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When private property masquerades as public space: the shifting face of publicness in London's city squares

"Access to space is fundamentally related to social status and power…changing the allocation of space is inherently related to changing society" (Weisman, 1992: 1)

The city square embodies popular notions of publicness: this is the space where people form assemblages of public identity, gathering to enact practices of mourning, celebration, protest, leisure and allegiance. Part of the public realm, the square supports the city dweller's public identity, configuring urban belonging through shared inhabitation. The actions and behaviours permitted and encouraged in the city square reveal ideologies supporting broader societal values and citizen rights.

Throughout the UK a pattern has emerged whereby private corporations create and take ownership of public space, but the publicness they promote is conditional and illusive. Ambiguous pseudo-public space is pronounced by liberal media as a threat to democracy, infringing access rights (Garrett, 2017; The Guardian, 2017). Private-public squares model aspects of appearance on state owned public spaces, but the dynamics and ideologies that support this spatial

identity are disregarded. By concealing terms of inhabitation, such shifts risk altering public belonging. The square is reconfigured as a simulated environment, reforming the bonds between people and city through neoliberal processes at odds with established concepts of publicness.

I will explain the role traditional public squares occupy in cities, the ideology that supports them and the public lives they facilitate. I use empirical observation and the act of photography to understand the identity shift of the square in terms of privatisation and publicness. As a research method, photography has two modes. Firstly, photographs isolate objects, behaviours and relationships between forms for later examination; secondly, the act of photographing is instructive because it tests the possibilities of inhabitation, facilitating interaction with the custodians of these spaces. Methods examine the impact corporate ownership has on the lived experience of inhabitation moderated through private management, looking at how and when these spaces are used, and who uses them, starting with the self.

My research is based on four London squares owned by private corporations: Regents Place, Bishops Square, Montgomery Square and Exchange Square. These squares were chosen for their inherent newness: all were created under private ownership, their construction responding to modern visions of what public space should be. The buildings surrounding the squares are home to powerful corporations such as multinational law firms and banking groups, and in all cases they act as one location within a larger development of land (Regents Place, Spitalfields, Broadgate and Canary Wharf). Bishops Square is owned by JP Morgan: the multinational US Bank bought the square (and surrounding offices and land) from previous joint owners Hammerson and the Oman Investment Fund for £557m in 2010, marking a 25% increase in price (Ruddick, 2010). This is exemplative of the global networks spanning pseudo-public space: space is traded between corporations for profit beyond national and territorial spheres.

Private-public squares are experienced locally but their economies have international impact, and this is reflected in their organisation and management. By analysing the square as a model of open public space and isolating the behaviours and relationships both contained and formed by them, I argue that in commodifying public life these illusory translocal spaces are changing the way we

come together to live in cities. I aim to interrogate the relevance of arguments of authenticity centred in debates on modern place production, particularly with regard to pseudo public space.

Public / Private

In discourse surrounding private-public space, the terms *private* and *public* are considered in opposition, but their relationship is more fluid than the binary suggests. The term *public* originates from the Latin *publicus* meaning "of the people; of the state"; it also signifies sovereignty, public property and ordinariness (Harper, 2017a). Seemingly inclusive, use of the term (and all it represents in regard to a Western society) is enabled by exclusivity. Those included under the umbrella term of *public* are defined by their belonging within privileged spatial boundaries. Publicness is used as a catch-all term to represent openness, togetherness, citizenship and state involvement. In contrast, *private* is rooted in *privatus*, meaning "set apart, belonging to oneself (not to the state), peculiar, personal" (Harper, 2017b). Ideas are based around exclusivity and separatism; *private* is used to acknowledge and create restrictions. When conceptualising publicness through environmental space, the conditions for identity formation need to be considered. Blackshaw notes that the word 'identity' derives from the word 'same', stating that if identity is definitively social, only able to be constructed in relation to others, then "difference is also irrevocably implicit to social identity formation" (2010: 112-113). A sense of identity is therefore created through relational commonality.

For public identity to be created through the sharing of urban space, different identities need to be able to inhabit the same spaces on a seemingly level footing; space first needs to be accessible to all. Citizenship acts as a unifying identity feature but more important is what the term necessitates. What matters is not the fact of citizenship but rather the demands that citizenship bring to public space in regard to nationwide values and rights. To talk of citizenship in this sense is to discuss the ideology absorbed by the term *citizen*. Stuart Hall and David Held state that "citizenship rights establish a legitimate sphere for *all* individuals to pursue their actions and activities without risk of arbitrary or unjust political

interference" (1989: 17-18). As the primary inhabitant of public space assumed by political stakeholders, public space does not make divisions between citizen and non-citizen but assumes the rights of the citizen for all inhabitants as a condition for publicness. What makes the formation of social identity possible is public space which facilitates the meeting of difference; assumption of citizenship generates commonality. Imposing restrictions uncommon to our understanding of publicness as a concept which unites all anonymous persons disturbs understandings of what is possible within the term.

The Public Square

The idea of the public square stems from *agora* in Greek, loosely translated to mean central meeting place: a place where people gather to socialise and share political opinions (Glancey, 2014). Through investigation into a hunger strike carried out on a square in Brussels in 2009, Merx (2013) examines the public square's function as a political stage researching how this environment invites certain behaviours. The public square presents a dichotomy of principles as power is reinforced and disrupted through structure. Physical spaces signify state power with public monuments and buildings representing societal values, while an open access format allows large numbers to congregate in response to that power.

However, the notion that public squares equal democratic space is problematic as priority of utility is granted to the state over citizens, with squares historically used as sites of public viewing and for state organised spectacles such as executions. This practice persists in places such as Deera Square in Saudi Arabia (Kennedy, 2019); associations consigned to history in the West are elsewhere part of the square's present. Whilst focusing on London, it is important to note that although the form shares common features, across borders the power dynamics of the public square take different shapes. Discussing how power manifests itself in cities, with reference to Foucault, Mehan (2017) states, "the square as a whole reflects the struggle between sources of power, as each source tries to gain control of the society in its strong appearance in urban space". In the early life of the square, although agoras were open to all citizens, a large percentage of associated populations were either enslaved peoples or foreigners, or citizens not wealthy

enough to sustain a leisurely existence, therefore “most of the ceremonial and political events that occurred here were out of bounds” (Sennett, 1994: 52). From their conception, public squares have never been inevitably open.

However, squares have played important roles in the functioning of free democratic societies, being activated by both agents of civil democracy and executive power. Their potentiality crosses borders; in 2011 Tahrir Square in Egypt became the centre point of the revolution to unseat President Hosni Mubarak (BBC News, 2011); in 1989 protesters gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing to call peacefully for political and economic reform (Amnesty International UK, 2019); and in London sites such as Parliament Square and Trafalgar Square have a long history of hosting political demonstrations and protests.

The public square creates a space for action to respond against the state, however it does not guarantee action will be responded to in a democratic manner. Although there are no official figures due to state suppression, hundreds if not thousands of protestors were killed in Tiananmen Square protests (ibid). Demonstrations in Parliament Square are curtailed by restrictions: the 2011 Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act prohibits sleeping overnight, use of tents, placement of sleeping bags, and the operation of amplified noise equipment such as loudspeakers without prior permission (Liberty, 2019). Public space under state ownership can be utilized as a tool of control allowing the brutality of autocratic and democratic regimes to be exercised against non-compliant subjects.

Squares are purposeful open spaces existing in the gaps between buildings. Their given focus is on harnessing the agency of human bodies in cities. On a quotidian level, well designed public spaces attract people at different times of day and for different reasons (Jacobs, 1961: 158-59). One of urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs' core conceptions surrounding public space is that, on a micro level, there is power in the relationships held between bodies and buildings; if these relations are harnessed effectively, they can bring vitality to urban areas and strengthen civic principles as collective meaning is produced from the approximate sharing of space to which strangers feel ownership (Jacobs, 1961). In London, for events like royal weddings, screens are set up in squares (Evening Standard, 2011), enabling large audiences to physically share in state celebrations. Using the contained collective

to strengthen nationalistic feeling, the state's use of squares as sites of public viewing acknowledges their power.

Public togetherness as facilitated by urban emptiness is organically associated with free speech, viewed as an outcome of open space produced through democratic governmental and sovereign systems. In this way the square is considered part of the public sphere, defined by Jürgen Habermas as "private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1991: 176). Moving into shared public space causes an identity shift. Reducing its proximity, the environment builds commonality into anonymity by centring the citizen in open space; public identity becomes a tool to facilitate conversation and action. Social relations are harnessed by the crowd and the state, as public belonging becomes a tool for control and the means of its utilisation is determined by nearness to power and freedom of response.

Dynamics of Ownership

The conception of private-public space combines contradictory ideologies, disturbing inhabitants' understanding of publicness and creating ambiguous experiences. Dynamics of ownership create a unique socio-legal category, neither wholly public nor private. In 2017, *The Guardian* newspaper contacted over fifty landowners of pseudo-public spaces in London, attempting to find out the regulations for public inhabitants: all but two landowners refused to answer (The Guardian, 2017). As rights are classified information, conditions for inhabitation have to be assumed intuitively. A capitalist free market economy expands power structures; publics are divided up as conditions of access and are negotiated by multiple separatist organisations with different economic agendas. Privately owned public spaces are indicative of this type of economy, whereby land becomes public through private systems of control.

Arendt elucidates that the public realm relies on the plurality of human existence to generate equality between beings (1958: 175). She argues that any space facilitating the meeting of strangers contains the potentiality of engendering the public realm through the formation of the body politic, but such a formation is fragile and "does not survive the actuality of the movement which [brings] it into

being" (ibid: 199-200). Without structures in place to support the plurality of ways to inhabit, the body politic dissipates and the material landscape is used to support the production of power and prevent togetherness, as demonstrated during the 2012 Occupy protests.

In 2012, Occupy protesters in Paternoster Square in London were legally removed because the square is privately owned by Mitsubishi Estate (Wilkinson, 2017). To generate group power in response to private dynamics, protesters needed the landscape but discovered Mitsubishi could legitimately remove them. The square's open design facilitated protest but dynamics of ownership halted action. When users activated the open space, the pretence of authenticity was revealed. Freedoms associated with and enabled by the public square are incompatible with private ownership. In state owned public spaces, the citizen responds to a legitimate force that is accountable; in private space, the relationship of belonging shifts.

Methods

Adopting situational photography as an ethnographic method, I photographed each square at different times, examining the changeability of place identity using the resulting photographs and active participant observation. In England it is legal to take photographs in public places (Askthe.police.uk, 2019); performing this same action in private-public space reveals something of the shift in rights across types of land. In line with writings on the role of photography in ethnographic research, photographs do not aim to represent objective truths but rather points of view (Pink, 2012). Pink (2012) argues methods combining movement and photography can be useful in representing the experience of particular environments, as personal movement actively responds to social space and social bodies. The environment acts "as a prompt or probe in the research process" (ibid). This method is contingent on the conditions of my identity (that of a young, able bodied, white woman), and uses the specificity of my own experience to investigate the precarious nature of belonging. The identity I inhabit and the possibilities of place shift as my actions change. I spend time consuming these spaces in conventional ways but construct myself as an outsider when using my

camera to capture others' actions. The following account provides insight into this identity shift.

While out photographing one weekday afternoon in Canary Wharf, a suited man approached me and requested we talk. A familiar line of questioning followed:

"I notice you've been photographing, could you show me the photographs you've taken? This is a private estate. Do you photograph the rest of the area or just here? How often do you come here? Are you a student? What do you do?"

In response I tell the guard I know the conditions: I am using minimal equipment and not shooting for commercial gain, photographing building entrances, loading bays or security arrangements. The security guard agrees, but states decisions are made specific to person and discretionary. After a lengthy questioning, he gestures towards me, *"I can tell you're trustworthy"*. I am given permission to continue and his security tag to reference if stopped in the future. Participation reveals the fragility of rights to belong; behaviour acceptable and lawful in public space is deemed deviant and questionable in private-public space.

Simulations of Authenticity

The material structuring of pseudo-public squares shifts inhabitants' experiences. Aged public landscapes represent accumulative public histories and multiplicities of presence: in these squares, new constructions erase traces of past inhabitation. A sense of history serves a purpose in capitalist space. Each square has its own newly constructed monument or public art piece (Figure 1), filling the gap for history where before it would have embodied the palimpsestic materiality of layered eras.

The Bishops Square development was completed in 2005; it features Charnel House, a 12th century chapel recovered during archaeological work and preserved below street level (Foster and Partners, 2005). The Square's users view the chapel through a glass pavement. A sense of history remains as a design feature, removed from the city's active fabric. Walter Benjamin saw glass as a key material in commodity capitalism, pivotal to the construction of phantasmagoric spaces (Thompson, 2016). The material distorts our experience of things as realities are visually accessible but mediated through impermeable surfaces. Glass is a

prevalent feature of modern corporate architecture. Every one of these four squares are overlooked by glass office buildings. Glass resists the mark of time, preserving the newness of peripheral buildings. Transparency enables the currency of interior activity to be displayed outside. The ambiguous nature of private-public squares is heightened as the apparent accessibility of interiors is shown to be an illusion.

Material details reveal intentions prioritising the protection of capital. Security guards patrol the spaces in high visibility uniforms and armoured black vests: they appear as police officers until proximity reveals the text on uniforms. All four squares are continually cleaned by street cleaners employed by private management teams. In Montgomery Square, signage reminds us that access is not a right (Figure 2). These encounters distort experience: an uncanny imitation of public life is created.

Figure 1: Statues & Sculptures. Clockwise from top left: Bishops Sq, Montgomery Sq, Exchange Sq, Regents Pl

Figure 2: Signage, Montgomery Square

Managed Behaviours

Corporate owners promote dance classes, brass bands, street food festivals, table tennis and beach volleyball as the performed landscape of the private-public square. A model of acceptable public life is demonstrated through these controlled events, dividing the square's usership into participants and spectators. Extended observation of the squares illuminates such separations.

For two weeks in July 2017, the open space of Montgomery Square was dedicated to beach volleyball, a venture hosted by disabled children's charity Action for Kids, with multiple corporate sponsors. Branded AFK Beach, the courts were available to hire from 8am - 9pm on weekdays and 11am - 5pm on weekends, for a minimum of £40 (AFK Beach, 2017). At 5pm on a Wednesday a team in matching white t-shirts played volleyball; those on the outside of the beach glanced across on their route between office and tube entrance.

Saturday 17th June was one of the hottest days of the year and no events were planned in Exchange Square. A group of women sit drinking wine in a circle singing happy birthday, nearby a woman works on her laptop and three men

position themselves for a game of catch. A man sits on a blanket watching the game as the woman next to him reads her book.

In Montgomery Square, the activity of play is given a purpose and a framework to support it. The production of profit extends the activity beyond the present. Inhabitants' roles divide: the openness inherent to squares diminishes as private space is established at the centre. By contrast, in Exchange Square, the activity of play does not extend beyond that moment in time, and those not participating in activity enact their own in close proximity.

Figure 3: July 2017, Montgomery Square

Figure 4: June 2017, Exchange Square

Capitalism has a tendency “to produce space while radically modifying the product" (Lefebvre, 2009: 193). When there is an exchange of money (however worthwhile the cause) spatial dynamics shift as intermediary organisations dictate the rules of participation. The scene in Exchange Square demonstrates the kind of public life produced in cities when space is not micro-managed. It constitutes just one segment of the Square's identity allowed to exist when there is a gap in planning.

Jacobs (1961) argues an effective public space is inhabited continuously by a diverse public, which polices acceptable public behaviour. This responsibility is relinquished to security guards in pseudo-public spaces. Patrolling squares and standing at building entrances, they maintain a near constant presence, regulating behaviour by reminding users they are being watched. The agency that inhabitants have, to regulate space through their behaviour is reduced by the presence of security personnel who are aware of how space is supposed to look: this knowledge is not extended to inhabitants.

The ability to participate is partially established by dominant behaviours dictating normality. This changes with time: walking through Exchange Square

after 5pm on a sunny weekday, I felt like I was entering a private party as workers congregated with drinks in hand. One social group dominated the space as it became an extension of the private realm. For non- corporate workers entering into the Square at this time, perceived notions of publicity were both confirmed and disturbed by signs of ambiguity. While diverse cosmopolitan publics are defined by their ability to be comfortable around those who are different, this ability is refuted when the cosmopolitan self is outnumbered by one identity type which renders them an outsider.

Sennett (2017) states that "what results from mixing difference and indifference…is a peculiar sort of neutralization". A multitude of difference facilitates belonging through a scale of indifference, with indifference playing a pivotal role in enabling public lives. Minimal interaction underpins the type of behaviour exemplative of everyday city living. Erving Goffman's concept of 'Civil Inattention' describes the process of encountering others in public space. Here strangers give to one another "enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present" (1963: 84), then withdrawing attention to show that the other does not constitute a "target of special curiosity" (ibid). The activity filling Exchange Square on that weekday evening defied regular patterns of public interaction, creating unease in my own position. Faced with a crowd seemingly unified by their shared stake in space, my actions as a photographer and non-corporate worker stood out as transgressive.

Figure 5: Exchange Square

Corporate structures of ownership prioritise users complicit in the function of the space, the main group being the workers who inhabit their buildings. When this category of user enters the square on their commute or lunch break, the boundary they cross supports their working life. This user inhabits pseudo-public space out of necessity, and the guarantee of their daily inhabitation and associated wealth means their needs are prioritised by management structures. This is demonstrated by the opening hours of Pret A Manger's Regents Place branch: the cafe is only open Monday to Friday (Regents Place, 2017). On Sundays in the Square, I observed families and teenagers trying to gain access, lamenting the fact that despite being surrounded by eateries nowhere is open for them: their occupation is not as valuable to developers because it is not guaranteed with the assurance it will convert to profit. Pseudo-public space reconstructs notions of publicness; intentions revealed through design, policing, organised events and opening times demonstrate a clear separation in publics, and objectives regarding who is welcome to participate, and how participation should be enacted.

Exclusions

Bishops Square is the most diverse of the four squares: while the community it produces is changeable, its users are representative of a varied public, inhabiting the space for different reasons at overlapping times of day. Geographically, it borders two distinct areas, sitting at the edge of Tower Hamlets, connecting the City of London and the East End. Regeneration is often justified through claims that new spaces will foster diverse neighbourhoods, promising the very thing that is displaced; 'regeneration' can be seen as synonymous with displacement (Campkin, 2013). Bishops Square did not bring diversity to the space. Such elements are conditions of the locality, accommodated to a varying degree.

I have observed that those who inhabit Bishops Square primarily do so for recreational and employment purposes. This is the same across all four squares. While on surrounding streets there is a consistent homeless presence, this identity is rarely encountered within the space. Not all those who inhabit the public realm do so out of choice and, for these people, private-public space appears unaccommodating. The lack of homeless people contributes to the sanitised identity of these spaces, which aims to make palatable notions of publicness whilst limiting disruption and the meeting of difference: qualities that informed the evolution of the square's spatial identity.

Conclusion

When the legal position of bodies in place is uncertain, relationships of power are tenuous because they lack stability. Private corporations are not accountable to the public inhabitants of their land, but inhabitants' relationship of accountability similarly shifts because a relationship has not been established through democratic means. Our stake in the city as anonymous citizens is compromised as the ideals of public space are openly abandoned, with squares centring planned events and experiences forged on terms of employment and consumption. This spatial model threatens democratic action because, while pseudo-public space can take on the appearance of public space, in the former

there is no spatial format of response for inhabitants to hold corporations publicly accountable.

The public square is constituted by the need to contain and facilitate diverse behaviours and actions. Pseudo-public space prioritises leisure and consumption over the freedom to gather, protest or simply belong in the city through indifference, as anonymous strangers. As spaces enabled and facilitated by successive neoliberal capitalist governments, these squares are a symptom as well as an environmental cause of an erosion of democracy in Britain. By dividing up publics according to participation, the capacity the city square holds to generate power from togetherness is diluted. Pseudo-public space employs ambiguity as a means of control, disturbing experiences of belonging by shifting components to respond to remote stakeholders, generating capital, corporate identity and reputation on international scales.

The components perceived to give things authenticity are warped under capitalism. The result resembles the original, but the origins differ. Applied to place, this process creates ambiguity by altering the conditions anchoring people to spaces. David Harvey (cited in Cresswell, 2015: 60) states:

"the problem of authenticity is itself peculiarly modern. Only as modern industrialisation separates us from the process of production and we encounter the environment as a finished commodity does it emerge".

A spatial language of authenticity is extracted from state owned public spaces, co-opted by private corporations and targeted toward profit. The city dweller is decentralised; through production, the things that produce authenticity become marginalised. Inhabitants such as the users seeking refreshment in Exchange Square, and the homeless around Bishops Square, cannot be reduced to makers of authenticity. Separating identities by their role in the production of authenticity reprises the false dichotomy between public and private. The material needs and practices of different groups are valuable in and of themselves, and the process of production is multiplicitous.

Pseudo-public spaces aim for passable and profitable simulations of authenticity. The end product is sanitised because the very act of commodifying space as a product and assigning the label of authenticity bypasses and ignores the complex and multi-layered history of place production in cities; spaces are

produced on terms incompatible with the concept. Material similarities to state owned public spaces trick us into misunderstanding the nature of the thing itself. Authenticity in relation to the public square produces itself by virtue of empty space and public land ownership; by manufacturing identity it becomes inauthentic by design.

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