

Is Public Space a Public Good?

Thomas Fisher

In our country, almost irrationally suspicious of the public sector and seemingly determined to incapacitate government, public space plays an increasingly important role as both a place of refuge for all who get left behind in the rush to privatization, and as a place of resistance for all who see danger in an ever more radical right wing. The University of Minnesota's College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture sponsored a symposium in October entitled "Public Space, Public Good?" that touched on such questions. Organized by faculty member Kristine Miller, the symposium brought together architects, landscape architects, and urban designers to evaluate the state of public space and the nature of the public good in an era in which both concepts have come into question.

Miller led off with a chapter from her forthcoming book on privatized public spaces in New York City. Focusing on the IBM atrium, she asked what recourse the public has when private owners alter spaces intended for public use, as happened when the IBM atrium's original bamboo garden, designed by Zion & Breen, received major modifications. She called for a public role in overseeing the changes to privately owned spaces provided in exchange for bonus space. That, however, will take a public sector in the U.S. that doesn't cower, as so often happens now, in the face of private power.

Architect Frank Moya and landscape architect Ludewijk Baljon showed public-realm projects they have designed in Puerto Rico and Holland respectively. Moya demonstrated that often simple moves, like cleaning up local streets or creating a new neighborhood entrance, can have a transformative effect, engaging the inhabitants and restoring the social infrastructure. Meanwhile, Baljon

showed how a landscape architect could hold together a newly created Dutch suburb, determining not only the major moves, but also the details that link the designs of various architects. In both cases, public space becomes the way to bind together disparate people, reminding us that our professional responsibility includes the health of communities and ecosystems, the safety of our air and water, and the welfare of future generations and even other species.

Landscape architects Dianne Harris and Walter Hood examined the ambivalence Americans have about the public realm. Harris critiqued Chicago's new Millennium Park, an expensive and exclusive public space that offers suburbanites an urban spectacle, complete with the "corporate graffiti" of private sponsors on almost everything. At a time when Chicago's schools and streets badly need money, Harris asked if this constitutes the best use of limited government funds. Hood showed two parks of his design in Oakland, where the local community demanded space for various uses, ranging from an open market to public toilets. In the end, Hood suggested, the public should make the ultimate decisions about the use of such spaces.

Architects Linda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley spoke about public space at a very different scale, the entire Niagara region. They proposed the idea of "ethical theming" to embrace those who often get overlooked in the typical branding of a region to attract tourists. At Niagara, this concept would involve seeing the Niagara River not as an edge separating two countries, but as the center of a single region. Politicians and planners have long depended upon boundaries and edges to separate people and thus reduce conflict—a substitution of distance for discourse that has reached a point where people

rarely encounter anyone or anything by chance anymore. As a result, many people fear real public space because they lack experience with it.

Yet, the resolution of such public conflicts may be the most important contribution design can make in our world, evident in the examples of traditional public spaces discussed by historian Marc Trieb and landscape architect Laurie Olin. Trieb described the design of Senate and Market Squares in Helsinki, two spaces that, while close together and roughly the same size, have very different functions and characters based on what surrounds them. Public space, in other words, depends for its vitality on the surrounding private property, just as the value of the latter depends upon the quality of the former. Olin recounted his work on the restoration and revitalization of New York's Bryant Park, where the quality of life in the space depends on improved design, management, maintenance, and programming, all working together.

The symposium ended with a spirited conversation among the participants. Do we have too much public space, asked Hood — more than we can afford? In reply, Olin asked, rhetorically, why we even have parks, or why we care about public life. Such questions reflect the embattled quality of public space in the age of terrorism and privatization. Public space has certainly become the stage on which the global struggle between the rich and poor, the disingenuous and the disenfranchised, now gets played out. Some might reasonably wonder if such problems would vanish if we were to get rid of all public space. But terrorists have shown themselves adept at creating public space faster than we could ever take it away. The World Trade Center towers, almost entirely private property, became a

global public space as soon as the first plane hit on 9/11. We cannot escape public space, so we have no choice but to understand it.

Shibley then asked if the fear or misunderstanding of public space comes from a paucity in the language we use in talking about it. Were we to talk about social space in all of its diversity, rather than the somewhat singular idea of public space, we would have a better understanding of it. Such space would certainly not remain, as Miller said, what is left over from what the law defines as private property. Understanding the social gradients of public space, added Trieb, would help us see that it can happen anywhere, on public or private property.

Likewise, the fear of public space can be addressed, said Moya, by seeing it as a way for us to deal with our cultural differences. It is a place, said Olin, in which a variety of people can meet in safety. The symposium ended with a recognition of the paradoxical nature of public space in our time: people fear such space because they feel vulnerable in it; yet they need it more than ever, for it will enable them to interact with others and overcome that fear.

It may sometimes seem that everything worthwhile has been either privatized or mediated, but we should not be fooled. How we deal with the public good globally will determine whether or not this century will be more peaceful or more war-torn than the last. And how we deal with public space locally will determine whether or not our communities will be more united or more divided than in the past. Public space may, in the end, be the ultimate barometer of our civilization, the gauge against which we can measure whether we are a country or just a collection of individuals living in fear of one another. For all of our good, let us hope it is not the latter.