

Public space

Public space is a polysemic notion referring to a space that is at once metaphorical and material. When it is metaphorical, it is synonymous with the public sphere or public debate. As a material space, public spaces are at once places of encounter and social [interactions](#), geographical spaces open to the public, or a category of action.

The term "public sphere" appeared in the 1960s following work by Habermas (1962). His work focused on the progressive formation in the course of the 18th century of a public sphere (Offentlichkeit) based on free, public use of reason, freeing itself from the sphere of power. While places have their importance in this process, (cafés, theatres etc.) the terms public sphere or public space rather refer to an abstract, fluid space, taking the form of the gatherings by which they are generated. From the 1970s, there is a semantic shift, with the term "public space" being increasingly used as a category for observation of the city to refer to a material space with particular characteristics in terms of form and usage. The emergence and establishment of this definition of public spaces occurred alongside their conversion into categories of action, since they became, at the same time, an element of urban policies in Europe. In all events, the extended use of the term in the 1990s and 2000s runs alongside increasing polysemy.

In urban sociology, public spaces are spaces of encounter organised socially by way of rituals of exposure or avoidance. Following on from the work by E. Goffman (1973), I. Joseph (1984, 1988) appears as one of the promoters of the concept in France. The term "*espace public*" then refers to a space of experiences, and relates to interactions forming within the anonymity of the city. The physical space is naturally included in this definition: it offers variable opportunities to citizens, to a large extent determined by the producers and managers of the space in question. But in this acceptance the public space is not so much defined by its material nature and its legal status as by the way it is used. In contrast, the geographical, architectural and urban planning literature uses the term to refer to a physical space gathering all the places belonging to the public sphere, freely accessible without charge, and in addition designed and managed to this end. The term replaces the notion of the open space hitherto used to refer to these [places](#) (stressing the fact that they are not built-up), and corresponds on the one hand to the road networks (streets square, avenues) and on the other to green spaces (parks, gardens).

This acceptance mainly developed in reaction to the functionalist urban planning policies of the Athens Charter, where the principles of zoning and separation of modes of circulation - had reduced streets and squares to spaces for traffic or parking (Le Corbusier, 1942). From the 1960s these principles were disputed and new representations of the city emerged, in the social sciences, more sensitive to the rites of everyday life and forms of socialisation, in professional circles, where we find "culturalist" urban planning, and more generally in Western societies having experienced urban unrest, with calls for a "new urban culture" (Tomas, 2001). At the end of the 1970s, came the recognition that the places constituted by streets, squares or parks possessed common characteristics specific to them: empty spaces generating tension among built-up elements; mediation spaces enabling social life, spaces symbolising values and urban culture (Plan Urbain, 1988). Academics, professionals and decision-makers, by appropriating the generic term of the public space, recognised that place entails not only its function but also certain qualities or properties, a value derived from usage, and a meaning.

Public authorities contributed to the naming of the public space, since they made it a full-blown category of action. Among the pioneering experiments, the cities of Bologna, Barcelona and Lyon became models in this respect. But public spaces are also found in new cities, and in urban policies, in particular in France, from the end of the 1970s. In the wake of these experiments, most cities undertook a requalification of their public spaces, thus virtually making them city-planning doctrine (Toussaint, Zimmermann, 2001, p.73). Usage of these spaces is at the forefront, since the projects concerned not only new developments, but also new rules. Even so, the objectives and the different terms of these policies were multiform, since they could concern prestige operations liable to improve the attractiveness of the city, or more systematic action in traffic policies to facilitate "soft mobility" or again more localised operations designed to rehabilitate living environments in residential quarters, in city centres or on the outskirts (Fleury, 2007).

Thus public spaces were first of all places belonging to the public sphere. However the term today tends more often to be applied to places that the public frequent, independently from their actual status. Thus private spaces open to the public, such as a shopping mall or a supermarket, are often referred to as public spaces. In the city there are indeed certain private spaces that are open to the public. Conversely, there is also private usage of public spaces: an urban motorway with toll gate or a street in a private [housing estate](#) (gated communities) have the appearance of public spaces, but are they really? The use of the term is therefore controversial,

so that other terms have been proposed. Some suggest the phrase "common (or shared) space", defined as "a layout that enables the simultaneous presence of social players, outside their domestic environment" and encompassed by the "public space" considered as "one of the possible modes of organisation of social interactions" (Lussault, 2001). Others suggest more refined classifications enabling the characterisation of "spaces constructed from scratch where the private nature is present from the outset": "private spaces accessible to the public" and "private (community) spaces that have the appearance of being public" (Dessouroux, 2003).

Alongside, public spaces can be strongly idealised in Western societies, so that they are often considered as beneficial spaces of citizenship, "intrinsically possessing the virtues of interpersonal exchanges" (Lussault, 2001). This can be explained by the history of the term, which establishes strong links between the crisis of public spaces and that of community life and democracy (Tomas, 2001). This idealisation however erases the wide diversity of usage and the complexity of the systems mobilising the protagonists, who are in particular caught up in logics of power. It also leads to an under-estimation of the fact that public spaces are located in varied geographical contexts, in terms of living place. Finally, it leads to a reification of public spaces, while they are in fact constantly evolving with respect to the practices of users. Even if we avoid this idealisation and define the public space as a system of usages and players in constant evolution, (Fleury, 2007), the notion of the public space still has considerable heuristic impact. It is indeed possible to confront places and their evolutions with this ideal public space. Thus the present debate opposes the advocates of a renaissance; who in particular draw attention to a renewal in practices and usage of central public spaces or policies aiming to re-qualify them for the purpose of social mixity; to the advocates of a decline, who for their part denounce the development of private spaces open to the public, the reinforcement of control, and the proliferation of restrictions of access (more restrictive regulations, video-surveillance, situational prevention etc). These two viewpoints, rather than contradicting one another, cast light on the contradictions playing out today in public spaces and in urban societies more generally

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