In Between Public and Private
Emerging Spaces in Cities

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Abstract

Is it still possible to talk about public space in an age when the shopping mall and the public square are increasingly hard to differentiate? Urban scholars have frequently argued that we are experiencing an "end" of public space. In this paper, I argue that public spaces are not necessarily disappearing, but that we need to re-think how we define space. Moving away from strict political-economic criteria such as ownership or economic function, I advocate for a new definition of public space based on notions of legitimacy and perceptions of collective ownership. In order to develop these ideas, I discuss three very different sites in Toronto that fall somewhere between public and private: a small downtown park, a suburban strip mall, and a sugar factory. In each case it is evident that the perceptions and actions of people do not necessarily reflect the political-economy of the spaces.

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Introduction: Liminality and the End of Public Space(?)

My presentation today will suggest a new way of thinking about public space – one that does not focus exclusively on who owns the space or what the space is used for, but rather how people make claims to particular spaces that they see as having special public significance. I think this is a particularly relevant issue given the fact that hundreds of people are currently camped out in New York’s privately-owned Zuccotti Park, and are probably also occupying the base of the Exchange Tower in Toronto, and many other privately-owned squares and parks around North America.

Before I get into my own perspective, however, it is worth considering the state of public space in North America today. We live in an era in which the shopping mall and the public square are becoming increasingly hard to distinguish. From its very origins, the shopping mall has offered what critics have called an illusion or parody of public space. In suburban landscapes that lack any real centre, and where people are physically isolated from each other, the mall provides one of the only spaces where one is able to be ‘in public’. However, this experience is one that is heavily regulated and tied to consumerism (Crawford 1992). Meanwhile, spaces we traditionally consider to be public – parks, streets, squares – are also increasingly regulated and tied to consumerism (Hannigan 1998). Public squares and even streets are now often patrolled by private security guards and watched by surveillance cameras (Yesil 2006; Davis 1992). Governance has shifted from truly public authorities to pseudo-public and commercially-oriented bodies such as business improvement associations or public-private partnerships (Madden 2010). Furthermore, advertising and commercial activity is finding its way further into these spaces through the selling of naming rights and “ad-creep”. These trends lead one to question the viability of the traditional distinction between public and private space, and for many urban scholars, have signalled an end to public space as we know it (e.g. Sorkin 1992).

Sharon Zukin (1991) has called this blurring of boundaries between public and private space a state of “liminality”. But does liminality really spell the end of public space? It does only if we hold ourselves to traditional definitions that focus solely on issues of ownership (government vs. private ownership), and function (cultural or political vs. commercial or residential space). Today I will try to show you evidence that urban inhabitants do not hold themselves to these definitions and are instead making claims to spaces that are not public in the traditional sense of the term. Understanding public space in the age of liminality, therefore, means examining how people understand space themselves, categorizing it as “ours” rather than “mine”, “yours”, or “theirs”, and imbuing it with special significance relating to collective identity and public life.
Furthermore, we need to understand the process by which this categorization is made cognitively, and enacted in practice: a process that we might call the “consecration” of public space. A focus on the consecration process means we can no longer simply treat some spaces as public and others as private by a pre-existing definition. Instead we must ask which spaces become public space, how and why does this occur, and who is involved?

To better understand the consecration of public space, I will be discussing three very different spaces in the city of Toronto that have achieved some level of consecration among groups who possess no formal ownership. I tried to choose cases that were as diverse as possible in terms of their ownership and economic function so that the characteristics of the consecration process can be brought into starker relief. The cases I will be discussing are a small urban park, a waterfront sugar factory, and a suburban supermarket.

**Case 1: The Grange Park (Urban Parkland)**

*The Grange Manor, 1909*

Grange Park is a lively, small green space in the heart of downtown Toronto. The park originated as the front yard of a Georgian manor built in 1817 by a member of the infamous Family Compact. In 1910 the final owners donated the manor and its land to be used as an art gallery and public park. The gallery, which eventually became the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), has maintained the park ever since. Over the past century a dense, vibrant neighbourhood has grown up around the park. Residents of the
neighbouring Victorian houses and apartment buildings not only consider the park to be public, they also consider it to be a shared front yard for the community. Meanwhile the AGO has been steadily expanding to the point where the original manor, which has survived to this day, is a tiny wing on the gallery’s south side.

When local residents learned that the AGO had quietly hired Frank Gehry to design a major expansion for the gallery, they realized that the building could only grow up over the park or out into the park. Because the AGO was reluctant to share any of its plans with the public, residents were free to speculate on how the secret expansion might adversely impact the park. Many worried that the AGO would attempt to redesign the park’s community orientation to make it a tourist destination, replacing the playground equipment and wading pool with sculptures and a café. Driven by these fears the residents undertook a campaign not only to oppose the AGO’s expansion, but also to call attention to the Grange Park’s importance within the neighbourhood. Local artists created works that highlighted the history of the Grange and its place in the community, and public meetings were held to discuss the importance of the park.

The campaign succeeded in changing the political dynamics of both the AGO expansion and the Grange community as a whole. Fearing what an open conflict with the neighbourhood might mean for their reputation and the fate of their expansion process,
the AGO changed strategies and helped to establish a public committee that would oversee the park in an open, public way. Along with members of the AGO and city hall, residents and other local groups were given a seat on the committee. Thus, despite exercising no ownership rights, local residents succeeded in reforming the governing structure of the park. While it remains to be seen whether the committee itself will succeed, the fact that local residents are no longer in the dark on what might become of the park, and now in fact have a formalized arena in which to voice their concerns and exert influence, is a significant development.

Case 2: The Redpath Sugar Factory (Waterfront Industrial Space)

From small urban green space, we move to waterfront factory. In the post-industrial era, most of the waterfront factories and ports that used to characterize cities in central Canada and the north-eastern United States have long been abandoned. In cities like Toronto that have managed to adjust and even thrive under post-industrial conditions, the old industrial landscape is quickly being replaced with spaces that cater to the new

Redpath Sugar factory
economy: tourist and consumer attractions, cultural amenities, and of course, condominiums. Even economically viable industrial operations are often declared blights and encouraged to relocate to the outskirts of town. Therefore it may come as a surprise that a fully functioning sugar factory sits in Toronto’s central waterfront, and even has plans to expand. First built in the 1950’s during Toronto’s industrial heyday, Redpath Sugar is now surrounded awkwardly by new condominiums, a supermarket, and a public beach. What explains Redpath Sugar’s survival in the face of local and global trends that have decimated its former industrial neighbours?

Partially, Redpath’s survival can be attributed to the attitudes of an influential group of local politicians, bureaucrats and planners who view the factory as providing a symbolic resource in the planning and redevelopment of Toronto’s waterfront. In their view, the factory represents an important tie to the city’s industrial heritage, and because it is still operational it is perhaps more authentic than the other remaining industrial buildings that have been gutted and repurposed as galleries or condominiums. Furthermore, the factory fulfills a political ideal held by this group of creating mixed-use and diverse neighbourhoods where people live and work in the same place and blue and white collar jobs exist side by side. Being the only remaining factory in the area, Redpath should be seen more as embodying these ideals symbolically rather than making them an economic reality.
Driven by these ideals, the government has gone out of its way to accommodate and even protect the continued existence of Redpath. In addition to incorporating the needs of the factory into its urban planning process, the government has taken more symbolic steps like constructing “Sugar Beach”. Named in honour of the factory, this new public beach allows visitors to sit in the sand and watch raw sugar being unloaded by the boatful into the factory. Thus, the government is not only physically accommodating Redpath in the built environment that surrounds the factory, but also encouraging the public at large to appreciate Redpath’s place on the waterfront. Despite these efforts, Redpath’s future on the waterfront is far from certain, especially as new condominiums fill up with wealthier residents whose ideal senses of place may not include industrial factories or blue collar work.

Case 3: Parkway Plaza (Suburban Commercial Space)

The third case represents what is perhaps the most important trend in the consecration of public space today. Though they have often been criticized as being a wasteland of disposable, inauthentic buildings, the post-war suburbs have now been home to multiple generations of residents who have developed intimate connections to these neighbourhoods. In the 1960’s, the conservation movement and activists like Jane Jacobs successfully redefined 19th century architecture from ‘old and outdated’ to ‘heritage’, but it remains to be seen whether a similar movement can or will occur for the mid-20th century shopping malls and bungalows of the suburbs. If such a movement does eventually occur, then the City of Toronto’s decision to list Parkway Plaza as a heritage property may be seen as an early success. Built in 1958, Parkway Plaza is the kind of small, community mall that has fallen out of favour with property developers.
who now prefer big box stores or condominiums. In keeping with this trend, the owners of Parkway Plaza have begun taking steps to redevelop the property as high-rise condominiums.

Lobbied by heritage and architectural groups, as well as the local city councillor, the city acted early in listing the west wing of the mall as a heritage property, restricting the owner’s ability to modify or demolish it. This move followed a series of high-profile demolitions that occurred in Toronto’s suburbs and that were opposed by heritage and architecture groups. Thus, the listing of this particular property became an opportunity for these groups to set a precedent both within municipal policy and in public consciousness at large, repositioning buildings like Parkway Plaza from disposable pieces of the consumer landscape to local landmarks and part of the Toronto’s historical identity.

Illustration from the Toronto Star (September 1958) for the grand opening of Parkway Plaza

This particular case of consecration should be seen as representing a very specific attachment to place: that of the architecture or heritage buff who seeks to enshrine the building for its symbolic or aesthetic value. It should be noted, however, that this is not the only way in which people have developed attachments to the small community malls that are now in danger of demolition. Despite no longer being profitable, these malls have become important nodes in the public life of local communities and serve as meeting places for local seniors and other groups (Parlette and Cowen 2010). While saving building’s exterior form, a heritage distinction will not preserve the use-value the malls provide for these more marginal groups. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that
consecration rooted in these attachments have been less successful, at least within the context of Toronto (ibid).

**Discussion and Analysis**

Based on these three cases, what larger claims can we make about the consecration of public space? As I have mentioned, these cases were chosen because their obvious differences in terms of ownership and economic function help draw attention to the commonalities that underlie the consecration process. What are those commonalities?

The first commonality relates to the emergence of a public attachment to place. Sociologists have typically viewed the emergence of values and beliefs in general as a process that starts with explicit, well formulated ideology that eventually shifts toward implicit, tacit common sense (Boin and Christensen 2008; Johnson et al. 2006; Berger and Luckmann 1966). The process of consecration we have seen in these case studies seems to work the opposite way. The public character of these spaces is something that developed over a long period of time and is not based on any explicit ideology, but rather the lived experience of the space (Mitchell 1995; Lefebvre 1991). Each of these spaces started off more or less as inconsequential. Yet, over years of use, members of the local communities developed symbolic and practical ties to the spaces, perhaps even without noticing themselves.

The consecration process only becomes explicit when the status of the space is threatened in some way (e.g. the AGO expansion, the demise of the industrial economy, or the threatened redevelopment of Parkway Plaza). Faced with an imminent threat, inhabitants are forced to account explicitly for what they have hitherto only experienced implicitly: that they consider the space to be public, irrespective of actual ownership.

A second observed commonality is that the consecration process is centred around a small group of activists or tastemakers who, in the absence of ownership rights, rely heavily on other forms of power, particularly social capital. In some cases these activists may be working hand in hand with the owners against larger threats, such as the case of the sugar factory. In other cases these activists may confront the owners head on, pitting the power of social capital against the power of economic capital.

Related to the last point, the central group of activists or tastemakers need to articulate a legitimating account of the space in order to reposition it discursively from a commodity subject to the rules of the market to a public good that requires democratic control and public support. For the Grange, this meant repositioning it from the
backyard of the AGO to the front yard and heart of the local community. For Redpath, the ideals of mixed-use and diverse neighbourhoods were used to justify its protection. And finally, architectural discourse was used to support the protection of the supermarket. Understanding the legitimating discourse is not only important in gauging the success of the consecration process, but also because different types of discourse produce different results. For instance, the architectural discourse supporting Parkway Plaza will protect its exterior form while sacrificing its function as a community meeting space.

Finally the outcome of consecration processes is never certain, but depends on the relative power of those behind the movement, any opponents they may encounter, the nature of the “threat” to the space, and the socio-political context. The fact that all three of my cases represent successful attempts at consecration – at least for the moment – is probably attributable to the relative privilege of the groups involved.

**Conclusion: Making Claims to Public Space**

Often when we talk about public space, we rely on a loose idealized historical image – perhaps a romanticized vision of Central Park, or the Jardins des Tuileries, or maybe even the ancient Athenian agora. These are spaces that, in our minds, truly embody inclusion, equality, democracy, and provide refuge from an otherwise unequal, unjust world. This perspective is not without its value, particularly when used as a Weberian ideal type. Nonetheless, if this is how we think about public space, then we should not be surprised when we are unable to identify a single space within North America that lives up to this ideal. Rather than declaring an end to public space, I suggest we develop alternative approaches. In this presentation I have sought to outline such an alternative by focusing on how people understand space themselves, relying on their schemata for classifying space and the actions they take to protect space that they recognize as belonging to “we the public”.

**Bibliography**


