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## **PUBLIC PLACES, PRIVATE LIVES: Plazas and the Broader Public**

Plazas today have little in common with those of ancient Greece and Rome and medieval Europe. On the whole, they have been cut from a different bolt of urban fabric. Civic plazas are, to an extent, an exception. What connects them with the Greek agora, the Roman forum, and the medieval piazza is the image of the plaza as an open-air, heterogeneous concentration of activity and focus of the city.

Yet, the potential of realizing that image in American cities is severely limited because of greater opportunities for a private way of life and the fragmentation of the city. Both civic plazas and privately developed corporate and commercial plazas have much more limited roles. They are more local and homogenous, more amenity than necessity.

### **Privacy, Public Obligation, and the Traditional Plaza**

The public, corporate way of life in ancient Greece and Rome and medieval Europe was not simply the result of a societal conception of how people should live together. It was largely a matter of necessity. The need to survive, the need to defend, and the need to maintain order all factored into this way of life.

Barrington Moore Jr., studying the concept of privacy in several extremely different cultures, concluded that opportunities for privacy are determined by the character of society's obligations, that the need for privacy amounts to a desire for socially approved protection from painful social obligation, and that the desire for privacy can be extinguished by an acute awareness of the need for dependence on others.<sup>1</sup> These conclusions illuminate the difference between public life then and now.

Social obligations were considerable in ancient Greece and Rome. Participation in public and political life was required of citizens. Withdrawal from that life made one immediately suspect. Wealthy citizens were required by very strong social sanctions to spend their personal wealth on public projects ranging from buildings, monuments, and public works to supporting a city chorus or outfitting and maintaining a warship.



Waldshut, West German  
Federal Republic. The most  
important street in town  
recently was repaved and  
designated for pedestrian use  
only. A nearby stream was  
channeled through the center.  
Photo by Donlyn Lyndon



**Crystal Court, IDS Center,  
Minneapolis, before new owners  
devoted more of its space to  
commercial kiosks and began to  
discourage lingering.  
Photos by Mark Chidister.**

In Greece, where cities were independent political entities, this involvement was vital for governance, administration, and keeping peace. In Rome, where cities were part of a larger government, involvement was mandated by the Roman Senate and Emperor. The dream of a “pax romana” or “peace in Rome,” under which people could live in cities without walls, required an impressive and oppressive military in which participation was not voluntary.

In medieval Europe, extensive sets of rules and codes of behavior were necessary to keep order within the city. Cooperation was necessary: communities could not call out the National Guard or the Army, and residents relied on each other to ward off enemies such as the Turks and the Vikings.

The agoras, forums, and piazzas in these cities generally were the only places where all the citizens could gather at once; in the absence of mass media, they were vital. These places were the focus of the political scene, the places where speeches were delivered, laws and edicts announced, elections held, and battle plans made.

The public way of life in medieval streets and piazzas was also fueled by the primary role of the city as a market place, the inadequacy of homes (by our standards), and the familiarity among city inhabitants. Goods and supplies were either produced within the city, brought in by traveling merchants, or, in the case of food and some raw materials, produced in the surrounding countryside. Because venturing outside the protective walls meant risk, most trading took place within.

Those same walls restricted horizontal growth of the city, forcing dense patterns of buildings and, in turn, small homes. This premium on space and the inadequacy of homes for much of anything except sleeping forced people into the street and the piazzas that were built

when the streets became too cramped.

These streets and squares were filled largely with familiar faces; cities had much smaller populations concentrated into small areas and people generally lived their whole lives within a single city. There were plenty of strangers, but there was a stable group of well-known people and a strong sense of corporate ownership of the public spaces that made coping with strangers manageable.

Life in all three societies was a corporate, public affair. The agora, forum, and piazza were the equivalent of our family room, grocery store, shopping mall, restaurant, central business district, courthouse, television, telephone, newspaper, theater, sports arena, and city water supply all rolled into one. Life was lived in the streets and plazas because of the inhabitants' acute awareness of their dependence on one another and the societal obligations that dependence spawned.

### **Fragmentation of the City**

The inability of plazas to be the focus of cities today and the more limited role of plazas parallels the dramatic changes in the city center and changes in our conception of privacy. During this century, the city has been fragmented: roles once associated with and vital to the city center have been dispersed.

Teaford's work shows that the fissures along which the city would break apart were well established at the century's advent. The city then had the appearance of a unified whole. The city center was shared, common ground. It was the focus of political, social, and religious life.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the neighborhoods around this hub were clearly defined homogenous enclaves, sorted out along social, economic, and ethnic lines. Numerous reforms that attempted to redress inequities and create unity failed to have

more than local effects. The city would not subject itself to one common moral standard. Thus, the city was unified only by its transit lines, common water supply, and shared center.

The car and the highway have often been blamed for the breaking apart of the city center. Rather than being the cause, they simply allowed deep-set divisions that already existed fuller spatial expression. Middle-class families moved out of the city center. Stores, theaters, schools, and later major employers, clinics, and their likes followed.

Consequently, the role of the city center has narrowed. It is no longer, even with all of the new festival marketplaces, the retail center. It is one of many retail centers and many entertainment, business, and cultural centers. It has been transformed into a specialized district and attracts a narrow sector of the population: the poor elderly, young middle class singles, and childless couples attracted to fashionable city life.

The role of plazas is intertwined with the role of the city center. Because the city center is no longer the focus, plazas can no longer be the heterogeneous, central places of history. They are specialized places serving the limited population of those who live downtown and those who work downtown. Roles once inherent to the plaza are now taken up by the myriad of outdoor and predominantly indoor spaces for public meetings, shopping, performances, sporting events, and celebrations that are dispersed throughout the city.

### **The Changed Conception of Privacy**

Public life in ancient Greece and Rome and medieval Europe was the result of a profound interdependency felt among city inhabitants and the societal obligations that directed all energies to the common good. Changes in our system of dependency, the dominance of home,

and the need to cope in a much different world of strangers has led to many greater opportunities for a private way of life.

Our system of dependency is at a much larger scale than ever before. Theoretically, we still depend on our neighbors for protection and the goods we need to survive. However, our defense against war is provided nationally; our food, clothing, and all the other paraphernalia with which we surround ourselves come from national and global systems of production and distribution. Cooperation among city inhabitants is not as necessary as it once was.

In the past few centuries, the home—as opposed to public places—has become the primary domain. It has become increasingly more comfortable and more specialized. From our homes we view the world through the window of our televisions and the printed media. From them, we contact our friends and relatives with the telephone. We no longer need the plaza to visit each other or to keep up on the news.

Finally, our conception of privacy is, in part, linked with our ability to cope in a much different world of strangers. Most clearly seen in Lyn Lofland's work on urban public space, people privatize public space as a way of enabling one to live with and relate to much larger numbers of strangers than previously known. The privatization occurs both in the sense of personalizing a portion of public space by regular use of an individual or group and in the sense of learning how to manage one's body to create a symbolic shield of privacy in public. The first type of privatization holds the potential of excluding other individuals and groups from using the public space. The second holds the potential of living in the midst of the throng in total privacy.<sup>3</sup>

Today, we are much more able to

choose a private life. That is not to say that opportunities for being in public are absent: they abound. But, our decision to go to a public place and to engage in its publicness is a matter of choice, not need or obligation.

### **The Role of the Contemporary Plaza**

Plazas in many cities not only provide a more narrow sector of the population with a more limited palette of options, but also are used only by people who choose to do so. Plazas are no longer integral to a way of life.

To begin to define the role of plazas, a distinction needs to be made between those that are privately developed and managed and those that are publicly owned and managed; more simply stated, between corporate and civic plazas.

Corporate plazas that are used most frequently host a lunchtime crowd of office workers watching each other or a staged event planned and provided by the corporation. Occasional special events, those outside the 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. frame of lunch time, seldom fail to draw a crowd. These plazas have also served as the forecourt of a corporate tower, a form or vessel of public art, symbol of corporate power and wealth, and means to a taller building through incentive zoning. Those that are used are close to a constituency of office workers and are designed and managed to encourage use.

The ability of these plazas to be truly public is highly dependent on the owner's attitude. Poor location, insensitive design, or a defensive management policy can hamper publicness. City government, in most cases, has little control over these and, as a result, many have an uncoordinated collection of open spaces that serve the public in a piecemeal fashion, often discouraging use of particular classes of people either overtly or by design.

Private provision and management of public space is fraught with problems. Even when it is done right, maintaining responsiveness to public need is vulnerable. A case in point is the Crystal Court of the IDS Center in Minneapolis. The Crystal Court occupies the 100 percent location downtown, the junction of the prime corner and the skywalk system. It can be used year round, which, given Minnesota winters, was a wise choice of design. IDS was not required to provide the space and did not receive any zoning bonus for providing it.

For many years the Crystal Court served as Minneapolitans' town square, the kind of place in which one could sit for hours watching the passing show. But several years ago, IDS was purchased by Oxford Development Group. The new owner proceeded to rent the observation deck on the top floor to a law firm, remove the information booth at the entrance, and remove public seating from the court. Instead, kiosks for selling merchandise were constructed in hopes of generating more income. Now standing still in the court for more than five minutes will draw an inquiry from security. A change in management dramatically changed the role of the court. The city has no recourse; the matter is out of its control.

Civic plazas also have the potential of being a lunch spot and a place for performances. Because access to all is inherent, these spaces tend to be more heterogenous. This became apparent to me when I compared the use of the First National Bank Plaza, Standard Oil Plaza, and the Civic Center Plaza in Chicago. The first two were populated by groups of young, mostly white, office workers; but the people in the Civic Center Plaza represented a wide range of ages, race, and economic status.

Civic plazas are distinctively different because of their potential of being a symbolic and ceremonial space for the



entire city. Even though the entire citizenry can no longer gather in these places, they can become symbolic centers for key events in a community's life. In that same vein, the civic plaza can become a repository of collective memory for a community, not only by sparking recollection of events it has held, but also as the vessel for monuments and tangible reminders of the past.

### **Implications for Design, Planning, and Research**

There are four conclusions and a number of directives for future action that can be drawn from this. First, public life no longer occurs exclusively in plazas. Decline in the centrality and use of plazas has not meant, nor is it a sign of, the death of public life. As Michael Brill has written, public life hasn't disappeared, it merely has been transformed, manifested in a broad range of spatial and non-spatial settings.<sup>4</sup>



Privately-owned and managed plazas, such as Chicago's First National Bank Plaza, are likely to attract a less diverse crowd than public plazas.

Second, plazas are one part, one option in a vast inter-connected network of public spaces. They can no longer be conceived as singular, stand-alone spaces. They must relate and connect.

Third, the ability of a plaza to unify a city or foster a sense of community merely by its presence is a myth. Forces that shape or break down a sense of community are determined by much more than architecture.

And fourth, plazas are very local, specific places. They must be shaped with a close understanding of the context in which they will be placed and the people who will use them.

New plazas should be planned and designed as part of a large, complex network of public spaces. Planners should build a knowledge of existing spaces and exercise more control over the placement and program of new ones. Reliance on private developers to provide public space and on competitions to provide designs weakens the ability to

fine tune new places and to incorporate public input.

This planning can be undertaken only with a clear understanding of the way public places are used, the amount of use they receive, the way they are perceived by both users and non-users, and the characteristics of users. This would allow identification of populations not being served in the existing network, options not presently available, and barriers to use. From this information, a clear conception of the purpose of these spaces and the population that should be served could be developed.

Finally, past thought and studies have conceived of the plaza as the primary public place in the city. This myopic view needs to be corrected to one that encompasses the broader public landscape and its purpose and meaning in people's lives.

#### Notes

1. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Privacy: Studies in Social and Cultural History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1984).
2. Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
3. Lyn H. Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
4. Michael Brill, "Transformation, Nostalgia, and Illusion about Public Life and Public Environments." Keynote address, 18th Annual Meeting of the Environmental Design Research Association, Ottawa (1987).