

The Erosion of Public Space and the Public Realm: paranoia, surveillance and privatization in New York City

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Introduction

Richard Longstreth's landscape of fear has also created a new structure of feeling in New York City, not only because of architectural changes, but because of the state and citizen paranoia that stimulates the restricted use of public space and ethnic profiling of users, reinforced by new regulations and land use policies. Not only are we facing the deleterious impact of 9/11 on an already insecure and frightened populace, we are also seeing the consequences of forty years of privatization and an increasing number of physical barriers on streets and sidewalks as part of Homeland Security measures.¹ Moreover, the current management style of increased control of unregulated places has altered how public spaces are used and perceived.

In New York City, we are losing public space and the democratic values it represents when we need it most. People went to Washington Square Park and Union Square after 9/11, and later to protest the Iraq war and mourn the dead soldiers. But during the Republican Convention, Central Park was closed to protesters because of the cost of re-seeding the lawn. What does this closure of the most symbolic of public spaces portend?

Nancy Fraser defines the public realm as an unbounded, expansive space of social interaction, free exchange of ideas, and political action that influences governmental practice (Kohn 2004). Without the encounters that occur in public space, the public realm contracts. According to Margaret Kohn, it is this link

between spatial practices and freedom of speech that alert us to the dangers contained in the erosion of public space (Kohn 2004), and exactly what we are experiencing in the aftermath of 9/11 and the specter of terrorism.

Public space in New York City

In the 1960s, William H. Whyte set out to find out why some New York City public spaces were successes, filled with people and activities, while others were empty, cold and unused. He found that only a few places were attracting daily users and saw this decline as a threat to urban civility. He advocated for viable places where people could meet and relax and his recommendations were implemented by the New York City Planning department to transform the city (Whyte 1980).

In this century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design, management, and systems of ownership that reduce diversity. In some cases these designs are a deliberate program to reduce the number of undesirables, and in others, a by-product of privatization, commercialization, historic preservation and poor planning and design. Both sets of practices reduce the vitality and vibrancy of the spaces and reorganize it to welcome only tourists and middle-class people.

Further, the obsession with security since the September 11th has closed previously open spaces and buildings. Long before the World Trade Center bombings, insecurity and fear of others had been a centerpiece of the post-industrial American city. But New Yorkers are now overreacting by barricading themselves, reducing their sense of community, openness, and optimism. President Bush argues that the emphasis on security is necessary, but, as Richard Longstreth notes, terrorism is never curtailed by Jersey barriers and bollards.

Before 9/11, when designers talked about security issues they meant reducing vandalism, creating defensible spaces, and moving homeless people and vagrants to other locations (Sipes 2002). With the enhanced fear of terrorism, though, familiar physical barriers such as bollards, planters, security gates, turnstiles, and equipment for controlling parking and traffic are now reinforced by electronic monitoring tactics—such as metal detectors, surveillance cameras and continuous video recording (Speckhardt and Dowdell 2002). Before September 11th, the idea that New Yorkers would agree to live their lives under the gaze of surveillance cam-

eras or real time police monitoring seemed unlikely. Yet the New York Civil Liberties Union has found more than 2,397 cameras trained on public spaces (Tavernise 2004). What was once considered 'Big Brother' technology and an infringement of civil rights is now a necessary safety tool with little, if any, an examination of the consequences.

Privatization of public space

Private interests take over public space in countless ways. Neil Smith, Don Mitchell and I have documented how sealing off a public space by force, redesigning it, and then opening it with intensive surveillance and policing is a precursor to private management (Low 2006). Restricting access and posting extensive restrictions further privatizes its use. For example, the interior public space of the Sony Atrium does not allow people in with excessive amounts of shopping bags or shopping carts. Napping is forbidden. At Herald Square in front of Macy's, the 34th Street Partnership has put up a list of rules prohibiting almost everything including sitting on the seat-height, planting walls. Gated communities exclude the public with fencing and guards, especially when there is a public amenity—such as a lake or walking trail—inside (Low 2003). Policing and other forms of surveillance insure that street vendors are strictly confined or banished to marginal areas, while malls and shopping centers have guards and 24 hour video surveillance to protect their facilities.²

These physical tactics are bolstered by economic strategies in which public goods are controlled a private corporation or agency. For example, Business Improvement Districts can tax local businesses and retail establishments to provide policing, trash removal, and street renovation accompanied by imposed restrictions on the use of public sidewalks, pocket parks and plazas. Conservancies and public/private partnerships also blur public/private distinctions when the city grants decision-making powers to private citizens who then raise money to run what was formerly a publically-funded park. The National Park Service has announced plans to privatize the national park system by using corporate funds to revitalize urban parks based on the success of public/private partnerships in renovating and maintaining Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and Central Park in New York City.

Gated communities employ a different set of regulatory practices connected with regional and municipal planning. Incorporation, incentive zoning, and succession and annexation recapture public

goods and services including taxpayers money and utilize these funds to benefit private housing developments. These strategies mislead taxpayers and channel money into amenities the public can not use and contribute only to the maintenance of private communities. This shift toward privatization of land use controls is an impoverishment of the public realm as well as access to public resources.

The World Trade Center as public space

There is an inherent tension between the meanings of the World Trade Center site created by dominant political and economic players, and the significance of the area for those who live near it. Most of the media reporting has been on the construction of a memorial space for an imagined national and global, community of visitors who identify with its broader, state-produced meanings. But New Yorkers' meanings are as much a part of memorialization as the political machinations and economic competition for rental space and architectural status. In response, I have been studying what local Battery Park City residents say about the aftermath of 9/11 and to record their feelings about what they would like to see built at Ground Zero to expand and contest media and governmental representations of the design.

Daniel Libeskind describes his scheme of the tallest tower in the world with a sunken memorial of 30 (originally 70) feet of exposed Hudson River slurry wall as symbolic of democracy's resilience in the face of terrorist attacks (Dunlap 2003). Many have criticized the 1,776 tower as "astonishingly tasteless" and a target for another attack. In fact, the New York Times reports that more than half of the New Yorkers surveyed are unwilling to work on the higher floors of a new building at the site, 67% are personally concerned about another terrorist attack, and 65% think that insufficient security measures are currently in place (Thee and Connelly 2005). Libeskind, however, argues that his tower is symbolic of his first view of Manhattan skyscrapers when he came to this country from Israel as a child of Holocaust survivors, and echoes the upraised arm of the Statue of Liberty. Recently, all work on the design of the tower was stopped because the construction plans did not meet post 9/11 physical safety requirements.

For New York Governor Pataki, New York City Mayor Bloomberg and the architectural critic Paul Goldberger, the site

plan and memorial space design is emotionally evocative. But for local residents, children, and the overall fabric of New York public spaces, it offers little to solve the problems—much less the feelings of fear and insecurity—of those who live and work downtown. For example, residents of Battery Park City say that they would not like to live in a cemetery, and feel that there are already too many memorials in their community spaces. They would like greater economic vitality, more people and businesses to enliven their neighborhood. Almost half of the pre 9/11 residents left shortly after the tragedy, and those who stayed still feel afraid and vulnerable. The current Libeskind design and memorial designs do not take into consideration any of the residents' concerns elicited through interviewing. Sadly, the memorial space dominates the Battery Park City side of the site, while the retail and commercial space that the neighborhood needs is included within the outer ring of tall offices buildings. And the sunken expanse of memorial space is not perceived by residents or children as a "safe" or "secure" space, even though it is defended by walls and a sunken, inaccessible site. So even at Ground Zero, we are losing the opportunity for a public space that could respond to citizens' feelings and concerns.

One more threat: globalization, increased diversity and why it matters

With globalization this trend of increased barricading and surveillance accompanied by privatization is intensifying. Immigrants, the mainstay of the U.S. economy, have again become the feared "other". Privatization, surveillance, and restrictive management have created an increasingly inhospitable environment for immigrants, local ethnic groups, and culturally diverse behaviors. If this trend continues, it will eradicate the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people of different gender, class, culture, nationality and ethnicity intermingle peacefully.

How can we integrate our diverse communities and promote social tolerance in this new political climate? One way, is to make sure that our urban public spaces where we all come together, remain public in the sense of providing a place for everyone to relax, learn and recreate, and open so that we have places where interpersonal and intergroup cooperation and conflict can be worked out in a safe and public forum.

Principles for promoting and managing social and cultural diversity

Based on twenty years of ethnographic research on parks, historic sites, and beaches, the Public Space Research Group has developed a series of principles that encourage, support and maintain cultural diversity in public space that are presented in *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity* (Low, Taplin and Scheld 2005). They include principles similar to William H. Whyte's rules for small urban spaces that promote their social viability, but in this case, these rules promote and/or maintain the "public" in urban open spaces. The principles are not applicable in all situations, but are meant as guidelines for empowered citizen decision-making in park planning, management and design for the future.

(1) If people are not represented in urban parks, historic national sites and monuments, and more importantly if their histories are erased, they will not use the park.

(2) Access is as much about economics and cultural patterns of park use as circulation and transportation, thus income and visitation patterns must be taken into consideration when providing access for all social groups.

(3) The social interaction of diverse groups can be maintained and enhanced by providing safe, spatially adequate "territories" for everyone within the larger space of the overall site.

(4) Accommodating the differences in the ways social class and ethnic groups use and value public sites is essential to making decisions that sustain cultural and social diversity.

(5) Contemporary historic preservation should not concentrate on restoring the scenic features without also restoring the facilities and diversions that attract people to the park.

(6) Symbolic ways of communicating cultural meaning are an important dimension of place attachment that can be fostered to promote cultural diversity.

These principles for promoting and sustaining cultural diversity in urban parks and heritage sites are just a beginning, but they are a way for us to start to address Richard Longstreth's landscape of fear. The important point to be made, however, is that it is not just the landscape that we should be looking at, but the regulations, laws and policies; restricted uses; paranoia; and citizen compliance.

Notes

¹While there have been some notable additions—Madison Square Park, the new pier and park at the Trump buildings on the West Side, and the tables and chairs at the New York Public Library entrance—these are exceptions. These spaces are surveilled but not barricaded.

²It is important to know that there have been court cases that challenge how private the public spaces of malls can be in that there have been cases won to distribute information and allow for free speech.

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