

Individuated Space and Assembly

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Introduction

"This is going to be the first public space created in the new city and it's vitally important that we get it right," says Robert Glover, Toronto's new director of urban design. "It will set the standard for all public space in the future." –Christopher Hume, *The Toronto Star*, "Dundas Square could set Yonge free", 12 September 1998.

It was only in 2004 that I first visited Dundas Square, Toronto's newest and most talked about public place at the time. I had not been in Ontario for some time and thus was not able to follow the development of the project. I was instantly struck by the intensity of the place and amazed at how few people seemed to use it. In the weeks that followed, in depth research of the project and the city's reaction to it seemed to point to a growing confusion. Although the place had been heralded as Toronto's newest and greatest public space project since Nathan Phillips Square, a centre point for the revitalization of Yonge Street, people just weren't convinced it was public at all.



The strict by-laws regulating use enforced by a private security firm, the commercial use of the space for product promotion and launches and the inconspicuous advertising towers surrounding the space surely seemed to give reason to the sceptics. The ownership of the square seemed to be at the centre of the debate.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your square. —Mayor Mel Lastman, ref. by Neco Cockburn, The Toronto Star, "10,000 celebrate opening of square", 31 May 2003.



In april 2003, some people were allegedly kicked off the square for chalk drawing on the square's granite pavers. Responding to the controversy, the ward councillor behind the project offered: "Dundas Square is not public property, it is City property."

A group of activists has criticized the advertising billboards around the square, and the reluctance to allow chalk artists to draw on the square's granite. Matthew Blackett of the Toronto Public Space Committee said police arrested two people for drawing in the square. Mr. Rae said the square is city property, not public property, but he added the square's board was looking at the issue. —Jeff Gray, The Globe & Mail, "Square to open with flair", 30 May 2003.

Apart from having multiple implications, this points to what is a crucial problem regarding public space: we are uncertain of what it wants to be. Of how to use it and what to allow. We cannot define it or represent it accurately. And the image of our present official public spaces as equalitarian, inclusive, common, free, and so on, is a myth.

"People don't seem to know what to do with the space," laments Carol Jolly, general manager of the Dundas Square board. —Mike Smith, Now Magazine, "By Permit Only", 15 May 2003.



Individuated Space

What I would like to present is a way of imagining public space in the city using two concepts I have been working with: Individuated Space and Assembly. Together, I believe these ideas can help us demystify our preconceptions of public space and present a way of thinking and designing these spaces.

An individuated space is a loose spatial appropriation of the concept of individuation in Jungian psychology. Individuation means becoming an «individual», and, *in so far as «individuality» embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self* [Jung]. What this means in term of city space is that all aspects of city life are taking place and are accommodated. No unsavoury elements are repressed. To push the metaphor a bit further, we can say that a space needs to accommodate for both the conscious realm of the city as well as the unconscious. It is unfortunate that in our longing for clean, prosperous-looking, "safe" and efficient city spaces, we marginalize a huge part of what naturally belongs in those spaces, pushing undesirable elements out.



To applause from supporters, activist Gaetan Heroux of the protest group Ontario Coalition Against Poverty termed Mr. Holyday "a bigot" for calling on authorities to ticket the homeless for sleeping outside. [...] Later, Mr. Holyday, who had called for a ban on sleeping in the square, angrily rejected the bigot allegation: "I think I speak for the majority of Toronto residents and taxpayers who want this problem cleaned up." Jeff Gray, *The Globe & Mail*, 'It isn't illegal to be poor', 20 January 2005.

Not in my backyard. Out of sight, out of mind. To bring a social perspective to the argument, we can draw from Hannah Arendt. For her, in modern society, conformity has replaced action as the foremost mode of human interaction. In a public place, action that deviates from the "norm" is indeed "frowned upon", or more effectively becomes the subject of a bylaw.

What takes place on the public sidewalk surrounding the Square will impact on the Square's success in meeting its objective of becoming a vibrant, safe and active focal point and economic catalyst. The Board has expressed concern respecting the possible impacts of activities such as sidewalk busking and vending, posterage and sidewalk maintenance, and with security issues such as panhandling. —Joe Halstead, City of Toronto, City of Toronto Staff Report, 4 October 2002.



Yet common sense, our own daily lives, should warn us against holding things in tension. As we know too well, repression inevitably leads to resurfacing.

Public Space

"A problem is now arising," writes Julian Fantino in a report to the September 18 meeting of the police services board, "where portions of the public believe that Dundas Square is a public space." The chief elaborates on the problem, reminding us that "anti-war demonstrators in the first quarter of 2003... utilized the square as a meeting point without proper authorization." —Mike Smith, *Now Magazine*, "Dancing in the Dark", 2 October 2003.

Now I would like to come back to our confusion about public space because this is important for our second concept, assembly. Part of the reason we may have a hard time defining PS is that it has undergone a radical transformation since the industrial revolution. Our preconception of PS, harking back to antiquity (say the forum, the agora) or to the middle ages (say the cathedral or market squares) are more often than not outdated and obsolete. We entertain "fantasies" or wish-images about public space. I try to parallel this transformation using three Toronto projects from three consecutive generations. I believe post-industrial public space to be marked by:

1) the erosion of a clear distinction between our public and private realms, and their subsequent dissolution into the realm of the social. What is crucial to understand here is that, drawing from Arendt, there really is not a true public realm in modern society. It is in fact more relevant to discuss the social realm. The creation of society happens when all our traditionally private needs becomes public concerns (think of work, family and wealth to name a few examples).

2) the ideology of consumption overtaking the realm of the social. In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, there is no other activity for which we are so extensively and expensively instructed. We can even speak of an ideology of consumption that describes and prescribes every human interaction. Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so our society is balanced on consumption and its denunciation [Baudrillard].

and 3) the world of the commodity replacing reality with the world of the spectacle. Public space becomes a commodity. Everything that once was lived has now slipped into representation [Debord]. Think of the rhetoric surrounding Dundas Square; the "before and after" advertisement is a case in point example of spectacular discourse. To paraphrase Guy Debord: "that which appears is public space."

It is no surprise then to witness confusion or, to the very least, misunderstandings, when discussing public space. For us, the word public can mean so many different things. In a society where public space is more often than not the location of conformity, consumption and leisure, the word public has less to do with the polis and the political than the "public at large".

The heterogeneity of the public realm

The uncertainty only increases when we try and locate public space. I believe public space (or social space) is found at the intersection of two equally undetermined fields: the urban and the social. The urban, according to Henri Lefebvre, is the phenomenon (superseding the city as phenomenon) that describes the setting of almost all human interaction. And since we accept its hegemony *de facto*, the urban cannot be fully understood until we become completely urbanized. The social, as described above, is our global society (Baudrillard would speak of the masses, but it's an altogether too dated and gloomy term). Where I think Baudrillard is true, though, is when he speaks of the silence of the masses. Society, by encompassing all humans, cannot have a voice unless it is channeled through statistical models. What society wants becomes a percentage, a poll, a survey.

If we accept that public space is located at the intersection of these two fields, then we must accept its indeterminacy. This is not meant in any way to be negative. In fact it is crucial that we accept

its uncertainty. Public space, at the basis, is heterogeneous. And any attempt to imagine it otherwise fails the idea. How do we make sense of this?

No person shall, within the limits of the Square: Climb or be on any arch, tree, roof of a building or any part of a building, structure or fixture, except any portion which is a public walkway; Enter or be in the reflecting pool or throw or place objects in it; Stand on any receptacle or container for plants, shrubs or trees; Ride a bicycle; Wear any ice skates other than on the part of the Square that is physically laid out and intended for use by the public as an ice rink area; Drop or throw any object from a roof of a building or from the Colonnade; Light any fire; Ride or stand on any skateboard, roller skate or roller blade; Release or hand out helium-filled balloons; Light or carry any candle or torch, except a light stick. —City of Toronto, Toronto Municipal Code, 237-2 Prohibited Activities.

Assembly

I believe assembly as a spatial concept can assist in the design of individuated spaces while at the same time make sense of the heterogeneous condition of contemporary public space.

assembly n.

I. The action or fact of assembling, the state of being assembled: 1. (a) Gathering together, meeting; the state of being collected or gathered. (b) The assembling of troops. (c) The action or method of assembling a machine or composite article; the parts so assembled. (d) The assembling of parts of a film or sound recording. 2. The coming together of two persons or things; meeting, conjunction, union. 3. Hostile meeting, onslaught, attack.

II. The company assembled: 4. A gathering of persons; a number of people met together; a concourse, throng. 5. A gathering of persons for the purpose of deliberation and decision; a deliberative body, a legislative council. 6. (a) A gathering of persons for religious worship; a congregation. (b) In schools, a general gathering of staff and pupils (usu. before lessons begin) for worship or other purposes. 7. A gathering of persons for purposes of social entertainment. 8. A collection of things.

III. A military call by drum or bugle.

The word assembly, or assemblage, is used here to define all heterogeneous fields of objects or people, brought together in dialectical juxtaposition. The most common definition of the word refers to “a congregation of people” and “the fitting together of parts and pieces.” Specifically, assemblage refers to a method deeply rooted in modernity, in the arts and technology, as it is in mass culture and production. The word was first used academically by William C. Seitz, then associate curator at the NYMOMA, in the title of the 1961 exhibition “The Art of Assemblage.” By this he wished to describe “all forms of composite art and modes of juxtaposition.” The main criticism toward the use of *assemblage* for what was traditionally referred to as *collage* or *papiers-collés*, was that people might automatically imagine a “congregation of people”, instead of the aesthetic reference to composite. Our definition overlooks this possible “mistake”, as the word is used to its fullest of meanings.

I would like to highlight three effects of assemblage:

1. through assemblage we automatically achieve a collective dimension.

"Aragon stressed [in the last paragraph of his essay] that the collective dimension was the quintessential difference between collage aesthetics and the conventions of painting."

p. 106. Bulchloh, Benjamin H. D. From Detail to Fragment: Decollage Affichiste in *October*, vol. 56, 1991.

2. from Benjamin, we also learn that assemblage, when drawing on fragments from global culture achieves a political dimension. His Arcade's project is significant in its form and content, but perhaps more significant because it is political. An attempt to wake the 19th century up from the wish-images and phantasmagoria of the 18th.

"Was it possible, despite capitalist form, to subvert these cultural apparatuses [or mass media] from within? The effect of technology on both work and leisure in the modern metropolis had been to shatter experience into fragments, and journalistic style reflected that fragmentation. Could montage as the formal principle of the new technology be used to reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection? And more, could the metropolis of consumption, the high ground of bourgeois-capitalist culture, be transformed from a world of mystifying enchantment into one of both metaphysical and political illumination?" The Dialectics of Seeing, p.23

3. from Eisenstein and his theory of montage, we see that a space carefully assembled can reach beyond itself, explode and reach *ecstatic flight*. He demonstrates this analyzing the Carcere etchings of Piranesi ("Piranesi or the Fluidity of Forms"). For him, the moment of *explosion* of the shot is the montage.

Here I would like to suggest a threefold foundation to individuated space. Individuated space is collective (inclusive, heterogeneous), political (in the sense of polis) and ecstatic.



Design

When it gives an appreciation of public space, our society usually tends to lionize the grandiose, the monumental, the calculated. It tends to overlook the somewhat more organic manifestations of public space found in streets and alleyways, community gardens and squares, long-term appropriated space and spontaneous event space, or any other example of the unpredictable, the tangential, the marginal. The problem of design rests on the tension that exists between the calculated and the unpredictable, between what we are looking to allow and what we are willing to suppress. But it is this same problem that gives the act of designing for the public realm all its complexity and significance. Indeed, rather than simplifying the issue, an enlightened view of the public realm only reveals the tremendous complexity implied in the process of generating public space through expropriation, appropriation, displacement, intensification, destruction, construction, etc.

Defining and designing public space is probably the single most demanding thing for mass society. At every instance, one is forced to conciliate the demands of mass culture and individual agency. When doing the same for private space, we can work confidently, having the assurance of private interests and needs. For public space, the innumerable interests and needs of society come into play – most of the time unwittingly so – and the project is inevitably bound to fail the “idea” of public space. We must therefore look to redefine public space for our society. Yet we must do so without losing its outstanding characteristic as the location of freedom, agency and action. Yet, this is where the crux of the problem could lie. Our nostalgic and mythologizing view of public space may be born out of a definition of the human condition that has already been superseded by something that lacks definition. Much like Henri Lefebvre “urban” is inexplicable and will continue to be until all pre-urban forms burst apart, or like Baudrillard’s “mass society” evades examination and definition (perhaps also until old social forms burst apart), public space for our contemporary society may prove to be indefinable until all the surviving old notions of public space and private space disappear. Or until all the myths we continue to project into public space are finally disassembled.