

Contemporary Public Space: Critique and Classification, Part One: Critique

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ABSTRACT *This two-part paper draws upon different scholarly traditions to highlight the key tensions at the heart of the contemporary public space debate. Critiques of public space can broadly be placed into two camps, those who argue that public space is over-managed, and those who argue that it is under-managed. This over-simplifies a complex discourse on public space that this paper aims to unpack, but nevertheless provides a useful lens through which to view the critiques. In fact there are a series of discrete but related critiques of the contemporary public space situation, and it is these that the first part of this paper identifies and organizes. In so doing it also reveals a range of public space types that are used in the second part of the paper to suggest a new typology of public space.*

Introduction

Most writers on public space issues recognize a general decline in this realm, although the causes and the cures prescribed are often very different. Crudely, the literature demonstrates a dichotomy among critics.

Many of the best known academic critics choose to focus on what they view as the over-management of some types of external (and internal) public spaces that manifests itself in what they see as the commodification and homogenization of space (for example, Sorkin, 1992; Boyer, 1994; Zukin, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998). Others, particularly practice-based critics focus on what they view as the under-management of external public spaces and paint a picture of a rubbish-strewn, poorly designed and insecure public realm. Many of the former set of concerns revolve around formal, high profile public space types that, through a wide variety of development and policy processes, have become increasingly privatized and often, as a consequence, more or less exclusionary. These are very real concerns which have spawned a huge literature and which underpin critiques of some of the recent trends in public space management (De Magalhaes & Carmona, 2006).

Critics of the under-management type are not new. As early as 1889 Camillo Sitte bemoaned the loss of civic life and the focus on functionality in the design of new civic space. Classic urban design texts such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and Oscar Newman (1973) have long since criticized the tendency to design environments that encourage incivil behaviour and a heightened fear of crime. In this tradition,

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Alice Coleman's (1985) work examined how the design of the built environment could support activities such as littering, graffiti, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour, leading all too quickly to a degraded environment and a disadvantaged community. Again, an extensive literature has developed from these pioneering studies, much of which challenges the details, if not the fundamentals, of the early work.

The existence of literature from both sides of the Atlantic making essentially the same observations about the deterioration of public space illustrates the portability of these concerns. In fact issues about public space quality are shared across the developed world (CABE Space, 2004) and in many parts of the developing world (Zetter & Butina-Watson, 2006). Arguably they are underpinned by a growing awareness of the 'value' of public space that now reaches to the highest political levels.

In the UK, for example, in his Croydon speech of April 2001, the former Prime Minister (Tony Blair) marked a decisive shift in national policy by calling for cleaner and safer streets where communities are given the opportunity to thrive and not just survive. This interest from the very top reflects an increasing perception about the importance of public space issues as a political concern, but also an awareness of a growing body of evidence that public space is able to deliver a range of benefits across economic, social and environmental spheres (see Woolley *et al.*, nd).

This paper has three main objectives. First, in the discussion that follows, it aims to identify the multifarious critiques of contemporary public space and to organize them so that they can be better understood in relation to one another. Second, in the next part of this paper, the impact of contemporary trends on public space is discussed, and whether, as a result, we are witnessing a deterioration in public space quality, or simply an evolution of public space with an inevitable development of management practices as well. In this process a range of typologies of public space are revealed, many emanating directly from the critiques themselves. Finally, therefore, an attempt is made to classify these in order to suggest a new typology of public space, one based on how public space is managed, rather than on particular qualities of public space itself.

Under-management Critiques

The critiques begin with the notion that public space, and therefore the public realm, is experiencing a physical decline. At this stage it is important to note that the categories discussed below are not hard and fast, and indeed some critiques could arguably be placed in a number of the categories. An important point is therefore to recognize from the start the inter-connected nature of the critiques, and their combined impact on perceptions of public space. This point is returned to in the second part of this paper.

Neglected Space

Writing in the 1980s and commenting on the state of the urban environment, Francis Tibbalds' now classic polemic *Making People Friendly Towns* bemoaned the decline of public space across the world. Using the UK as an example of where a once rich public realm was declining, Tibbalds (2001, p. 1) argued that public space is too often

littered, piled with rotting rubbish, covered in graffiti, polluted, congested and choked by traffic, full of mediocre and ugly poorly maintained buildings, unsafe, populated at night by homeless people living in cardboard boxes, doorways and subways and during the day by many of the same people begging in the streets.

Tibbalds quoted Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* when he said that the public realm is a 'SEP' (someone else's problem). Not only, he suggested, do the general public expect someone else to clean up after them, but so do the numerous organizations with a formal role in the creation and management of public space (Figure 1). Through their influential 'Broken Windows Theory', Wilson and Kelling (1982) graphically demonstrated what a failure to deal with minor signs of decay within an urban area could bring—a rapid spiral of decline. They argued how a failure to repair broken windows quickly, or to deal promptly with other signs of decay such as graffiti or kerb crawlers can lead to the impression that no one cares, and quickly propel an area into decline.

Like many urban designers, Tibbalds advocated the use of good design as a means to reverse the problems of a threatening and uncared for public realm, although unlike many others, he also recognized the vital role of public space management: "Looking after towns and cities also includes after-care—caring about litter, fly-posting, where cars are parked, street cleansing, maintaining paved surfaces, street furniture, building facades, and caring for trees and planting" (Tibbalds, 2001, p. 7). For him, after-care mattered every bit as much as getting the design right in the first place. Empirical evidence that backs up claims that there has been a decline in the way we care for the urban environment, at least in the UK, is compiled in Carmona and De Magalhaes (2006). The implications of this neglect is now widely accepted in policy circles.

Lost Spaces

Other writers have written about certain types of contemporary urban space that make the management of public space all the more challenging. Loukaitou-Sideris (1996, p. 91), for example, writes about 'Cracks in the City'. For her, cracks are defined as the "in-between spaces, residual, under-utilised and often deteriorating". She argues that poor management is also to blame for the state of many corporate plazas, car parks, parks and public housing estates, "where abandonment and deterioration have filled vacant space with trash and human waste".

Trancik (1986, pp. 3–4) has used the term 'lost space' to make similar arguments. For him, lost space is a description of public spaces that are "in need of redesign, antispace, making no positive contribution to the surrounds or users". Examples of lost spaces are "the base of high-rise towers or unused sunken plazas, parking lots, the edges of freeways that nobody cares about maintaining, abandoned waterfronts, train yards, vacated military sites, and industrial complexes, deteriorated parks and marginal public-housing projects" (Figure 2). He argues the blame for creating lost spaces lies squarely with the car, urban renewal, the privatization of public space, functional separation of uses, and with the Modern Movement.

However, not all writers are critical of these neglected spaces. Hajer and Reijndorp (2001, p. 128) suggest that "The new public domain does not only appear at the usual places in the city, but often develops in and around the



Figure 1. Neglected public space.



Figure 2. Lost space.

in-between spaces. ... These places often have the character of 'liminal spaces': they are border crossings, places where the different worlds of the inhabitants of the urban field touch each other". They quote a broad group of supporters for the idea of 'liminality' (Zukin, 1991; Shields, 1991; Sennett, 1990), each arguing in different ways that such spaces can also act to bring together disparate activities, occupiers and characters in a manner that creates valuable exchanges and connections. Worpole and Knox (2007, p. 14) have termed such spaces 'slack' spaces arguing that they should be regulated with a light touch. For them, urban areas need places where certain behaviours are allowed that in other circumstances might be regarded as anti-social.

The poor physical state of these types of public space seems to rest with the fact that it is rarely clear who should be managing them after they are built, or after they have declined. As a consequence, they are universally neglected, with Hajer and Reijndorp (2001, p. 129) arguing that much greater attention needs to be given to such transitional spaces.

Twenty-four-hour Space

Other forms of space are not neglected in the sense that 'lost' or 'slack' spaces are, but have nevertheless also taken on some of the characteristics of liminality. Roberts and Turner (2005) argue that the increasing emphasis on the evening economy and support for 24-hour city policies has brought with it forms of behaviour that even the perpetrators would feel is unacceptable in their own neighbourhoods. In such places the conflicts often revolve around the needs of local residents *vs* those of the revellers and local businesses serving the evening economy. Leisure and entertainment destinations such as London's Soho are of this type.

In the UK, the 24-hour city and concepts of the evening economy became a major trust in the regeneration efforts of towns and cities throughout the 1990s, and the Government-led de-regulation of the drinks industry that followed stoked this heady mix, turning many urban centres into what have come to be termed 'youthful playscapes' (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). These spaces may not have been neglected, but have nevertheless been abandoned to market forces and to a

clientele of the young with disposal income to burn (Worpole, 1999), in the process deterring other users from these previously shared spaces and perpetuating a form of exclusion (see below). For Roberts and Turner (2005, p. 190), the solution is the need for more active management and more sophisticated planning controls. Without suitable controls, they argue, the original ideals of a European 'continental ambience', so admired by the original proponents of the 24-hour city, will not be achieved.

Invaded Space

Perhaps the most universal derision is reserved for the impact of the private car which Gehl and Gemzoe (2001) have described as invading public space. They argue that in old cities and urban areas where car traffic has gained the upper hand, public space has inevitably changed dramatically with traffic and parking gradually usurping pedestrian space in streets and squares. 'Not much physical space is left, and when other restrictions and irritants such as dirt, noise and visual pollution are added, it doesn't take long to impoverish city life' (Gehl & Gemzoe, 2001, p. 14).

The critique is nothing new, and manifests itself in four primary problems. Lefebvre (1991, p. 359), first, describes how urban space is often "sliced up, degraded, and eventually destroyed by ... the proliferation of fast roads" so that "Movement between the fragments becomes a purely movement experience rather than a movement and social experience" (Carmona *et al.* 2003, p. 75). Buchanan (1988, p. 32), second, argues that the remaining public space itself is too often dominated by traffic and has lost its social function as a result. Thus even when the number of car users is greatly exceeded by the numbers of pedestrians using a street, the space given over to road space far exceeds that dedicated to footpaths.

A third problem relates to the ease with which car owners can move from one unrelated place or event to another while "The in-between spaces simply fly past" (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001, p. 57). In such a context physically distant places can be compressed into a single space, while others (in between) can be ostracized and allowed to deteriorate because of their perceived reputation or absence of attractors. Hajer and Reijndorp (2001, pp. 53–61) characterize this as an 'archipelago of enclaves' and argue that unless the in-between parts of the city also develop an attraction value, the new network city will ensure that they continue to be ignored.

A fourth impact can be seen in the range of exclusively car reliant environments that have spawned across the Western World, particularly in North America, where external public space does not exist at all, at least not in any traditional form, but is instead replaced by a series of disconnected roads and car parks (Figure 3). This phenomenon is extensively covered in the literature (see, for example, Garreau, 1991; Ford, 2000; Duany *et al.*, 2000; Graham & Marvin, 2001), and although such developments are sometimes placed within landscape settings, these landscapes are typically designed to be experienced from the car, and rarely attract pedestrian traffic. "Such cities are not intended for walking. Sidewalks have disappeared in the city centres as well as residential areas, and all the uses of the city have gradually been adapted to serve the motorist" (Gehl & Gemzoe, 2001, p. 16).



Figure 3. Car reliance space—the American strip.



Figure 4. Invaded public space.

Gehl and Gemzoe (2001, p. 14) argue that invaded space is generally impoverished space, and that most of the social and recreational activities that did or would exist, disappear, leaving only the remnants of the most necessary, utilitarian functions. In such places, people walk only when they have to, not because they want to. Collectively the invasion of private cars have led to a dramatic reduction in the space available to pedestrians, a reduction in the quality of the space that remains, significant restrictions to the freedom of movement for pedestrians both within and between spaces, and the filling of spaces with the clutter and paraphernalia that conventional wisdom has determined the safe coexistence of cars and people requires (Figure 4):

This panoply is generally owned and managed by different bodies. At worst, there is no co-ordination and the only functional considerations are engineering-led and car-oriented. The pedestrian is ignored or marginalised. Some of these items are introduced on the grounds of 'pedestrian improvements', yet the 'sheep-pen' staggered pedestrian crossings and guard rails impede pedestrian movement while allowing a free run for the car. (Llewelyn-Davies, 2000, p. 102).

Campaigners such as David Engwicht have written about the need to reclaim such street space from cars to once again make it available as social space, available to the full range of users. He argues "the more space a city devotes to movement, the more exchange space becomes diluted and scattered. The more diluted and scattered the exchange opportunities, the more the city begins to lose the very thing that makes a city: a concentration of exchange opportunities" (Engwicht, 1999, p. 19).

Exclusionary Space

A number of the most influential figures in urban design, including Jane Jacobs (1984), Jan Gehl (1996) and William Whyte (1980, 1988), have argued that the use public space receives is directly related to the types of 'quality' factors discussed above. Therefore, if space is poorly managed and declines either physically, or in the opportunities and activities (social, cultural, political, economic) it offers, then a vicious cycle of decline may all too easily set in. "If people use space less, then there is less incentive to provide new spaces and maintain existing ones. With a

decline in their maintenance and quality, public spaces are less likely to be used, thereby exacerbating the vicious spiral of decline" (Carmona *et al.*, 2003, p. 111).

Disabling Spaces

Although the physical quality of public space will be important to all who choose to use it, for some it will be more important than for others. For some, particularly the disabled, those with young children in pushchairs, or the elderly, simple physical barriers can present major obstacles to their use of public space, often completely excluding them from certain areas as a result (Figure 5). Hall and Imrie (1999, p. 409) argue, for example, that the disabled tend to experience the built environment as a series of obstacle courses. For them, most built environment professionals have little awareness of the needs of those with disabilities, and the public space that results is itself disabling when it need not be (Imrie & Hall, 2001, p. 10). Moreover, because disability is associated with wheelchair use when in fact only a very small percentage of the population with disabilities are wheelchair users (4% in the UK), the manifold ways in which the environment can be disabling is rarely appreciated (Imrie & Hall, 2001, p. 43). For Carmona *et al.* (2003, p. 43), addressing environmental disability involves:

- Understanding social disability and the ways in which the environment is disabling;
- Designing for inclusion rather than for exclusion or segregation;
- Ensuring proactive and integrated consideration, rather than reactive 'tacked-on' provision.

In other words, because what is good for those with disabilities is generally good for all (making the environment more accessible and easier to use for everyone), the needs of less physically able users of the built environment should be considered as an integral part of processes that shape and manage the built environment. Likewise, the psychological barriers to accessibility may need to be tackled, including fear of crime (see below) or simply a concern that the streets are unsafe for certain users (particularly children) because of their domination by fast moving traffic.

Parochial Space

For Loukaitou-Sideris (1996, p. 100) "the fragmentation of the public realm has been accompanied by fear, suspicion, tension and conflict between different social groups. This fear results in the spatial segregation of activities in terms of class, ethnicity, race, age, type of occupation and the designation of certain locales that are only appropriate for certain persons and uses", for example the forms of 24-hour 'youthful playscapes' described above. Lofland (1998) describes such spaces as 'parochial' because they are appropriated by particular groups, so whoever wanders in feels either like a stranger or a guest, depending on how they fit in. Loukaitou-Sideris (1996, p. 100) describes users of contemporary public space as having suspicion of the stranger, but, as opposed to the single undifferentiated spatial type of the modernist public space, there is now segregation into distinct spatial types and users.



Figure 5. Exclusionary public space.



Figure 6. Dedicated teen-space.

The combined result of physical barriers, and concerns for the safety and well-being, in particular of the old and the young, means that life-cycle stage is among the most significant determinants of environmental accessibility and equity (Lang, 1994, p. 269). The reluctance of parents, for example, to let their children play in the street or walk to school has been widely reported, and linked to associated health and obesity problems among children unable to get enough exercise, as well as to a decline of the overseeing role of children by adult strangers, and to a growing tendency to see the presence of children in public space as a threat to public order (Shonfield, nd, p. 11). The development of car-dominated urban form may be partly to blame and has been extensively criticized, not least by 'New Urbanists' who argue that suburban environments too often dictate that only one lifestyle is possible; to own a car and to use it for everything (Duany *et al.*, 2000, p. 25), but the way that existing environments are managed is likely to be just as culpable, not least in the way that space for the pedestrian has increasingly been starved of investment.

Moreover, some heavy users of public space have been very actively denied access to it, or parts of it, prominent among which are the poor, homeless and teenagers. Exclusion because of fear or an inability to consume are discussed below, and teenagers are excluded for both these reasons, but teenagers are also excluded because of their pastimes, the most written about being skateboarding which is regarded by some as anti-social' because of the conflict it creates with other groups and due to the damage it does to street furniture (Johns, 2001).

Rather than positively designing for and managing such activities, some argue the strategy is more often to crudely banish such uses to dedicated spaces (Figure 6), and to design or police them out of shared spaces. However, as Malone (2002, p. 165) has argued, "It has become obvious from research that skate ramps and other youth-specific spaces on the margins of city centres are less than appealing places for young people (especially for young women)". In such places teenagers experience problems of safety and security and feelings of exclusion, while what they desire in a public space is "social integration, safety and freedom of movement". These all represent failures to appropriately manage shared public spaces in a manner that allows their equitable use by all groups without diminishing the welfare of others.

Segregated Space

At the most extreme, some forms of user activity directly undermine an equitable use of public space. Crime, or often, more correctly, the fear of crime, remains a

major cause of this retreat from the public realm for those with choice (Miethe, 1995), whether behind gates, or simply away from urban locations into suburban ones. Boddy (1992), for example, contends that people feel exposed and vulnerable when outdoors, and conversely safe and protected when inside, a fear that results in the increasing spatial segregation of activities by class, age, ethnicity and occupation—communities for the elderly, ethnic areas, skid row, etc.

Contemporary trends to physically gate communities, for example, have been well documented (see Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Low in Low & Smith, 2006; Webster, 2001), and reflect the long established desire of affluent groups in many societies to separate themselves from the rest of society, often reflecting a fear of crime, or simply a desire to be, and to be seen to be, exclusive. In essence, the gates turn the space inside into a private space, accessed on the basis of relative wealth, while the residents turn their backs (the walls and gates) on the space around. Increasingly this is a global phenomena (Figure 7).

The fear of victimization is real and a significant factor in how the contemporary urban environment is both designed and managed (Oc & Tiesdell, 1997), not least in pressures for segregation. Crime and incivil behaviour can quickly undermine the quality and experience of public space, encouraging users to manage the perceived risk by avoiding using places and in turn contributing to their further decline. Although men are statistically at greater risk of crime than women and young men at greatest risk of all, the fear of victimization is felt more acutely by women, no doubt helping to explain Whyte's (1980) observation that a low proportion of women in public space generally indicates that something is wrong.

A huge literature exists around approaches to crime reduction, with arguments around the extent to which environments can be made more safe through various combinations of defensive design, surveillance, street animation, active control, and social and educational approaches to crime reduction; approaches that at their most extreme lead to accusations of over-management (see below). Although prescriptions vary, most commentators would agree with Jane Jacob's basic prescription that public peace is kept primarily by the network of voluntary controls that most individuals in society subscribe to and which is (typically) codified in law. In this sense, as Jacobs (1984, p. 45) argued, users of the public space and occupiers of the surrounding buildings are "active participants in the drama of civilisation versus barbarism" (Figure 8). By its very nature this requires users to be actively engaged in the process of civility, and a perverse consequence of the privatization of residential environments may simply be the withdrawal (behind their gates) of many law-abiding participants from this role (Bentley, 1999, p. 163).

Domestic, Third and Virtual Space

These trends may be an extension of what Sennett (1977, pp. 5–15) has described as a decline in public life brought on by an increasing emphasis on the private relations of individuals, their families and intimate friends, driven by the rise of secularism and capitalism. By contrast, he argues, public life has increasingly been seen as a matter of dry formal relations, while the introspective obsession on private life has become a trap, absorbing the attention of individuals rather than liberating them. The consequence is a retreat to domestic space while the venues of public life, the streets and squares, have increasingly been replaced by the suburban living room.



Figure 7. Gated communities in China.



Figure 8. Active participants in the drama of civilization.

Supporting this view are critiques that identify the spread of new technologies and new private venues for social exchange as a key threat to the very notion of a public life. Ellin (1996, p. 149), among others, notes, how many social and civic functions that were previously—by necessity—conducted in the public realm, have increasingly transferred to the private. Entertainment, access to information, shopping, financial services, and even voting, can increasingly be undertaken from the home using modern technologies, in particular the internet. This, on top of increasingly dramatic rises in personal mobility, has in many places led to decline in the ‘local’, ‘small scale’ and ‘public’ and to a growth in the ‘regional’, ‘large scale’ and ‘private’ as venues for public life. Thus Sennet (1977) has long argued that individual lives are increasingly private and that, as a result, public culture has declined.

Third Spaces

This tendency may simply necessitate a broadening of the definition of public space, to incorporate some of the new forms of semi-public space that have been emerging. Banerjee (2001, pp. 19–20), for example, has suggested that urban designers should concern themselves with broader notions of public life rather than just physical public space, reflecting the new reality that much public life exists in private spaces “not just in corporate theme parks, but also in small businesses such as coffee shops, bookstores and other such third places”. For him, these spaces support and enable social interaction, regardless of their ownership.

This notion of ‘third places’ was originally advanced by Oldenburg (1989) who argued that because contemporary domestic life often takes place in isolated nuclear families, and work life, with the spread of new technologies, increasingly in a solitary manner, people need other social realms to live a fulfilled life. For him, this ‘informal’ public life, although seemingly more scattered than it was in the past, is in fact highly focussed in a number of third place settings—cafes, bookstores, coffee shops, bars, hair salons and other small private hangouts (Figure 9). These places host the encounters from the accidental to the organized and regular, and have become fundamental institutions of mediation between the individual and society, possessing a number of common features. They are:

- Neutral ground, where individuals can come and go as they please;
- Highly inclusive, accessible and without formal criteria of membership;



Figure 9. The third place setting for public life.

- Low profile and taken for granted;
- Open during and outside of office hours;
- Characterized by a playful mood;
- Psychologically supportive and comfortable;
- Places of conversation, and therefore also of political debate.

One might argue that these features also characterize (or should characterize) public space, but also that these third spaces are, again, nothing new; the British pub, French café, or American bar providing examples from the past that remain significant third places in the present. Today these have been supplemented with other forms of third place; the shopping centre, health clubs, video rental stores and a surfeit of new leisure spaces.

Virtual Space

What is new is the growth of virtual spaces—chat rooms, virtual worlds, radio phone-ins, and the like—that some have argued will supplant our need to meet and interact in traditional public space, and will eventually lead to new forms of urbanism (see discussion in Aurigi, 2005, pp. 17–31). Leaving on one side the most extreme predictions of the ‘techno-determinists’ of an end to urban life, some of the most thoughtful writers in the field have concluded that the nature of cities as we understand them today will be challenged and must eventually be reconceived as “Computer networks become as fundamental to urban life as street systems” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 107). Others have argued that rather than undermining traditional cities, the new technologies actually act to reinforce their role as IT applications are largely metropolitan phenomena, while those who work in these fields increasingly wish to live and work in places that bring them into contact with others in the field, and which meet their quality of life aspirations (Graham & Marvin, 1999, p. 97).

Conversely, therefore, the quality of public space may become more rather than less important. In reality, the true impact of the new technologies on city form and public space has yet to be seen, but the fact that face to face communication remains the preferred mode of interaction for business as well as for private activities suggests that public space may not be as threatened by the new technologies as was once thought (Castells, 1996; Sassen, 1994). The expanded role of third places seems to confirm this. Critically, however, whether domestic, third,

or virtual spaces, all these worlds are effectively beyond the normal realm of civic society to manage, as is their impact on 'traditional' public space. Concerns about an under-managed public realm are thus extended to this new pseudo-public space.

Over-managed Public Space

Turning from under-management to over-management critiques, many of these revolve around a notion of increasingly commodified public space. Like the under-managed critiques the categories are not hard-and-fast and discussion overlaps categories, while perceptions of public space are informed by the collective impact of each on the whole.

Privatized Space

In the USA and the UK, debates over the management of public space have increasingly highlighted concerns over privatization and related security issues in recent years. Low and Smith (2006), for example, highlight the increased security and regulation in the USA, especially post 11 September 2001. However, they also note that public spaces in the USA were anyway experiencing significant increases in security during the neo-liberal era of the 1980s and 1990s:

The clampdown on public space ... is not simply due to a heightened fear of terrorism after 2001, and it has many local as well as national-scale inspirations. Many public uses of space are increasingly outlawed and policed in ways unimaginable a few years previously, but these rights were already under concerted attack well before 2001. (Low & Smith, 2006, p. 2)

Corporate Privatization

Low (in Low & Smith, 2006, p. 82) makes the links with the privatization of public space by corporate or commercial interests, arguing that "during the past 20 years, privatisation of urban public space has accelerated through the closing, redesign, and policing of public parks and plazas, the development of business improvement districts that monitor and control local streets and parks, and the transfer of public air rights for the building of corporate plazas ostensibly open to the public". The argument is now widely accepted that urban public spaces in the USA are more highly managed and policed due to the increasing private ownership of public space and the consequent spread of private management strategies. Ellin (1999, pp. 167–168) argues that this privatization is both a cause of the decline of public space, but is equally a consequence of it, as the desire to control private space has grown. For her, the move of facilities and amenities from public city centres to privatized suburban locations, and their reincarnation as inwardly focused fortresses surrounded by moats of car parking, epitomizes the problem. It represents an appropriation of public space by private corporations.

Mandanipour (2003, pp. 215–216) notes a further cause of privatization inherent in the urban development processes that give rise to many new urban

spaces. As development companies have grown in size and complexity, small locally based companies with links to local decision-makers have increasingly given way to companies whose centre of operations typically resides outside the locale. Hand in hand, the financing of projects and ownership of commercial properties are increasingly the responsibilities of national and multi-national companies. The result is a growing disconnect between those responsible for development and the locality. Therefore, "If particular developments had some symbolic value for their developers in the past, it is now more the exchange value in the market that determines their interest"; space becomes a mere commodity. In such a climate, a safe return (the investor's primary interest) will most easily be guaranteed through responding to the needs of occupiers, while those of the wider community will be a low priority. In the absence of strong planning controls to rectify the situation, and a general unwillingness of public authorities to take on the responsibility and cost of managing new spaces themselves, privatization is the inevitable result.

Boyer (1993, pp. 113–114) recognizes a 'City of illusion', arguing that it is inappropriate to call something public space when in fact it is not. In central areas, she suggests, the emphasis is firmly on the provision of luxury spaces while ignoring the interstitial places between. Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998, p. 280) agree, arguing that postmodern design eliminates unwanted and feared political, social and cultural intrusions:

Space is cut off, separated, enclosed, so that it can be easily controlled and 'protected'. This treatment succeeds in screening the unpleasant realities of everyday life: the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the landscapes of fear, neglect, and deterioration. In the place of the real city, a hyper-real environment is created, composed by the safe and appealing elements of the real thing, reproduced in miniature or exaggerated versions.

For them, the subjugation of public space to market forces is a recent phenomenon. Thus, in the USA, downtown urban design, because it is determined by private interests, has become reactive and opportunistic rather than proactive. By contrast, the public sector typically reacts to the initiatives of the private sector for downtown building. "Increasingly the new downtown has come to be at odds with the traces of the old downtown; the Main Street of yesteryear. The public life of the Main Street downtown is vestigial at best and has been totally transformed by the culture of the poor, the homeless, and the new immigrants" (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998, p. 288). Their analysis not only revealed a lack of macro-scale strategic direction to steer investment into parts of the city where the public realm was in decline, but also a series of micro-scale design strategies that deliberately foster exclusion: high blank walls, impenetrable street frontage, sunken plazas, hidden entrances (to new spaces), de-emphasized doorways and openings onto the street, no retail, etc. At the same time the 'privatized' spaces inside can be seen as a series of spectacles or themed environments to be packaged and advertised (Figure 10).

State Privatization

In the UK, Minton (2006) describes the shrinking local government model whereby the local council acts as enabler as opposed to provider, with private–public spaces not managed by the police but by private security. Often the process happens through public-led urban regeneration initiatives, with resulting developments being owned and managed by a single private landlord. As Minton notes, this is effectively a transfer of power for the management of public space from the state to private individuals:

In terms of public space the key issue is that while local government has previously controlled, managed, and maintained streets and public squares, the creation of these new ‘private–public’ places means that... they will be owned and managed by individual private landlords who have the power to restrict access and control activities. (Minton, 2006, p. 10)

Minton uses the examples of Canary Wharf and Broadgate in London as examples of this phenomenon, while the redevelopment of Liverpool City Centre has involved Liverpool City Council leasing out 34 streets to a developer to build and manage for 250 years. Graham (2001) notes an altogether more subtle and pervasive privatization of the streets, in this case through the move in the UK (and elsewhere) from publicly owned urban infrastructure, to privately owned. Although the phenomenon has not yet extended (new motorways and bridges aside) to the roads themselves, most of the infrastructure beneath the street has now been privatized, with associated rights transferred to these companies to obstruct, dig up and reinstate public space more or less at will.

A related issue, in common with the USA, is the rise of Business Improvement Districts (BIDS). BIDS amount to a group of business paying an extra financial levy in order to create an attractive external consumer environment. The relevant legislation to allow the creation of BIDS was approved in 2004, and by April 2006 there were 27 BIDS in England. These Minton (2006, p. 17) describes as ‘private–public’ spaces where private management tightly monitors and controls the public space. For him, BIDS are “characterized by a uniformed private security presence and the banning of anti-social behaviours, from skateboarding to begging”. The evidence suggests that the UK is experiencing similar changes to those experienced in the USA over the last 20 years: a shrinking local government; changes in land ownership; increasing private ownership of public space;



Figure 10. Privatized corporate space.



Figure 11. Café-creep.

increasing private control and management of public space; and an increased focus on cleanliness and security.

Citing the impact of the 2001 Patriot Act in the US as evidence, Low and Smith (2006, p. 12) conclude that “the dilemma of public space is surely trivialized by collapsing our contemporary diagnosis into a lament about private versus public”. For them, the cutting edge of efforts to deny public access to places, media and other institutions is occupied by the state, and the contest to render spaces truly public is not always simply a contest against private interests. Critiques of the instigation and spread of BIDs are based on similar concerns; of the state effectively passing aspects of their responsibility for publicly owned space to private interests. Kohn (2004) identifies another dimension of these same trends in what she characterizes as a creeping commodification of public space. In this category she places the renting out of space by local government for commercial events, the sale of advertising space in and around public space, and ‘café-creep’, or the spread of commercial interests across the pavements of public spaces (Figure 11).

Consumption Space

In Sorkin’s (1992, pp. xiii–xv) *Variations on a Theme Park* it is argued that a new corporate city has emerged heralding an end to traditional public space. This new space is a global space, where economic phenomena cross over to society and culture. Sorkin describes a world dominated by multinational companies, producing a standard urbanism where public space is for consumption. He argues that public space is being heavily managed with an obsession on security, and that public space is at the forefront in creating a city of simulation where spaces are defined by pseudo-historic links to the past.

Hajer and Reijndorp (2001, pp. 49–50) note an unprecedented increase in the deliberate consumption of places and events as a consequence of the dramatic expansion and domination of the middle classes in developed countries:

A phenomenon that has mushroomed in recent years concerns the desire of the ordinary citizen to have ‘interesting’ experiences. Leisure experts talk about an ‘experience market’. Where all kinds of events are offered that can excite people for a short time, from factory sales to art biennials. ... Cities and organizations compete with other places by producing experiences.

Boyer explores the question of simulation further, and how postmodern cities contain layers of history and symbolism that can be manipulated and exploited as an instrument of late capitalism: “In Europe as well as in America, the postmodern return to history and the evocation of past city tableaux ... can be viewed as an attempt by political and social authorities to regain a centered world. ... [V]isual memories ... codified as fashionable styles and images ... could be manipulated to release the tensions that social changes and political protests, uneven urban and economic development, had wrought” (Boyer, 1994, p. 408). Boyer observes that districts in cities may be carefully designed, but do not cater for all in society. Other districts in the same city are neglected leftover pieces of public space containing the realism of social decay.

Financial Exclusion

Although design and management strategies can be used to explicitly exclude certain groups and encourage others (see above), other forms of exclusion can be practiced through financial means. This might be explicit, for example charging an entry fee, tied to a series of codified rules and regulations often specified on the ticket. Many internal public spaces—museums, underground railways, etc.—adopt such a strategy. A more subtle practice involves establishing visual cues that communicate that only those with the ability to pay are welcome, and that those who fall outside this category will be treated with suspicion, or even physically barred. For those who enter, it is necessary to advertise their right of entry through a separate set of visual cues, for example the clothes they wear (Carmona *et al.*, 2003, p. 127). Exclusive shopping arcades fall into this category, outwardly welcoming all, at least all with the ability to consume (Figure 12).

By the same token, Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998, p. 291) argue that although public space in traditional cities serves as a venue for political debate, this is explicitly discouraged in the consumption space that characterizes the new downtowns of America. “Owners and developers want their space to be ‘apolitical’. They separate users from unnecessary social or political distractions, and put users into the mood consistent with their purposes”—to consume.

Mattson (1999, pp. 135–136) discusses this trend in the context of the ubiquitous American suburban shopping mall. He argues that many shopping malls are examples of what sociologists call a ‘total institution’, in which the outside world is intentionally locked out so as not to divert shoppers attention from their primary responsibility, to shop (Figure 13). However, as malls have increasingly become the only central gathering place in many communities, “the activities of regular citizens who leaflet, protest, or otherwise use malls as public space have resulted in a number of contentious court cases”. In the USA, many states have come down on the side of protecting private property rights over the constitutional rights to free speech, with only a minority validating the view of malls as public spaces.



Figure 12. Exclusive space.



Figure 13. Shopping malls as consumer space.

Whatever the specifics of the debates, they always centre on the core issue of public space and democracy in America's suburbs. Citizens have made clear that they need places where they can interact with fellow citizens and try to persuade others of their viewpoints. Malls, they have argued, must serve as these places, simply because they focus public interaction within a defined arena. In making the argument, these citizens have recognized a key weakness in the contemporary suburban landscape—a lack of public space and the insidious impact of that lack on democracy. (Mattson, 1999, pp. 136–137)

Invented Space

Some of the most frequent critiques of the new forms of public space are associated with the perceived loss of authenticity and growth of 'placelessness'. These critiques focus more on over-design than over-management, although the literature suggests this may be coterminous. Various writers have discussed the components of place, typically focusing on the sum of three elements: physical form, human activities and meaning or image (Relph, 1976; Canter, 1977; Punter, 1991; Montgomery, 1998). Others have focused on the qualities of successful places, such as Carr *et al.*'s (1992) view that space should be 'responsive' to five needs:

- (1) Comfort, encompassing safety from harm as well as physical comfort;
- (2) Relaxation, allowing a sense of psychological ease;
- (3) Passive engagement, with the surroundings and other people (e.g. people watching);
- (4) Active engagement, that some people seek out, but which is often spontaneous if the situation allows;
- (5) Discovery, reflecting the desire for variety and new experiences.

However, these very qualities help fuel the desire for, and spread of, entertainment spaces where, without effort, participants can indulge in leisure activities. At the same time, the spread of globalization processes, mass culture and the loss of attachment to place (Carmona *et al.*, 2003, pp. 101–102), has led to a repetition of certain formulaic responses across the world, a classic example being Baltimore's Inner Harbor, which, since its regeneration in the 1970s and 1980s, has spawned copycat leisure spaces across the globe (Yang, 2006, pp. 102–127; Figure 14).

Although many settlements have at some time been 'invented' by their founders, increasingly techniques borrowed from theme parks are being used to re-invent existing places, with the danger that elements of continuity and character that might have been part of the distinctive qualities of a place are lost. Wilson (1995, p. 157) takes Paris as an example, arguing that the Parc de la Vilette, despite its international reputation, is "designed for tourists rather than for the hoarse-voiced, red-handed working men and women who in any case no longer work or live there". Thus in cities around the world, "not only is the tourist becoming perhaps the most important kind of inhabitant, but we all become tourists in our own cities".

Sometimes the process involves the creation of difference as a means to distinguish one place from another, for example the use of place marketing



Figure 14. Baltimore Inner Harbor.



Figure 15. Manchester's Gay Village.

strategies to distinguish one city, neighbourhood or place from another (Figure 15). Sometimes the process involves the deliberate creation of sameness, copying a successful formulae that has worked elsewhere—for example the emergence of formulaic China Towns in many cities across the world, or the cloning of high streets with the same national and international brands (New Economics Foundation, 2004). Criticism of such places is now widespread. Sorkin (1992, p. xiii), to name but one, reserves particular bile for such places, arguing that the USA is increasingly devoid of genuine places, which are instead gradually being replaced by caricatures and 'urbane disguises'.

However, although such places can be criticized for being superficial and lacking in authenticity, all such places necessitate a considered and careful design process. Thus as Sircus (2001, p. 30), talking about Disneyland, argues, "It is successful because it adheres to certain principles of sequential experience and storytelling, creating an appropriate and meaningful sense of place in which both activities and memories are individual and shared". Zukin (1995, pp. 49–54) agrees that Disneyland and its like represent one of the most significant new forms of public space from the late 20th century, although she identifies different factors for its success:

- Visual culture, through an aesthetic designed to transcend ethnic, class and regional identities;
- Spatial control, through a highly choreographed sequence of spaces, allowing people to watch and be watched, and to participate without embarrassment;
- Private management, aimed at controlling fear—no guns, no homeless, no illegal drink or drugs, promising to "make social diversity less threatening and public space more secure".

This manufacturing of place occurs in a wide range of contexts, as do Zukin's factors for success, with the creation of entirely fictitious theme parks at one end of a spectrum, to the reinvention of historic urban quarters at the other. At all scales there is one over-riding objective, "to attract attention, visitors and—in the end—money" (Crang, 1998, pp. 116–117). In this sense, such places are undoubtedly popular, and invariably full of human activity. Returning then to the components of place, one might conclude that 'placelessness' is not a product of the lack of activity or carefully considered physical form, but instead an absence of place-derived meaning. For Sircus (2001, p. 31) even this is not a concern. He argues "place is not good or bad simply because it is real versus surrogate,

authentic versus pastiche. People enjoy both, whether it is a place created over centuries, or created instantly. A successful place, like a novel or a movie, engages us actively in an emotional experience orchestrated and organized to communicate purpose and story." Ultimately, therefore, the challenge may not be to create authentic or invented places, but simply to create 'good' places, recognizing that to do that, many factors over and above the original design will be of concern, not least how such places are subsequently managed, and the restrictions placed on uses and users of the resulting space.

Scary Space

Kilian (1998, pp. 129–131) argues that restrictions can be broken down into power relationships of access and exclusion, and that it is these relationships that are the important factors in space. For Kilian, urban spaces contain three categories of people: inhabitants, visitors, and strangers; and each group has different rights to access and exclusion:

- Inhabitant, the controllers. This is often seen as the state/government, but is frequently the private sector such as a large corporation. Inhabitants have rights to access and exclusion.
- Visitors, the controlled. These are the users of public space, with rights to access for certain 'purposes' and no rights to exclusion.
- Strangers, the 'undesirables'. They have no rights to access and are excluded by definition.

He freely admits that these are fluid categories that are controlled by the subjective definitions that inhabitants give to visitors and strangers, and concludes that the debate over the loss of public space relates to the processes of social relationships that control the function of urban public space. For Minton (2006, p. 24), fear of crime (rather than actual levels of crime) are often the driver of moves to privatize parts of the public realm, segregating communities in the process. She argues, however, that while the ubiquitous reporting of crime in the media has undoubtedly driven much of the increased fear (at a time when actual crime is consistently reducing), processes of polarization and the associated atomization of communities also drive a heightened fear of 'the other' (strangers), and a further withdrawal of those with choice from public space. Research in the USA, for example, has revealed that the perception of crime is linked to the presence of visibly different groups with mutual suspicions of each other sharing the same space, such as the presence of homeless people in public space (Mitchell, 1995).

Exclusionary Policing

Minton (2006, p. 2) describes the potential for social exclusion in terms of 'hot spots' of affluence and 'cold spots' of exclusion. 'Hot spots'—such as urban regeneration areas or BIDS—are characterized by having clean and safe policies that displace social problems. 'Cold spots' are characterized by the socially excluded who are unwelcome in the hot spots. By this analysis, public space management is actively creating socially polarized urban public spaces. Minton (2006, p. 21) also identifies the slow creep of the private security industry in the

UK, effectively supplanting the role of the publicly funded police force in those areas that can afford it (Figure 16). On this issue, she quotes Sir Ian Blair, the former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police who has described Miami, where despite 19% of streets being policed by private security remains the murder capital of the USA. For her, “private security does not equate with safety”, but it does represent a further degree of privatization of public space and a further withdrawal of the state from this, its traditional territory.

Murphy (2001, p. 24) highlights how exclusion practices are not always the work of the private sector through processes of privatization, but are increasingly supported in public policy aiming to counter undesirable social activities. The ‘exclusion zones’ that result vary, but control factors such as smoking, skateboarding, alcohol consumption, begging, use of mobile phones and driving. This raises concerns about personal freedom *vs* personal and collective responsibilities. Returning to Jane Jacob’s (1984, p. 39) assertion that society acts together to establish and police norms of behaviour, and in doing so controls what she described as ‘street barbarism’, the question arises, are such zones any more than the codification of these rules in areas where the voluntary controls have broken down? Are they therefore a delimitation of person freedoms, or simply a statement of the freedom of others to use public space in a manner that reflects societal norms?

In this regard, Ellickson (1996) has argued persuasively that if users of public space are not able to enjoy a basic minimum level of decorum in public spaces, they will be all the more likely to flee to the privatized world of suburban shopping malls, gated enclaves or the internet. He makes the seemingly controversial argument that to avoid this, those who transgress societal norms should be confined to zones set aside for their use—in other words the skid row model of social control. In fact, as Kohn (2004, p. 169) contends, this is no more than codifying what already happens in many cities where the homeless and other ‘undesirables’ are tolerated in some areas—red light districts and the like—but herded out of others, including shopping and commercial districts. Davies (1992, pp. 232–233), points to the danger of such a strategy, arguing that the no-go environments that result merely exacerbate rather than solve the problems, with the resulting problems inevitably spilling over into surrounding urban areas.

Carr *et al.* (1992, p. 152) argue that freedom with responsibility necessitates “the ability to carry out the activities that one desires, to use a place as one wishes but with the recognition that a public space is a shared space”. The question of management, and what is appropriate and what is not, may therefore be simply a matter of local judgment and negotiation.

Hard and Soft Controls

Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998, pp. 183–185) identify two basic options, hard or soft controls. Hard controls are active and use a variety of private security, closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems and regulations; the latter either prohibiting certain activities or allowing them subject to control (permits, scheduling or leasing). Soft controls, by contrast, are passive, using a range of symbolic restrictions that passively discourage undesirable activities or make others impossible through removing opportunities. Much of the concern in the literature over a perceived loss of freedom and a resulting change in character of public space relates to a view that the former set of controls are increasingly being



Figure 16. The creep of the private security industry.



Figure 17. Hard controls.

favoured over the latter by those with responsibility for managing public space—both public and private (Figure 17).

Fyfe and Bannister (in Fyfe, 1998, p. 256), for example, point out that “Responses to the fortress impulse in urban design, and the broader ‘surveillance society’ of which it is a part, range from optimism at the discovery of potential technological fixes to chronic urban problems, to despair at the creation of an Orwellian dystopia. Laying between these extremes, however, is a middle ground characterized by a profound ambivalence about the impact of increased surveillance.” They quote Ellin (1996, p. 153) who argues that while gates, private policing and CCTV will contribute to give some people a sense of greater security, for others, they will simply raise the levels of paranoia and distrust that they feel.

Extensive research in the UK reveals that the actual impact of CCTV on reducing crime is in fact very low, while the popularity of such systems grows at a seemingly exponential rate (Welsh & Farrington, 2002). Fyfe and Bannister (in Fyfe, 1998, p. 265) conclude that “Under the constant gaze of CCTV surveillance cameras, Boddy’s (in Sorkin, 1992, p. 123) claim that streets ‘symbolise public life with all its human contact, conflict and tolerance’ will be difficult to sustain”. Atkinson (2003, p. 1840), by contrast, in surveying British urban space policy, notes that although it is possible to see a ‘revanchist’¹ strand at the extremes of public space policy in the UK as a coercive attempt to clear certain groups in order to protect the majority—zero-tolerance policing, ASBOs (Anti-social Behaviour Orders), child curfews and exclusions zones, etc.—at the same time other “more compassionate ideas and initiatives can also be detected, including neighbourhood wardens, policing without the police”, etc. Moreover, coercive policies may simply be viewed as attempts to empower communities by tackling the most severe problems in order to reclaim streets for the silent law-abiding majority. For him, the direction of travel is still not clear, although concern across the public

space literature about the over-policing of space, both by the state and private interests, continues to predominate.

Conclusion

Within the academic literature, a range of reoccurring critiques characterize discussions about public space. Although critiques are diverse, highly nuanced and range from the prosaic to the highly abstract, a broad over/under-management dichotomy can be seen and this can be used to order the discussions. Categories are not exclusive, but overlap and collectively inform perceptions of public space. Most are based on a view about what public space should offer, often predicated on an idealized notion of public space as an open and inclusive stage for social interaction, political action and cultural exchange. Although there are distinct historical antecedents for such qualities (see Carmona *et al.*, 2008, chapter 2), it is also probably true to say that public space has rarely, if ever, achieved such a utopian state. Not least this is because the 'public' in 'public space' is not a coherent unified group, but instead a fragmented society of different socio-economic (and, today, often cultural) groups, further divided by age and gender. Each part of this diverse society will inevitably relate to public space in different and complex ways.

In summary, those responsible for the design, development and management of contemporary public space have been criticized for the under-management of public space, leading to:

- *Neglected space*: Neglecting public space, both physically and in the face of market forces.
- *Invaded space*: Sacrificing public space to the needs of the car, effectively allowing movement needs to usurp social ones.
- *Exclusionary space*: Allowing physical and psychological barriers (fear of 'the other') to dominate public space design and management strategies.
- *Segregated space*: Following the desire of affluent groups in many societies to separate from the rest of society reflecting a fear of crime and simply the desire to be exclusive.
- *Domestic, third and virtual space*: Failing to halt a more general retreat from public space into domestic, private and virtual worlds.

Perversely, they have also been widely criticized for allowing the over-management of some types of space in ways that undermine their essential 'publicness':

- *Privatized space*: Allowing public space to be privatized, with knock-on impacts on political debate and social exclusion.
- *Consumption space*: Failing to address the relentless commodification of public space and the dangers of the financial exclusion of less prosperous segments of society.
- *Invented space*: Condoning the spread of a placeless formulae-driven entertainment space.
- *Scary space*: Where crime, and—more often—fear of crime has been allowed to dominate perceptions of place, and where crime prevention strategies—public and private—impact on the freedom with which space is used and enjoyed.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

In fact, the under-management and over-management critiques may simply be two sides of the same coin with each directly and indirectly contributing to the other. Thus a poorly designed and inadequately managed public realm leads directly to the desire of key commercial and community interests to desert publicly managed space in favour of their own more highly managed and inevitably exclusionary space. Indirectly this perpetuates itself by withdrawing investment from traditional public space to which perceived antisocial elements are now relegated. It is further reinforced by removing key civil groups from the public space ambit, in turn, perpetuating management trends.

As such, many of the critiques of over-managed public space could be seen as a consequence of the under-management of publicly owned space by the public sector, causing in turn a flight from truly public space into private and semi-private domains. Equally, more recent critiques around the over-management of publicly owned and managed space may be viewed as a response to the need of these spaces to compete with their pseudo-public counterparts as a means to redress the situation. The discussion shows a complex relationship between the two groups of critiques and the types of space to which they relate. They are each the cause and consequence of the other, leading (Part Two of this paper argues), to a general homogenization of the public built environment.

An Indictment on Contemporary Space?

On the face of it, the critiques are damning of contemporary public space. Richard Sennett (1992, pp. 21–22), for one, has argued that the public space of the modern city has always represented a hybrid of political and commercial forces, but at the root of many critiques is a perceived increasing severance between the two.

Whether the critiques are any more or less pertinent today than during any period in the past are open questions. As historical analysis elsewhere demonstrates (Carmona *et al.*, 2008, chapter 2), there has always been a strong link between commerce and urban public space, and strong exclusionary tendencies among those with management and ownership responsibilities. Nevertheless, the concerns of those who criticize trends in contemporary public space design and management are powerful and should not be dismissed by policy makers. Nevertheless, one might argue it is hardly surprising that corporate interests are determined to take responsibility for their own public spaces, or for neighbouring spaces that directly impact on their businesses, when the public sector has so often done such a poor job in managing the spaces for which they are responsible, spaces that still make up the large majority of the public realm.

Note

1. Smith's (1996) notion of revenge against minorities and the affirmative action directed at them, including, for example, asylum seekers, beggars and young people.

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