quickly through the public, nonintimate, and unpredictable world.

Open-minded space, by contrast, competes with intimacy because it provides an alternative pattern of activity and encounter. These days it competes less and less successfully. The more privileged we are, the more quickly we move from place to place, the less time we spend in public. The ideal is door-to-door: private airplane, helicopter, limousine. Public space is degraded, first because it is taken to be merely instrumental, then because even the instrument is avoided by those who are able to do so. Think of the waiting rooms of the great 19th-century train stations and then of the way we wait now: the experience has been stripped of all grace and expectation, except for the dim hope that the train will be on time. Single-minded space, without value of its own, tends to run down. Technology advances, fashions change, the affluent depart; ultimately the space is taken over by those to whom society denies the comforts of intimacy, the vagabonds and homeless.

III

It's not difficult to describe the process by which this happens or to explain its reasons. Indeed, there are too many reasons; the process is overdetermined. What is hard is to suggest how it might be abated or reversed.

(1) *The first reason is cultural* and has to do with the success (or perhaps the development beyond the point of success) of liberal individualism—which is not merely a creed but a state of mind, a certain characterological formation. Increasingly, we conceive of well-being exclu-

sively in terms of the self. The material realization of well-being lies in the personal or domestic accumulation of goods; the moral realization lies in self-understanding and meaningful relationships. Materialism and morality alike lead to the enhanced valuation of intimate space, the setting for private comfort and also for personal or mutual exploration. Public space, by contrast, requires what Sennett calls impersonality and role-playing: civility rather than sincerity. It's a setting for reticence and wit, not for confession. At home you can say to someone you love or hope to love: Sit down, sit down, and tell me *everything*; in the café we tell one another censored stories, artful stories. Liberalism breeds an expansive desire for comfort and closeness, useful commodities and loving persons, while an older republicanism, historically associated with open-minded space, provides us only with monuments and fellow citizens.

(2) *New technologies also enhance* the value of the home—not only labor-saving devices that make housework easier but also, and probably more important, the new communications media. Less housework might mean more time to "go out," but the new media make possible a kind of engagement-with-the-world at home: we don't need to go out at all. We can sit, safe and secure, in our living rooms or family rooms and listen to music, watch the news, see movies, plays, or vaudeville shows, tune in a political debate or a revivalist preacher or a "talk" show (where famous people, whom we cannot hope to meet, do the talking, and we are free to kibitz), watch national and international athletic competitions—with a better view of the action than the actual spectators have.

Any of these activities, passive though they are, would once have carried us out of intimate space into many different sorts of public space, single-minded and open-minded in different degrees, lobbies and halls and stadiums and parks, and led to encounters (at least, visual encounters) with other people doing similar or different things. The experience is less engaging, I think, when we are homebound, but it is also less trouble, less time-consuming, physically and mentally easier. "Perhaps," as the Goodmans say, "there are no longer real occasions for social congregation. . . . " Not true, of

course: people still go out to concerts, movies, ball games, church services, and I shall want to ask why they do. But they also spend a lot of time "attending" these events, not together but one by one, as a locational series (separately, in their own living rooms) rather than a social congregation. And, increasingly, when they do go out, they travel in their cars, small pieces of intimate space, hurtling along the single-minded highway.

(3) *Shaped by culture and technology*—here the car has been more important than the new communications media—the concepts that have guided city planning and urban redevelopment in the 20th century have been largely single-minded in tendency. The reigning maxim is one site/one purpose: hence the "center" and the "project." "Modernist architecture and planning," writes Marshall Berman in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, "created a modernized version of pastoral: a spatially and socially segmented world—people here, traffic there; work here, homes there; rich here, poor there; barriers of grass and concrete in betweeen. . . . "

Berman's list can be extended: housing, business, manufacture, government, culture, recreation—each has its proper place, cut off from all the others. Open-minded space is equated with urban disorder, the uncertainties of street life, the chaos of the petty-bourgeois economy. All this is to be banished. "We must kill the street," Le Corbusier said, and that is the effect, not yet achieved, of his "radiant city" as of Frank Lloyd Wright's "living city," both of them really anti-cities, organized to serve the private car and the solitary individual.

(4) *The ideological critique of open-minded space* has been paralleled by a social inundation: crowding, overuse, conflict. It would be foolish to deny that the planners and architects have responded, sometimes, to real, not ideological, disorders. Economic mobilization and the slow advance of democracy (at least, of democratic manners and a superficial "equality of condition") bring more and more people into available public space. And, what may be more important, they bring increasingly diverse kinds of people, from different classes and ethnic groups, into the same public space. Open-mindedness implies a tolerance for diver-

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sity, but in the past this has most commonly been a diversity of function and only within limits a diversity of people.

Lovers of urbanity celebrate the city's chaotic mix, but it is wise to notice that many of the most celebrated examples of urban space "belong" to quite specific groups of people. The forum and the piazza were places first of all for male citizens; universities are segregated cities of the young; neighborhoods are often ethnically homogeneous (like one of Jane Jacobs's favorite neighborhoods, the Italian North End of Boston); streets and parks are someone's "turf," cafés and bars are most interesting when they are taken over by particular groups of writers, actors, journalists, and so on. Insofar as this sort of possession ceases to be possible, or ceases to be secure, the space deteriorates. The unpredictability of open-mindedness becomes threatening. There is more difference, more tension and potential conflict, than people want to cope with.

Jane Jacobs has described how a successful street is self-policing. An unsuccessful street, by contrast, always seems inadequately policed, dangerous, a place to avoid. The same is true for parks, playgrounds, waiting rooms, lobbies. Without regular and confident users, they become settings for social, sexual, and political deviance: derelicts, criminals, "hippies," political and religious sectarians, adolescent gangs. All these belong, no doubt, to the urban mix, but if they are too prominent within it, ordinary men and women will flee as soon as they can into private and controlled worlds. Their flight carries them through single-minded space, which is subject to a similar deterioration and can come to feel equally dangerous. But single-mindedness is, at least, transitional and instrumental: we aim only to be in and out and have no high hopes of conversation or engagement along the way. So we avoid urbanity, move between the instrumental and the intimate, give up those areas of public life where civility is necessary but increasingly difficult.

(5) *What we might think of as the mass consumption of open-minded space* strains and sometimes overwhelms its financial base. Open-mindedness requires public subsidy. This can take the form of direct provision (squares, parks, sidewalks) or of maintenance and control. Sometimes it requires planning—if only to undo the effects of previous plans. Market provision is also possible, as in the case of the café (though the café is dependent on the sidewalk) or the row of shops. But enterprises of this sort don't seem profit-maximizing, and may require entrepreneurs who themselves enjoy the public life they facilitate. They are often bought out by national chains whose local managers are not trained for a similar enjoyment. Under contemporary conditions, it appears that commerce favors single-mindedness, which is easier to invest in and capitalize on, and which represents a more profitable use of increasingly high-priced land. Alternative uses and possibilities are uneconomic, rather like political speeches in a shopping center (agitation is only appropriate at the government center where taxpayers foot the bill). There is no obvious entrepreneurial interest in reproducing the civility of the old street and square (or, say, the spaciousness and dignity of the old waiting room)—except, perhaps, as luxury goods, like the first-class bar in a 747.

The truth is that open-minded space depends upon police, street-cleaners, waiters, conductors, gardeners, supervisors of all sorts, *whose wages it doesn't pay*. These people have to be paid out of tax money, and there is less and less willingness to pay enough of them. We try to accommodate ourselves to the supermarket model, where service personnel are reduced to a minimum. But that reduction is deadly for open-minded space: one can't strike up a conversation at the check-out counter or "hang around" in a parking lot. If there is to be room for conversation and for hanging around, it must be, so to speak, room with amenities.

IV

An overabundance of reasons—cultural, technological, ideological, social, and economic —and all of them seem to point in the same direction: toward single-mindedness on the one hand and intimacy on the other. But this can't be, and obviously isn't, the whole story. Life at home requires, if only for contrast, an extramural life; it is too much of a strain on intimacy when intimacy is all there is. Once, perhaps, it was in the interest of women to raise the walls

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high around the home, and to emphasize the coziness and comfort of domesticity, for they were largely excluded from public activities outside. But the success of the feminist movement, if it is successful, ought to lead to a new demand for space outside the home. Affluence breeds a similar demand: how often can one redecorate the living room? There is bound to be growing pressure from people with time and money on their hands for interesting things to do as well as for (or even instead of) domestic enhancements: holidays, travel, evenings out, "social congregations" of different sorts, places to see and be seen. People will continue to want to rub shoulders even if they are leery of actual encounters.

Certain sorts of single-minded space can meet this pressure—in their different ways, for example, shopping centers and cultural centers. But settings of this sort are most successful if they open out on alternative spaces or slowly come to accommodate alternative uses. The new urban malls are a nice example of the adaptation of the "center" to a genuine urbanity—though they have mostly been successful only on dramatic sites, like the Boston or Baltimore waterfronts. In any case, success points

strongly to the appeal of open-minded space, with its easy access to many different sorts of activity, the sense it conveys of things to do and time to waste, and the security generated by consistent use over the span of day and night.

What has made all this possible is an interesting combination of entrepreneurial activity, local politics, planning and antiplanning—a market/political process that liberals and leftists committed to the city would do well to study. What isn't yet clear is the extent to which success, where it has occurred, depends upon exclusion, in this case by price (especially from the in-close housing that has sprung up around the new malls).

The real test is to make such arrangements work in more ordinary neighborhoods—or, in the absence of the mall, to rehabilitate the street. It would not be a great achievement to provide urbanity only as a luxury good, and chiefly for a homogeneous but transient population of upwardly mobile young professionals. The more appropriate homogeneity for a democratic city is the residential district, shaped over the years by ethnicity or interest. Years ago, Percival Goodman argued in *Dissent* against the construction of Lincoln Center. The buildings planned for the Center, he suggested, should be scattered across the city, strengthening its different parts. I suppose there are counterarguments. Certainly, Lincoln Center is very convenient for cultural commuters from New Jersey; it is hardly necessary to register the (alarming) fact that one is in Manhattan. And lots of people do come, creating, at least at certain fixed times, a nice liveliness.

Cities, indeed, need centers, but only insofar as these accommodate diverse kinds of enterprises and activities. Otherwise, they need decentering, for the sake of diversity. It is probably better that a cultural palace be located near a church, a government office building, a good café, an apartment house, and so on, than that it be adjacent to another palace—better at least for the residents of the city. If open-minded space is good for the people called "yuppies," then it is probably good for the rest of us. But are there enough of the rest of us, living in more or less stable neighborhoods, eager for the pleasures and ready to pay the costs of urbanity?   □