Public space and the geography of the modern city

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Abstract: Public space is often seen as problem space in the modern city: it is now as it has always been a space of contention. It is the visible and accessible venue wherein the public – comprising institutions and citizens acting in concert – enact rituals and make claims designed to win recognition. This article discusses two theses which regard the public realm in the modern city from very different perspectives. It then seeks to understand the strikingly contrary conclusions about the public sphere by exploring several of the issues which proponents of the two viewpoints interpret differently.

Key words: public space, public symbols, rituals, modern city.

Public space in the modern city is charged with meaning and with controversy. The space in question is that which the public collectively values – space to which it attributes symbolic significance and asserts claims. The values attaching to public space are those with which the generality of the citizenry endows it. Citizens create meaningful public space by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes. It thereby becomes a meaningful public resource. The process is a dynamic one, for meanings and uses are always liable to change. Renegotiation of understandings is ongoing; contention accompanies the process.

There is general agreement on the concept of the public itself; the words chosen by two of the principal protagonists to characterize the public are strikingly similar. For one the public is ‘not only a region of social life located apart from the realm of family and close friends, but also . . . [the] realm of acquaintances and strangers’ (Sennett, 1992: 17). For another, the ‘defining characteristics of urban public space [are] proximity, diversity, and accessibility’ (Zukin, 1995: 262).

There are in the current urban literature two highly contrasting assessments of the significance of public space to the conduct of public life in the modern city. One view proceeds from the premise that the public sphere has been radically devalued as a powerful social and political ideal in the modern city. In this interpretation, which I will examine with reference to the writing of Richard Sennett, the interest of the citizenry in public space has diminished as it has withdrawn from active participation in debates on
public issues. For some, this expresses the conflict of capitalism with the citizenry’s collective rights. A competing interpretation emphasizes the continuing significance of public space as the preferred arena where groups of every description can achieve public visibility, seek recognition and make demands. In this perspective, which I will define with reference to the writing of Philip Ethington and Sharon Zukin, urban public space reflects in a particularly creative way the changes and continuities that characterize a dynamic urban public life which reflects both celebration and contention. Proponents of this view focus on understanding the changing repertoire of public rituals and politics enacted there. In this article my two principal aims are to explore these conflicting theses on the importance of urban public space and to assess the bases for reaching opposing conclusions about the significance of public space in the modern city.

1 The nature of public space

1 The public and the modern city

The concept of the public as an important force in understanding the modern city appeared at the birth of urban social science itself. Robert Park and his colleagues relied on the concept as a fundamental part of their explanation of how urban inhabitants, most of whom were newly recruited to the city, could learn about their confusing new environment. In their emphasis on community structure based on shared values and commonality of interest, and in their focus on the dissemination of news and on communications, they acknowledge it directly (Park, 1972; Barth, 1980; Bulmer, 1984: 76–78). But the idea of the public took on a new coloration when, in 1963, in his seminal work, Victorian cities, Asa Briggs demonstrated that public culture was central to an appreciation of the historical rise of the modern city. While Briggs offers no definition of what the Victorian urbanist might have considered public culture to be, he focuses on the crucial issues that comprised its agenda throughout the period. It recurs persistently in his book under such rubrics as the ‘Sanitary Idea’, public institutions, the public interest and urban ‘improvement’. Briggs pioneered the study of Victorian urbanism, and was keenly aware of his limited capacity to generalize its history. He does not try to obscure the complex trajectories of the histories of individual cities which are the focus of his book. Indeed, he highlights them. Nor does he hesitate to acknowledge the conflicting reactions of contemporaries who found terror as well as pride in the human experiences that unfolded within the industrial city of the railway era. As the principal interpretive device of his work, though, he chooses to construct a narrative of what he conceptualizes as an ongoing public debate about the great issues of the day. He concentrates his readers’ attention on the confrontations experienced in guiding the affairs of the cities. His cast includes politicians, social philosophers and reforming activists. Briggs creates a powerful argument for the idea that an urban public, or publics, emerged during the Victorian period through the agency of working to meet the huge challenges which cities faced. The result was of great significance for the historical development of Victorian cities. Even of Manchester, the shock city of the age that had so fascinated contemporaries with an interest in the future of the new city, he writes that its ‘public administration’ was ‘the hero’ of its development. What had been accomplished there in the public sphere was ‘largely irreversible, and ultimately creative’ (Briggs, 1968: 138).

Marshall Berman, in a very different vein, likewise identifies modern urbanism with the public sphere. In his splendid critical study, All that is solid melts into air (1988), he
argues that modern urban sensibility arises from the ubiquitous and uncontrolled encounters of people and groups in urban public space, especially the streets. To a remarkable extent these spaces were themselves the product of the modernization of city landscapes, with Haussmann’s Paris being the best-known example. And these spaces, epitomized by the boulevard, constituted ‘the most spectacular urban innovation of the nineteenth century, and the decisive breakthrough in the modernization of the traditional city’ (Berman, 1988: 150). For the first time, Berman suggested, the city became available to all its inhabitants. The generous new public spaces were more readily accessible to the ordinary residents of the city than had been the pre-existing public space. The citizenry could now enjoy the relatively unrestricted use of the public spaces for its own purposes. Social expression in this new space ranged widely; the streets in particular played host to an immensely rich and often conflictual variety of activities that defied easy bureaucratic control (Ross, 1988).

Christine Boyer (1996), drawing widely from European and American urban experience in a broadly conceived modern period, has recently offered an alternative view of the relation between the concept of the public and the city. She suggests that ‘the “public” has become a negative concept’, in contrast to the “private” [which] has been refurbished with an exalted image’ (1996: 9). She suggests that in this perspective the public has ceased to exist as a coherent force in the city; prerogatives that many believe ought rightfully to belong to the public have been usurped by private interests masquerading as its inheritors. Those who see the public in these terms focus on evidence of the selective withdrawal of some citizens – especially the middle class – from visible roles in the public arena and on the confusion and even occasional chaos of public activities. From their perspective the modern city offers an increasingly inhospitable environment for the widespread enjoyment and use of public space; it is a place where private interests increasingly successfully compete against the public interest. They see weakness in the fragmented nature of the public in the modern city, and emphasize the difficulty of marginalized groups in expressing or enforcing their interest in the public sphere (Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1991; Sorkin, 1992; Boyer, 1993).

The concept of the public sphere owes its currency to the work of Jurgen Habermas (1989) whose original formulation has stimulated critics to propose significant revisions, especially to its historical and political specificity. Habermas regarded the public sphere as a specific and limited historical entity. It arose, he argued, from the challenge offered by certain private interests that proved capable of challenging the right of the state to represent its purposes and interests as those of the public in general. Habermas suggested that the bourgeoisie alone became an effective interest group possessing the communication skills and manipulating the levers of power, thereby exercising power over the institutions of government. As I shall discuss later, subsequent scholars have forcefully disputed his view that the bourgeoisie enjoyed an exclusive status as an influential public.

The relation between an understanding of the public sphere and interpretations of public space is that between a general cause and a more immediate effect. As the notion of who constitutes the public has become generalized, or democratized, the public sphere becomes a more inclusive concept (Ryan, 1990; Matthews, 1992; Zukin, 1995). Exclusive concepts of the public sphere are consonant with restrictive ideas of public space, and specifically of what groups or interests are thought to have an effective voice in determining the nature and significance of public space. As the concept of the public sphere broadens to incorporate a wider range of voices than Habermas originally contemplated,
so too there develops a more inclusive view of whose input is significant in determining the nature of public space (Fraser, 1991; Cresswell, 1992; 1996). In another literature, that of social history and especially as practised in England, are to be found rich sources for a broader view of a significant role for ordinary people in establishing norms of behaviour in public space (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Harrison, 1988; Thompson, 1993).

2 The ‘meaningless’ public sphere

Richard Sennett is among the most articulate and forceful proponents for the loss of relevance and power of the public in the contemporary city, an argument he has developed and sustained in an impressive series of books contributed through the duration of his distinguished career. I will outline the negative position solely with reference to his work, which in the modern urban literature is perhaps unique in its sustained and elaborated argumentation. In his most recent book, *Flesh and stone. The body and the city in western civilization* (1994), he concludes that the modern city has ‘falsified’ assertions that its people share a common interest. This he sees as the unhappy consequence of the nineteenth-century preference for private comfort and the disastrous decision ‘to resist the demands of crowds and privilege the claims of individuals’ (Sennett, 1994: 369). Like the earlier urban historical conspectus by Lewis Mumford, with which he invites comparison, Sennett’s story ends in disappointment, a failure he associates with the triumph of modern individualism and the loss of confidence in public, community experiences. Public space became ‘empty space, a space of abstract freedom but no enduring human connection’ (Sennett, 1994: 375).

The idea that people had come to regard the urban public domain as ‘meaningless’ Sennett first outlined in his study, originally published in 1976, *The fall of public man*. Here he focuses explicitly on what he sees as the turmoil of public life in the nineteenth century. The outcome of the crisis of public culture was that the nineteenth-century population ‘lost a sense of itself as an active force, as a “public”’ (Sennett, 1992: 261). Four circumstances were significant in producing this result, he suggests. First, the effect of changing material conditions of life was to diminish the intensity and meaningfulness of being in public. In the growing cities a more indiscriminate mingling in public, especially on the streets, of people of different social backgrounds, given their adoption at the same period of more uniform dress and codes of conduct, decreased the ability of those in public to distinguish their peers from the general populace. This resulted in people adopting a more passive demeanour, of showing less sociability, and of having less knowledge and confidence in their mastery of the public sphere. This problem was particularly acute among the bourgeoisie, Sennett suggests.

Secondly, because the cosmopolitan city was a place where physical appearance conveyed no certainty of status, a defensive withdrawal from feeling occurred. It became dangerous to reveal one’s personality in public. The street became the place for illusion rather than exposure to the truth.

Thirdly, the public man was supplanted by the spectator who did not so much participate in the public life of the city as he observed it. The *flâneur* was a highly visible but passive figure. From this transformation, Sennett suggests, the urban citizen learned a fundamental truth of modern culture: that pursuit of personal awareness and feeling is a defence against the experience of social relations.

Finally, the culmination of the turmoil and uncertainty of nineteenth-century urban public life was, in Sennett’s view, the creation of a new personality based on a concern
for intimacy. In an earlier work Sennett had concluded that in adjusting to the modern
city the family ‘appropriated the social functions and contacts that men once sought
in the broader arena of the city’ (Sennett, 1970a; 52; 1970b). City inhabitants simply
stopped thinking of themselves as a group, and the idea of a public personality became a
fantasy.

This programme of decline readily leads to the notion that public spaces in the modern
city are to be feared, even when they are full of people. Government must therefore make
extraordinary efforts to orchestrate and control inherently dangerous behaviour in public
spaces; other powerful interests are at work to supplant genuinely public space with its
privatized surrogates. Sennett (1990: xii) decries the condition, declaring that it is a
‘reduction and trivialization of the city as a stage of life’. In this, another book in the
series on the city and public culture, Sennett argues that the design of modern cities has
undermined their capacity to support a vital public culture. The city, in its essence, could
be ‘a place where different ages, races, classes, ways of life, abilities can all crowd
together on streets or in large buildings: the city is the natural home of difference’, he
writes (Sennett, 1990: 78). And yet, much of the history of urban design for the last two
hundred years reveals an aversion to this truth of urban life. He highlights a series of
plans that he believes sought to diminish the experience of these differences, and to
control their consequences for residents of the cities. He believes (Sennett, 1990: 95) that
beginning in the eighteenth century urban design was often intended to create ‘a conduit
to get people out of the crowded condition of the city rather than to organize the
congestion. The lesson, once learned, was thereafter copied so that in nineteenth-century
America

Olmsted shut out the city; … the crowd is a force to be weakened by design.

It is one of the great ironies in the history of urban form that these structures meant to organize a crowd of
people evolved so that the edge became their point of vital development, and the center became of ever less value.
In that dispersion toward the empty edge, the design avoids the otherness concentrated at the center (Sennett,
1990: 95).

This is a judgement of stunning finality. Can it be that a planning strategy predating the
clear emergence of the modern city has retained such influence and importance as to
occlude one hundred years’ experience of living in the most rapidly changing urban
environment that humans have ever invented?

3 The viable public sphere

Other voices dispute this interpretation of the distinctive public spaces that characterize
the modern city. These writers claim to understand the significance of the behaviour of
people and institutions who have persistently chosen to stake their claims to influence by
exerting their rights to occupy and control culturally significant urban public space. This
turf have been and remains a preferred place where groups and interests wishing to stake
claims in urban society choose to contend for power and authority. Recent research
attests to the conviction that many groups continue to believe, as they have since the
birth of the modern city, in the efficacy of targeting public space as the preferred venue
for campaigns that aim to influence public opinion and establish legitimacy. Scholars of
working-class women’s movements in late nineteenth-century Barcelona, of public
history of women’s ethnic groups in present-day Los Angeles, of gays in early twentieth-
century New York, of vigilantism and governance in early San Francisco and of the
Disney Company in late twentieth-century America are among those whose recent
research supports this thesis (Kaplan, 1992; Chauncey, 1994; Ethington, 1994; Hayden, 1995; Zukin, 1995). Public space for these authors is a vital locus for moulding public opinion and asserting claims; it conveys none of Sennett’s sense of ironic incongruity. Here I will analyse the treatment of the public sphere in two recently published works concerned with different periods and institutions. Ethington has focused on the influence of the public as crucial force in understanding the way nineteenth-century San Francisco was governed and opinion formed. Zukin, in a wide-ranging analysis of the culture of late twentieth-century urban America, examines the continuing attention paid by many groups, from local ethnic sodalities to the Disney Company, to controlling and moulding public space. Indeed, in her highly suggestive work she goes further, implying that these groups may have the capacity to influence the concept of what is public space and private space.

In opposition to Sennett’s contention that the nineteenth century saw the erosion of confidence in the public sphere, Philip Ethington, in *The public city* (1994), argues just the opposite thesis using evidence from San Francisco in the period from 1850 to 1900. The contrast in their perspectives is particularly striking because Ethington and Sennett display no fundamental disagreement on the concept at the heart of their analyses of the public. Ethington (1994: xiv) focuses on ‘an institutional sphere that was neither “state” nor “society”, but the arena of collective action that linked those two domains: the public. It was on the terrain of the public sphere that the most important transformations in American political culture were contested and completed’. In his judgement, the significance of the public can hardly be overstated in the nineteenth century: ‘The nineteenth-century public sphere was the stage of history itself’, he confidently concludes (Ethington, 1994: 410).

Ethington is convinced that urban politics in this period responded to the changing conception of the public sphere which he regards as the source of its explanation. The key to understand the process is found in the transition from what he calls republican liberalism, which ‘hinged on belief in a single, identifiable public good, one grounded in the ethics of political leaders’, to pluralist liberalism, which ‘accepted the existence of multiple, or plural, public goods, each grounded in the interests of competing groups in society’ (Ethington, 1994: 8–9). He argues that American urban political development ‘cannot be reduced to, or explained by, historical changes in civil society … [T]he reverse has been the case: Social group formation in San Francisco was largely the result of actions and institutions of the political public sphere’ (Ethington, 1994: 14). The public sphere, as he conceives it, is the source of urban political history not its devalued byproduct.

The public sphere in Ethington’s judgement has its own history, which is to be understood as distinct from and equally important to that of the state and private interests. The principal institutions of the public sphere thus become the focus of his analysis: the instruments of public communications; public perceptions and their influence on political behaviour; and the behaviour of groups in public space. Time and again, Ethington argues that the political questions confronting the city are to be understood as they were perceived in the public sphere, for this was where the agenda was established. The newspaper played a large role in this process, but he rejects the argument that the medium was fundamentally a byproduct of urban growth: ‘The growth in size and complexity of the city had no visible impact on the basic shape or operation of the newspaper market’, he declares (Ethington, 1994: 310). What the leaders of journalism (in San Francisco it is Hearst who gets Ethington’s attention) understood
and exploited ruthlessly was ‘a reorientation of the position of the reader vis-à-vis the state’ (Ethington, 1994: 309). The relation of public opinion to the vehicles of dissemination of information did not change during the period; the public sphere was defined by the same instrumentalities throughout the period. What changed was the political complexion and the geographical framework of the expanding city.

The constant reconstruction of the ‘“public” of the public city’ is, then, the story as Ethington sees it. The public sphere changed as the political concept of the public good changed radically. This, however, constitutes an argument for regarding the public sphere as an institution in its own right – an institution that mediated access for the citizen to the state, an institution that had a social role in constructing and reconstructing boundaries between public and private life, and that influenced gender identities of urban residents.

Zukin’s recent book, _The cultures of cities_ (1995) is an imaginative _tour de force_ in which she convincingly vaults over the economistic view of ‘creative destruction’ of urban landscapes which had been the focus of her previous study (Zukin, 1991). In her new book she focuses instead on public culture, arguing that culture is now ‘a fiercely explicit battleground in struggles that used to be considered political or economic’ (Zukin, 1995: 263). Her concern (p. 10) is with ‘a process of negotiating images that are accepted by large numbers of people’. Public culture, as she conceives it, is socially constructed, … produced by the many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops, and parks – the spaces in which we experience public life in cities. The right to be in these spaces, to use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of our selves and our communities – to claim them as ours and to be claimed in turn by them – make up a constantly changing public culture … Yet public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended (Zukin, 1995: 10, 11).

The space that interests Zukin is physical space, ‘places that are physically there, as geographical and symbolic centers, as points of assembly where strangers mingle’ (Zukin, 1995: 45). The production of this space, a consequence of the ‘synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings’, and the production of symbols in it, a result of ‘both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity’, are at the heart of her work (Zukin, 1995: 24). She thus confronts directly the withdrawal of the public sector and its replacement by private interests in the process of defining public space. This trend to the privatization of public space, which brings into prominence the Disney Company on which she continues to rivet her reader’s attention, she regards as one in a continuing series of significant challenges in shaping urban public culture. She suggests that it is entangled at the present time with matters of ethnic identity and fear for physical security in defining attitudes towards public space. She insists also that public spaces serve the same purposes now as in the past, notably to ‘frame encounters that are both intimate and intrusive’, with the culture of the city (Zukin, 1995: 44).

Because great public places only become so over time, she considers that the commentator is ill-positioned to prejudge the consequences for public culture of contests waged over public space by the society that will inherit the resource. What needs to be established is not a doomsday scenario for public space but the new forms it is taking and the strategies for managing it that are being devised by the diverse interests interacting there. These forces, as always, continuously contend for influence.

Zukin’s attention to the changing valence of existing institutions of the public sphere and to the invention of new ones is one of her signal contributions in this book. Her discussions of the demise of the department store and the rise of the theme park, the
restaurant and the street bazaar illustrate the process well. Particular institutions evolve, waxing and waning in the value which the public accords them. Public culture, on the other hand, continues to be defined by the nature of the institutions – formal and informal, official and unofficial, private and public – and the people who in their turn likewise devise strategies to advance their interests by their occupation of public space. From this vantage, the Disney Company is no longer simply an enemy of public space. Instead, Zukin (1995: 54, 52) believes that ‘Disney World idealizes urban public space’. Further, she suggests that ‘[l]earning from Disney World promises to make social diversity less threatening and public space more secure’. What accounts for her changing perspective on this institution and its role? Disney is still a private company engaged in the behaviours she formerly chronicled. Her new outlook is certainly influenced by her perception that the public regards the theme park as public space, even though it is privately owned and managed. Furthermore, the distinction separating Disney’s entertainment spaces from city parks and streets in public ownership is less marked than many may have assumed. Her discussion of the privatization of the management of urban public spaces, including some that are world famous, reveals the need to abandon simple definitions of what is public and private. She believes that public space and public culture are mediated through the contest varying interests. It is public perception that is crucial, for in her view the public has the power to decide what it finds acceptable and desirable. It can define private restaurants as public spaces, and is doing so in just the same manner as the usurpatory nineteenth-century New York crowd claimed Central Park in defiance of the elitist intentions of its designers and the city administrators.

Zukin’s book presents a well illustrated case for the argument that urban public space is best defined as it always has been, as the locus for ‘a continuous production of symbols and spaces that frame and give meaning’ to contemporary culture which in modern America means pre-eminently ‘ethnic competition, racial change, and environmental renewal and decay’ (Zukin, 1995: 265). This space, moreover, is a major zone of contention where vital institutions of our time are active participants. Nothing less than our understanding of our own city rests on our ability to grasp the public power, the mystique, of its public culture.

II Explaining the differing interpretations

What, we must ask, can account for such differing conclusions as to the value and role of public space in the modern city? I would like to suggest four possible answers. There is, first, the very different importance given the political arena in understanding the public sphere; secondly, the treatment of everyday life in conceptualizing the public; thirdly, the reconceptualization of the public and private; and, fourthly, the significance attributed to the changing character and use of public space in the modern city.

1 The role of politics

Politics is the language of the public sphere. Scholars such as Ethington follow Habermas’s argument that the rise of a public sphere depended upon the ability of a self-conscious group to act together, to exert their will within the political realm (Habermas, 1989: 51–56). In his original treatise Habermas privileged the bourgeois confrontation with the state, considering that only this group could engage in rational communication
and thereby formulate a politically enforcable public opinion. And so, as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, with its clamour by other groups who insisted that their voices also be heard, this ‘pressure of the street’ for the enlargement of the public ‘devalued’ the public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 132–33). The public sphere was readily conceptualized so long as it was the arena of influence of a well identified group whose institutions and means of communication were visible and dominant in society. As the control by the bourgeois interests over the city came to be challenged during the nineteenth century the composition of these groups constituting the public sphere diminished.

That politics and the public came to comprise far more than Habermas originally conceded has been relentlessly argued by subsequent critics who have assailed his first formulation on the grounds of its gender, period and class exclusivity (Eley, 1992; Ethington, 1992a; Fraser, 1992; Ryan, 1992). Perhaps no one has made the general case more forcefully than James Vernon in his recent study (1993) of English popular culture from 1815 to 1867. He first examines the garnering of popular support for what he calls official politics and then scrutinizes the attempts of popular political groups to contest these exclusive official definitions. He discusses, among other things, ‘the politics of sight’, that is the role of spectators whom he considered to comprise ‘an autonomous popular politics’ (Vernon, 1993: 111). In his examination of the struggle to influence English political culture, he could identify no simple causes. Instead, many factors prominently including gender and class were powerful discriminators in the ‘moral and political assault on received exclusive definitions of citizenship and the public political sphere’ (Vernon, 1993: 225). Habermas (1992) has now conceded the point, acknowledging the possibility and the value of generalizing the application of the concept of a public beyond the late eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. It is becoming commonplace to refer to publics rather than the public, and Fraser’s (1992) extension of the idea to include subordinated groups – expressed in her use of the phrase ‘subaltern counterpublics’ – has gained currency.

As the meaning of the public sphere has changed to reflect a more democratic conception, its relation to public space has likewise altered. During the modern period ‘private interests and commercial concerns have invaded public opinion, . . . [and] [i]n place of the “public sphere” a fictitious and “universal” public has been constructed’ (Boyer, 1996: 417). The public sphere no longer reflects the coherent power of a privileged group, and its institutions are likewise more diffuse. The space of the new public is less exclusive than formerly, continuing a long tradition whereby new institutions in the public sphere claim new space in the city. In the modern city the streets have taken on new importance, and a whole range of other public spaces were invented to serve the new purposes of a changing public (Barth, 1980; Harris, 1990; Celik et al., 1994). Public space continues to be redefined by publics whose values and demands are in competition in the political arena that is the city. Zukin (1995) illustrates the process beautifully with reference to restaurants and even Disney World.

Among the critics who have pushed to extend Habermas’s concept of the public into their analysis of the modern period have been scholars interested in making gender more visible. The American historian, Mary Ryan, for one, has studied how urban women began to exercise their perceived rights to assume roles in public and to achieve political influence. She discovered in Habermas’s ‘construction of the public sphere . . . a singular advantage for feminists: it freed politics from the iron grasp of the state’ (Ryan, 1992: 261). Her substantive research concerns the nineteenth-century urban experience of
women contending for influence and reforming political practice even before they could claim the vote (Ryan, 1990; see also Ryan, 1989; Matthews, 1992). In her reading of the public sphere she has deliberately chosen to focus on its political dimension. So, in a remarkable study of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Barcelona, has Temma Kaplan. The women whose public roles she brings to critical scrutiny include many of the city’s working people, and their politics she sees reflected in art, in public protests and demonstrations, and in a host of other activities by which they asserted their claims as participants in the public arena (Kaplan, 1992). These authors are among those whose research on urban women has demonstrated that politics is more than what the state chooses to recognize or to privilege (see also Baker, 1984; Peterson, 1984; Clark, 1995: Chap. 8). This claim is central to a significant body of scholarship arguing for the visibility and importance of gender in the public sphere in the modern city. The significance of the recognition that the distinction between public and private spheres may not be as sharp as has often been stated, a particularly important understanding for feminist scholarship, will be examined below.

For Sennett, by contrast, politics is deep background on a stage where creative change is associated more often with the individual or with private institutions such as capitalism. Public opinion receives mention but to it he attributes no operative role in diminishing the value of the concept of the public to an analysis of the modern city. He regards public opinion as a byproduct of the process. The process of negotiating conflict and adjudicating competing claims elicits little attention in his chronicle of a society undergoing fundamental change. When he does address the matter directly, Sennett sees only the loss of vitality in the public sphere. The words vary but not the message. The problem is identified as ‘a divide between the inside and the outside ... between subjective experience and worldly experience, self and city’ (Sennett, 1990: xii). In a later book a different image: ‘[t]he computer screen and the islands of the periphery are spatial aftershocks of problems before unsolved on the streets and town squares, in churches and town halls’ (Sennett, 1994: 21).

In contrast to Sennett, Mike Davis (1990) recognizes in his study of Los Angeles that politics is centrally involved in negotiating over the use of urban resources, public and private. Davis is concerned to explore the relations between private interests and public bodies in his study of the politics of investment in the city. He understands this activity to be crucial to the creation of the contemporary urban landscape. Significantly, he uncovers little influence that has been exerted by the public, broadly conceived, in the process. From his perspective, urban politics have essentially been subverted by the ability of private capital to manipulate the environment without recourse to meaningful input from the general populace. Davis disagrees with Sennett on the importance of politics, but both see the public spaces of the modern city as being beyond the ability of the citizen to influence (Lees, 1993–94).

2 Everyday practices

Secondly, the two theses on the role of the public sphere in the modern city regard the impact of everyday practices very differently. For Sennett, who sees the individual as the inheritor of a deprived public sphere, everyday practice provides little opportunity to change the rules. Instead, the urbanite, confronted by the urban turmoil of the modern city, searches for a comfortable retreat into a world of individualism. The individual may adopt the persona of a flâneur, a highly visible observer of the urban, but not that of an
active player. Disengagement, the theme behind the nineteenth-century urban boulevardier’s appreciation of public life, darkens in the twentieth century to become fear which begets pervasive surveillance. The late twentieth-century city has become the home turf of manipulation and control of the visitor to such environments as Disney’s parks (Sorkin, 1992).

By contrast, Michel de Certeau sees an altogether more creative outcome of the persistent turmoil that Sennett regretfully believes to have produced negative consequences for the wide participation of urban residents in public activities. Sennett believes that from the nineteenth century the privileging of the private market and of individuals made the city a place where public experience was devalued and any sense of common destiny falsified. The increasing diversity which the citizen encountered on the streets became seen in a negative light, and uncontrolled encounters came to be regarded as undesirable and were to be avoided (Sennett, 1994: Part 3). De Certeau (1984: xi), by contrast, believes that what he calls everyday practices in the city ought to be regarded as more than ‘merely the obscure background of social activity’. The city, he writes, ‘is no longer a field of programmed and regulated operations … [T]he ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; … they are impossible to administer’, in part because they are concentrated in public spaces and especially the streets. They have, he suggests, ‘reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy … and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations’ (de Certeau, 1984: 95, 96). These practices, beyond the panoptic control of the state, are inherently spatial practices.

Zukins’ (1995: 213–30) analysis of Brooklyn’s Fulton Street business district illustrates the point beautifully in counterposing elaborate official strategies of redevelopment against the unauthorized occupation of the sidewalks by peddlers and street vendors operating outside official sanction. Ethington’s treatment of crowds and their political influence, as when he discusses vigilantism and public executions in San Francisco, recognizes their agency in the public sphere. He appreciates that the logic and validation of these practices depend not upon the sanction of established state institutions but upon their public acceptance. Indeed, it is precisely this understanding that gives the episode of mid-century vigilantism its importance; it enforces change in the political arena. The subversive potential of these everyday practices, realized in this instance in San Francisco, arises precisely from their unreadability by the state.

An appreciation of the inability of the state to discern and control everyday practices, even of supposedly powerless street people, and the significance of these practices to the public life of the city, is becoming clear (Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 1992; 1996). In the literature on what is now sometimes termed urban popular culture, urban graffiti provides a significant example. Tim Cresswell (1992) examines its flowering in New York. He sees it as an attempt to assert claims to places where the graffiti artists believe they have rights not yet given public recognition. From the viewpoint of city authorities it is regarded as a symptom of disorder, a practice that is neither sanctioned nor understood. Nevertheless, it proved to be a practice that the state was largely powerless to control. Eventually, some attitudes changed and the graffiti was declared to be art and hung on gallery walls. The ‘ordination of graffiti as art, consciously or not, subverted the subversive’, in Cresswell’s (1992: 342) phrase.

Another illustration of de Certeau’s belief in the power of everyday practice that is beyond the control of the state can be found in the recent literature on urban gay life. George Chauncey’s significant research presented in his splendid book, Gay New York
explores activity that in the period he has studied was illegal. Nevertheless it survived. Indeed, its practice was often highly visible in public space where it found a certain sanctuary from attack. There is no little irony in the realization that illegal activity which was being actively prosecuted by the law on occasion found greater protection in public space than it secured in private space. Police raids on bath houses were more easily executed than were arrests in public. Public space was a crucial resource in gay culture. We must remember that this was no subculture of privilege, but crossed economic lines and invaded public spaces, including streets, at the very heart of the city (Chauncey, 1994).

3 Public and private spheres

Thirdly, the treatment of the distinction between the public and private spheres differs among the proponents of the two theses. Sennett regards the opposition of the two as central to his argument: the fall of public man and the loss of confidence in the public sphere accompanies the choice that the citizenry has made to retreat into the private sphere. The reasons for this preference and the process of implementing it are central themes in his interpretation of modern urbanism. There is much that appears to be self-evidently reasonable in this interpretation, for the history of suburbs has been seen to represent precisely this escape into a preferred domestic environment as a conscious choice to avoid the threatening chaos of the city (Jackson, 1985; Stilgoe, 1988). Further support for the argument can be gleaned from Claude Fischer’s (1981) findings from an extensive survey study designed to test whether urban residence itself was a cause of estrangement considered by Wirth as typical of an urban way of life (see Reiss, 1964). His findings support the theory that distinguishes between public and private spheres of life; urbanism – measured by the size of city in which respondents lived – was correlated with increasing distrust of strangers, of people met in public. Urban life, he concludes, acts to create distrust of relations in public but not in private (Fischer, 1981).

In contrast to analyses which proceed on the assumption of the clear and unproblematic distinction between the public and private spheres are others suggesting that the categories themselves may need to be redefined. Zukin (1995: 265) alerts her readers to the necessity of reconsidering long-established assumptions, writing that ‘[t]he very concept of public culture seems old because it requires transcending private interests’. A usable concept of the public will require that the complex influences exerted by private interests on public culture and space be confronted. This she attempts in her analyses of the Disney Company, of shopping and eating as important elements of public culture, and of the management role of private interests in urban redevelopment of city parks, streets and neighbourhoods. She is arguing in part for a recognition of the changing mix and legitimacy of interests involved in negotiating to establish rights of enjoyment, management and control of public resources.

Urban geographers have begun to recognize that concepts of public and private held by the urban citizenry are malleable, responding to changing experience and perception. Robert Sack has articulated an often-encountered sensibility when he examines popular attitudes to assess urban public space unfavourably by comparison with private space. Of the former, he writes that it tends to be ‘objective, geometric, … often alienating space’ (Sack, 1992: 134). Public space has been emptied of much of its vitality; it has become increasingly impersonal and drained of the social meaning which previously attached to it, diminishing its relevance to community life (Sack, 1986: Chap. 6).
zoning arose from a concern to manage private space by defining its use in terms of perceived public interest. It created a heightened consciousness of the ties binding what is public and private. Geographers have been drawn to study residential zoning, restrictive covenants and other such devices for protecting private interests as these have become contentious (Robson, 1982; Johnston, 1982; 1984). The question of who controls public space may be crucial to strategies for the protection of private space. The concept of defensible space has become significant as investigations have revealed the extent to which the enjoyment of private space, including one’s home, depends upon one’s ability to exercise some control over public space, which is frequently perceived as a threat (Newman, 1973; Coleman, 1990). Public space is widely perceived to threaten private space by harbouring crime, a circumstance which Steve Herbert (1997) has investigated in a study examining the differing approaches of policemen in Los Angeles to enforcing the law in public and private places. Not only in the public imagination but also in the operation of police forces and through litigation over exclusionary zoning the complex relationships between public and private space are in the process of being defined and redefined.

Feminist scholars have recently subjected the liberal view of the public and private spheres to sustained criticism. Carole Pateman (1989) scrutinizes the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the liberal view, and urgently seeks to provide an alternative perspective. Assumptions such as the availability of a ‘smooth passage of all individuals through social institutions’ and ‘a benign public world’ in which all can interact illustrate liberalism’s patriarchal bent. She believes that in consequence of such thinking ‘[t]he meaning of “civil society” … has been constructed through the exclusion of women and all that we symbolize’ (Pateman, 1989: 29, 48, 52). Liberals, she argues, have regarded women only as a source of ‘disorder’ in the state, that is, as a disruptive influence in social and political life. Their neat dichotomy between the public and private sustains this assessment in regarding these realms as the exclusive spheres of men and women respectively. The real result of such reasoning, Pateman (1989: 121–22) argues, is that liberalism’s concept of social life views the public and private as ‘inextricably interrelated; they are the two sides of the single coin of liberal-patriarchalism’. The alternative for which she argues would insist on the importance of considering the significant distinction between them and then examining the relationships which link public and private (domestic) life. This argument is widely appreciated; the segregation of public and private, male and female spheres has been described as ‘a guiding fiction’ (Saegert, quoted in Rose, 1993: 125; see also Fraser, 1991).

Liberal doctrine finds no favour with Iris Marion Young (1995) who analyses communitarian ideas as alternatives that have been offered as an alternative. She discovers no happy alternative in these formulations, regarding them as equally denying difference and concealing heterogeneity under a cloak of unity. Instead, she searches for a formulation which will privilege face-to-face relations, a ‘normative ideal of city life … [as] a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers’ (Young, 1995: 264). By focusing on the differences which find their clearest expression in the politics of public space accessible to everyone, she believes that such a perspective will overcome the pitfalls of liberal individualism and the reliance on the idea of a universal public which she finds repressive.

The urban literature offers a number of fine examples of research that has explored the ways in which women who have been assumed to represent the private, or domestic, sphere have insinuated themselves into the public sphere. Jeanne Peterson (1984)
explodes the myth of the Victorian matron as the ‘angel in the house’ in her work on three generations of women of the Paget family in England, and Paula Baker (1984) persuasively argues that women’s volunteer work in the Progressive era was politically significant by being adopted, if not co-opted, into the foundations of the welfare state (see also Deutsch, 1992). In both these studies the capacity of women to redefine the meaning of public and private is elucidated, as when in Baker’s study political recognition given to the volunteer work of women signifies its importance in the public sphere. Furthermore, these studies expose the permeability of the boundary between public and private, and the capacity of women to negotiate and influence its demarcation. The idea that during the modern period the nature of public and private spheres has been redefined is subjected to cool analytical criticism by Amanda Vickery (1993) who in particular doubts its power when applied to middle-class women. She casts significant doubt on the contention that ‘sometime between 1650 and 1850 the public/private distinction was constituted or radically reconstituted in a way that transformed relations between the sexes’ (Vickery, 1993: 411–12). The meaning of the public/private dichotomy, and of separate spheres, is yet to be sufficiently argued conclusively to demonstrate that the discourse of feminine and masculine gender shaped female language and behaviour (Ethington, 1992b).

The role of women in drawing the line between the public and private is one of the topics that Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987) examine in their significant study of several generations of women of middling rank in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century urban England. This was a period when the public sphere was being significantly recast, and when women of a certain rank tended to withdraw from what had been their daily acquaintance with business: ‘As the spatial and temporal quarantine between the public and the private grew, they were every more identified with gender, a masculine penumbra surrounded that which was defined as public while women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social and psychic partitions’ (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 319). From within these shrouds with which society intended to encompass women the authors demonstrate how provincial middle-class urban women extended their influence beyond the private, domestic sphere through involvement in religious institutions, charities and education. They portray women self-consciously constructing and reconstructing their own identities in private and public realms.

4 The significance of public space

Fourthly, the two interpretations differ fundamentally on the significance attributed to public space in the city. The character of public space has been radically redefined in the modern city (Harris, 1990). The nature of the street changed with the arrival of the boulevard. Huge new spaces have been created for the public in parks and cemeteries. To take the most singular example of new public space in the USA, Central Park in New York represented a radically different resource for the city than any that had existed previously. What makes Central Park especially significant is the knowledge we now have from the research of Rosenzweig and Blackmar (1992) that the ordinary citizens of that city enforced their own ideas of how they wished to use and enjoy it even in the teeth of official disapproval and attempts to prevent them from exercising their perceived rights. In the streets, where rights of public enjoyment were seen as traditional, the public resisted attempts to extinguish these privileges (Goheen, 1994). But the streets were not
the only setting for claims by the public against the designs of authorities for the control of public space.

The question that arises is: how important is the exercise of rights in public by ordinary residents thought to be? Sennett has almost nothing to say about the new public spaces that appeared in modern cities. He dismisses Central Park in a sentence or two as a dream that failed. The failure he defines as the inability of its designers to impose their own vision as to how it ought to be used (Sennett, 1994: 360). This new kind of public space has little impact on his interpretation of the decline and fall of public man and the triumph of individualism in the modern city.

Ethington, by contrast, places a good deal of emphasis on public space although he betrays some discomfort with it, finding it easier to describe the hall than the street as a venue for public acts. He seems confused from time to time by the proliferating conflicts of identity revealed in public space. Nevertheless, he recognizes the importance and authenticity of public opinion expressed there. Space, he acknowledges, is a central dimension of the public sphere and its value for collective demonstration is part of what separates it so clearly from both society and the state.

The values which attach to public space are usually in contention (Mitchell, 1995). The meaning of public space cannot be read from the record of official actions or policies; it is not the result of civic ordinance. It will be understood only by paying attention to the often confusing or seemingly trivial contests over the use and enjoyment of public space, whether old streets or new parks and cemeteries. The process of creating value is a continuing one: few episodes are ever thought to be definitive and even these are susceptible to being reinterpreted with the advantage of long hindsight. This is to be expected by the very nature of the tradition of the streets as public (on streets, see Levitas, 1978; Kostoff, 1992; Celik et al., 1995). Ethington senses this more clearly than does Sennett.

III Conclusion

I have defined two dramatically different assessments of the importance of public space in the modern city principally with reference to writings by Sennett, and by Ethington and Zukin. Each author, in my judgement, has clearly articulated one of the contending theses about the significance of public space in the contemporary city. I have examined in some detail the differences in these interpretations with reference to four issues which have been extensively treated in the wider literature or urban public space and the public sphere. Proponents of both interpretations recognize, and respond very differently to, their perception that the meaning of what is public and private is being actively renegotiated. For Sennett and those who share his general view the increasing irrelevance of public space for many urban inhabitants significantly diminishes the value of old definitions of public and private. A lack of perceived interest in public space has resulted in a diminished commitment to it, a process proponents of this view see illustrated in the increasing success with which private interests are able to claim some measure of control over formerly publicly managed public space. Zukin diagnoses the same trend, offering a different perspective on it. She stresses the fuzziness and permeability of the boundaries between what is regarded as public and private, arguing for the importance of consumers – the public – in establishing definitions that suit their purposes.
The interest of the public in the most highly symbolic urban public places is recognized in both views. In one reading these seminal spaces – most of which were created in an earlier era of clearer control by élites – lose their significance as those élites are perceived to abandon them. In the other, this very process by which newly contending groups exert their rights of use and enjoyment of these public spaces suggests their continuing significance. They are important talismans of a creative process of a changing urban public culture.

I would like to conclude by offering a brief comment on one recent event which demonstrates how strong can be the attraction of highly regarded urban public space to groups seeking recognition as public participants. It is hard, I believe, to read into such an incident an interpretation that would emphasize the devalued quality of the public space in question. Let us look beyond the officially sanctioned parades; let us notice instead the unauthorized demonstration (riot?) or the tolerated but not encouraged occupation of public space.

The ‘Million man march’ on Washington provides a vivid recent example of the tolerated but not encouraged occupation of public space. The organizers well grasped the point that certain messages are communicated to the broad public more clearly and effectively through such events than is otherwise possible. The Economist noted the occasion, commenting that it was orderly, peaceful and ‘civilized’. It proceeded to quote the civil rights leader Roger Wilkins on just this message:

That in itself was history-making … Much of America sees black men as irretrievably violent and ‘disorderly’ … But at least half a million people came, and they were orderly. They were spiritual. They came for the day and left the city in just as good shape as when they got here. White America has never seen anything like it. And black and white America both saw an image of black men that was strong, determined, and clean (The Economist, 1995: 31).

Darryl Pinckney (1995) brought his readers’ attention to another point: the symbolic value of occupying the Mall in Washington. The organizer of this occasion, Louis Farrakhan, had three years earlier drawn larger crowds in Atlanta than the World Series then being played there. That rally, however, had failed to attract mainstream press notice. But that would not be the fate of a huge demonstration on Washington’s Mall. ‘After all’ Pinckney (1995: 79) wrote, ‘the Mall is where the coronation is held, even if [Martin Luther] King had been down at the Lincoln Memorial end’.

The will to command public urban space expresses the desire of many urban groups and institutions to be acknowledged, to convey messages forcefully, to promote the legitimacy of one’s cause. The range of such expression is great, and the contest for visibility and influence is lively. The process is visible both in the hawking along the pavements of Fulton Street in Brooklyn and on the Mall in Washington. It is all-important public space which lends its iconic value to those who occupy it, even briefly. As geographers we have a particular interest in learning from the way urban society views, manages and contests this collective resource, this shared symbolic space.

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