Beyond Placing and Distancing: Public Spaces for Inclusive Cities

By Ali Madanipour

As public spaces were emptied and abandoned by the force of the pandemic, their significance for social life became increasingly apparent to everyone. And everyday sociability, which is always taken for granted, became an object of desire beyond reach. The centrality of public space in urban life can be traced back to the archaeological remains of the very earliest cities. Today, in the context of cities that are more complex and fragmented than ever before, public spaces are facing challenges and threats, but there is potential for change and improvement for the spaces themselves and for the city as a whole. Therfeore we ask, How are public spaces defined? How can public spaces contribute to a more inclusive city? What challenges does this need to overcome?

Defining Public Space: A Double Negation

There is an old ontological controversy about space, on whether it is an entity in itself or just a set of relationships between things. Descartes, Newton, and an entire tradition of mechanical science and philosophy that started in the 17th century and continued for centuries, believed that space and time are stable and measurable entities.[1] From early on, however, Leibniz objected that space is relational, no more than "an order of coexistences," as time is an order of successions; and by the early 20th century, Einstein argued for the relativity of space and time and their interdependence.[2] If space is an order of coexistences, the epistemological question is: How do we get to know it? Kant's answer was that space and time "cannot exist in themselves, but only in us," as they are aspects of our perception of the world.[3] As Hegel argued, however, no perception of the world is purely personal, but is influenced by larger contextual conditions.[4] Furthermore, as critics of idealism have argued, our experience of the world is embodied, rejecting the Cartesian duality of body and mind.[5] Understanding space means that we, as embodied and embedded beings, try to understand, from the inside, the material and social order of coexistences within which we live. So what makes such a space public?

The word "public" has a wide range of meanings, which may be grouped into three broad definitions: the totality of a population who share common interests, territories, or laws; the contradistinction of this totality from the private and partial; and exposure to non-intimate others. These definitions are not unproblematic: people as a whole is difficult if not impossible to delineate, boundaries between public and private are not easy to draw and they are more blurred than ever before, and appearance before others occurs in all sort of places, now even in the depths of what is considered private space. Nevertheless, these definitions may offer a platform toward a broad concept of public space: an inclusive order of coexistences, an inclusive space that is open and accessible to all in contrast to the exclusivity and enclosure of the private space. This order is embodied in material conditions of people and their environment and takes shape in physical co-

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[1] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations* (London: Penguin, 1968), 58.

[2] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "The Relational Theory of Space and Time," in *Problems of Space and Time*, ed. J.J.C. Smart (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 89; Albert Einstein, foreword to *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, by Max Jammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), xi-xvi.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: J.M.Dent, 1993), 61.

[4] Ludwig Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 134-35.

presence and direct face-to-face encounters as well as in institutionally and technologically mediated relations.

The inclusivity of public space indicates a double negation: a space that is not private, while in turn the private space is that which excludes others. Private space specifies an individual's legally recognized claim for control and use of space; it is the socially sanctioned negation of common access to a territory, enabling some to exclude others. Public space negates this negation, defining an area in which no one can exclude others from accessing it. In other words, it defines an area of common accessibility, where a private individual's claim to limit or negate access by others is not recognized. This creates a normative demand, an affirmation, that an area be safeguarded from the encroachment of individual, partial interests, so that everyone in society can have equal access to it. Areas are needed in which everyone can enter, but no one should dominate permanently. Public space becomes an empty space, necessarily underdefined so as to allow different entrants to make it as they wish, but to leave it not long afterward, so that the others can have the same chance. It is inscribed with the possibility of exerting double negation at all times and in doing so finding an affirmative character.

Inclusivity becomes a principle that could lead urban transformation. Public space is not the space of "Society" as a monolithic totality; it is the entire range of different places and activities that make up the social life. It incorporates presuppositions of unity, equality, and openness, which are not found in the realities of highly stratified and diversified societies, but describe the ideals of democratic society. The public is not a mere aggregation of people, but as Rousseau argued, it implies association, and it is in this sense that it becomes a normative principle rather than a descriptive statement.[6] If seen as the place of possible association, public space finds a transformative force. Rather than a passive container for some activities, it becomes an active force, a stimulant for change; not by assigning independent agency to the material environment, but by seeing how materiality is an integral part of social relations.

This concept of public space generates demands on society and its institutions. Spaces can be evaluated on the basis of their inclusivity and accessibility, with all the subsequent implications for spatial form, composition, and context. The meaning of space is not fixed; it finds meaning through a continually changing process of designation. It is in this fluidity that public space's normative potential may be actualized. What the many different forms of public space share is that they are materialized actions, rather than thoughts and feelings; they are all exposures rather than concealments; and they all potentially involve unknown, rather than intimate, others. From this perspective, public space is a social space, the place of impersonal co-presence.

Public space is always contextualized: it combines a general principle, which demands equal access for all, with widely different contextual conditions of spatiality, where different and unequal forces are at play.[7] The result is ambiguous, multilayered, and conflictual. Activities, events, and spaces may not be entirely private or public, and the complex urban circumstances generate a wide spectrum of publicness and privacy, each subject to challenges, conflicts, and vulnerabilities. This is evident in the gap between ownership and use of space: some "public" spaces are not accessible to the public or are highly controlled, while some privately owned spaces are open to them. Some spaces mediate between different realms, generating peaceful ambiguity, while others create harsh

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[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract & Discourses* (London: J.M. Dent, 1923 [1761]).
[7] Ali Madanipour, ed., *Whose Public Space? International Case studies in Urban Design and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

boundaries, reflecting a warring condition. The encroachment of private interests into the public domain is always present, pushing to expand more and more. Vice versa, the intrusion of the public eye into private domains should be curtailed, so as to protect intimacy and peace.

Placing and Distancing

Under what conditions can public spaces and their expansion contribute to the development of a more inclusive society? Like public space, social inclusion is a double negation, a continuous struggle against social exclusion, which can broadly be analyzed in overlapping economic, political, and cultural spheres.[8] In economic terms, social exclusion is the lack of access to resources that are necessary for decent living. The political form of social exclusion is the lack of political voice through explicit suppression or through alienation from the political process. In cultural terms, social exclusion is the loss of status, stigmatization, denial of identity, and disconnection from common symbols and shared narratives. Social exclusion is the acute and sustained combination of these limitations, which are exacerbated at their intersection with the patterns of social difference, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and physical ability. It is a condition of powerlessness that characterizes those at the lowest ranks of stratified and diversified societies.[9]

Social exclusion is not a fixed condition, but it is a continuous and multidimensional process of negation. It works through "placing," which, through political, economic, and cultural processes, allocates inferior positions to some individuals and groups within a social hierarchy. It also works through the process of "distancing," which keeps these inferior positions away from those who are placed at higher levels of the hierarchy. The extreme forms of social exclusion find spatial expression in deprived neighborhoods, which in turn consolidate the conditions for the reproduction of disadvantage and marginality. These neighborhoods are the most visible manifestations of placing and distancing, but different forms of these processes can be found at all levels of society. Placing and distancing are among the instruments that shape the order of coexistences.

Social inclusion is the fight against the processes of exclusion in all its dimensions; it is the process of negating the negative. In economic terms, social inclusion is a struggle against poverty, which is normally made possible through social support and though access to well-paid employment, facilitated by knowledge and skills provided through education and training. Social inclusion in political terms means having a stake in power and being able to participate in the decisions that affect our lives. And social inclusion in cultural terms means the ability to share symbols and meanings, perform free expression and communication, and enjoy social recognition and a secure status.

The role of public space is significant in all three dimensions. In economic terms, it involves investment in public infrastructure, such as public transportation and housing, and a fair distribution of public services in urban areas, ensuring access for all groups. Political inclusion entails a democratic public space that is open to equal political participation. Cultural inclusion requires a free space of cultural presence and expression that allows as many voices as there are forms of life.[10]

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[8] Ali Madanipour, "Social Exclusion, Space and Time," in *The City Reader*, 7th edition, eds. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York: Routledge, 2020).
[9] Ali Madanipour, "Can the Public Space Be a Counterweight to Social Segregation?," in *Handbook of Urban Segregation*, ed. Sako Musterd (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020), 170-184.

[10] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

Exclusion as the practice of distancing is an essential part of social life, enabling individuals and households to manage their lifeworld; but it needs to be offset by processes of inclusion. Social exclusion and inclusion largely revolve around access: to resources, power, and shared symbols. This access is regulated through social barriers that constitute the social hierarchical order, with which individuals and groups are placed into particular positions and kept at a certain distance from each other. These visible and invisible social barriers range from subtle nuances in signs and gestures, to institutionalized customs and laws, and to the physicality of high walls and the violence of barbed wires. Access is enabled or denied with these socio-spatial barriers, through which individuals and groups are sorted and placed.

Public space as the inclusive order of coexistences offers an open gate to cross at least some of these barriers; it offers the possibility of negating the negative. More public spaces, in all their immediate and mediated forms, from face-to-face to digital and institutional spaces, would mean more choice for more people to have open access to places and possibilities, which would include better access to resources, political voice, and cultural exchange. Public space can help overcome the limitations that are generated by placing and distancing, not on its own and in a deterministic way, but as part of a broader process of making society more inclusive.

The Barriers to Cross

Low density dispersion of urban areas, which is one of the causes of the climate crisis, has also decimated the places of sociability. The expansion of public spaces, therefore, can be seen as a bridge for the reconstitution of fragmented society. The obstacles and challenges to an inclusive public space have come from an economic approach to public space, which sees it as a commodity serving partial interests; a political approach that metamorphoses the role of public authorities into private corporations; and a cultural fragmentation that is reproduced even by the instruments that claim to overcome it.[11]

Some forms of public spaces, such as market squares, have long been associated with economic activities, as the public space, and the city itself, functioned as a marketplace for the exchange of goods and services. The link between public space and retail trade is still present in casual street vendors and regular open-air markets. In the structural transformation of urban economies from manufacturing to services in globalized economies, this historical link is utilized to serve urban regeneration, which draws on consumerism, leisure, tourism, and real estate development. However, what appears to be public and open, and used to claim inclusivity, could become merely an image, a shell for partial interests and a catalyst for gentrification; more exclusive places with glitz and excitement, but with additional legal, physical, and symbolic limits on accessibility. Public space becomes a catalyst for animating an experience economy and boosting property value, a medium of attraction that can lubricate the operations of the retail and real estate markets.

The link between trade and public space—now transferred to online spaces, and accelerated through the global health crisis—is threatening the survival of the model of urban space that is based on consumerist retail. By being attached to partial economic interests, the inclusivity of public space in all its forms is undermined or curtailed. As social inequality has grown, some public spaces have dwindled, been neglected, or become associated with homelessness. Deregulated urban

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[11] Ali Madanipour, "A Critique of Public Space: Between Interaction and Attraction," in *Companion to Public Space*, eds. Vikas Mehta and Danilo Palazzo (New York: Routledge, 2020), 7-15; Ali Madanipour, "Rethinking public space: between rhetoric and reality," *Urban Design International* 24 (2019): 38–46.

development has been driven by maximizing interest on private investment, which was secured through a privatized environment, rather than through an inclusive public space. Tensions between public and private interests, which are manifested in approaches to public space, have long been identified as a challenge to democracy, one that needs to be continually addressed.

The duty of balancing different demands that put pressure on common resources falls on public authorities. Public spaces, as one of these common resources, are not supposed to belong to any one person or group, and therefore they are managed and owned by public authorities. Global economic restructuring of recent decades, however, has dramatically changed the nature of public authorities and their relationship with private interests. Public authorities are encouraged to think and act like private corporations. Under the pressures of reduced budgets and guided by a change of mentality and culture, some public authorities look to public space as a source of revenue, rather than as a nonprofit common resource. This metamorphosis has profound implications for the processes of urban development and the quality of public spaces. Rather than performing a balancing act, public authorities join private corporations in a search for maximizing revenue. Although some have taken positive steps toward reducing car-dependency in urban spaces, similar steps have not been taken toward a reduction of dependence on partial interests. Partiality of public authorities undermines the possibility of democratic governance, which is expected to safeguard an open and inclusive public sphere. Meanwhile, authoritarian political tendencies insist on surveillance and violent control of public spaces, keeping people out of what could become a theater of democracy.

In addition to these political and economic challenges, cultural challenges are also significant. Public space reflects the idea of public interest, which in turn draws on a presupposition of unity and homogeneity. But even as the diversity of the population increases, the "public interest" is often seen as supporting the interests of a privileged minority—while being wrapped in the language of the public. This is reflected in a wide range of struggles: from a critique of top-down urban planning practices, to women's and minorities' struggle for equality of presence and opportunity in the public realm, to the fight for removing the symbols of racism and colonialism from the public domain.

Faced with social diversity and fragmentation, in which traditional social bonds would no longer be recognized, some have argued that the revival of democracy depends on the formation of a single public out of these many publics.[12] However, while different publics may be formed at smaller scales, a single public may be difficult to find. Information and communication technologies were at first praised for offering the possibility of linking people from across their spatial and social divides, constituting healthy new public spaces. In practice, however, they amplify this fragmentation through the creation of echo chambers, and in monetizing any success in the creation of new publics. They have also threatened the possibility of safeguarding a realm of intimacy and privacy, by further blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres. Meanwhile, long-term alienation from common narratives, as well as fears of violence, crime, terrorism, and health hazards, have led those who feel vulnerable to withdraw from the public realm.

Struggle for Public Space

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[12] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946); Charles Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," in *New Communitarian Thinking,* ed. Amitai Etzioni (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 183-217.

Public space is both a mirror and an engine of the urban society. It is both a functional necessity and a normative principle. It is not a stable and fixed condition, nor a particular architectural form that can be repeated in different times and places, but a continual struggle to maintain an inclusive common realm, a negation of negations. The threat of partial interests and exclusionary forces is always present, finding different forms: authoritarian or commercialized public authorities that do not recognize the inclusivity of public space, economic pressures of turning or attaching public spaces to commodities, and cultural pressures of stratification and diversification that break or weaken social linkages. These exclusionary pressures find spatial expression in placing and distancing, to which public space as inclusive space is a partial response. Despite these pressures, there is no life without interdependence, no city without public space, and no democracy without the public sphere. As such, there is no alternative but to struggle for creating and safeguarding inclusive public spaces.