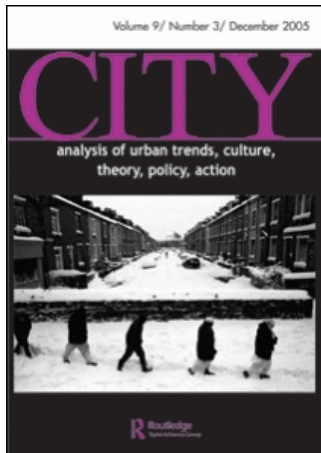


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Collective culture and urban public space

Ash Amin

This paper develops a post-humanist account of urban public space. It breaks with a long tradition that has located the culture and politics of public spaces such as streets and parks or libraries and town halls in the quality of inter-personal relations in such spaces. Instead, it argues that human dynamics in public space are centrally influenced by the entanglement and circulation of human and non-human bodies and matter in general, productive of a material culture that forms a kind of pre-cognitive template for civic and political behaviour. The paper explores the idea of 'situated surplus', manifest in varying dimensions of compliance, as the force that produces a distinctive sense of urban collective culture and civic affirmation in urban life.

'When public spaces are successful ... they will increase, opportunities to participate in communal activity. This fellowship in the open nurtures the growth of public life, which is stunted by the social isolation of ghettos and suburbs. In the parks, plazas, markets, waterfronts, and natural areas of our cities, people from different cultural groups can come together in a supportive context of mutual enjoyment. As these experiences are repeated, public spaces become vessels to carry positive communal meanings.' (Carr *et al.*, 1993, p. 344)

Introduction

Urbanists have long held the view that the physical and social dynamics of public space play a central role in the formation of publics and public culture. A city's streets, parks, squares and other shared spaces have been seen as symbols of collective well-being and possibility, expressions of achievement and aspiration by urban leaders and visionaries, sites of public encounter and formation of civic culture, and significant spaces of political deliberation and agonistic struggle. While urban commentators and practitioners

have varied in their views on the precise detail of collective achievement across time and space, they have generally not questioned the assumption that a strong relationship exists between urban public space, civic culture and political formation, as the quote that opens this paper clearly shows.

In this paper, I ask if this reading is still valid. In an age of urban sprawl, multiple usage of public space and proliferation of the sites of political and cultural expression, it seems odd to expect public spaces to fulfil their traditional role as spaces of civic inculcation and political participation. We are far removed from the times when a city's central public spaces were a prime cultural and political site. In classical Rome, Renaissance Florence or mercantile Venice, the public spaces of a city (for the minorities that counted as citizens and political actors) were key sites of cultural formation and popular political practice. What went on in them—and how they were structured—shaped civic conduct and politics in general. There were few other sites of public gathering and expression, justifying their connection with *civitas* and *demos*, through inculcations of community, civic responsibility and political judgment or

participation sparked by meeting and mingling in public space.

Today, however, the sites of civic and political formation are plural and distributed. Civic practices—and public culture in general—are shaped in circuits of flow and association that are not reducible to the urban (e.g. books, magazines, television, music, national curricula, transnational associations), let alone to particular places of encounter within the city. Similarly, the sites of political formation have proliferated, to include the micro-politics of work, school, community and neighbourhood, and the workings of states, constitutions, assemblies, political parties and social movements. Urban public space has become one component, arguably of secondary importance, in a variegated field of civic and political formation. This would almost certainly be the view held in cultural and political studies, with the emphasis falling on the salience, respectively, of media, consumer and lifestyle cultures, and of representative, constitutional and corporate politics. The dynamics of gathering in, and passing through, streets, squares, parks, libraries, cultural and leisure centres, are more likely to be interpreted in terms of their impact on cultures of consumption, practices of negotiating the urban environment, and social response to anonymous others, than in terms of their centrality in shaping civic and political culture.

Within the urban canon, however, to assert that only a weak link might exist between public space and civic culture or democratic politics, is a lot less acceptable. The history of urban planning is one of attempts to manage public space in ways that build sociality and civic engagement out of the encounter between strangers. It draws on a long lineage of thought including the classical Greek philosophers, theorists of urban modernity such as Benjamin, Simmel, Mumford, Lefebvre and Jacobs, and contemporary urban visionaries such as Sennett, Sandercock and Zukin, all suggesting a strong link between urban

public space and urban civic virtue and citizenship. This is a lineage claiming that the free and unfettered mingling of humans in open and well-managed public space encourages forbearance towards others, pleasure in the urban experience, respect for the shared commons, and an interest in civic and political life. As Carr *et al.* (1993, p. 344) claim:

‘in a well-designed and well-managed public space, the armor of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people. Seeing people different from oneself responding to the same setting in similar ways creates a temporary bond.’

Public space, if organized properly, offers the potential for social communion by allowing us to lift our gaze from the daily grind, and as a result, increase our disposition towards the other.

Among urban practitioners, such thinking has inspired the ‘city beautiful’ and ‘garden cities’ movement, and most recently, the project of ‘urban renaissance’ and ‘new urbanism’, commending a return to compact housing, front porches, pedestrian areas, shared urban assets, mixed communities and the city of many public spaces. While the aspirations of urban practitioners have veered towards civic and communal outcomes rather than political ones, urban activists continue to believe that inclusive urban public spaces remain an important political space in an age of organized, representative, and increasingly centralized but also veiled politics. Such spaces—both iconic and known spaces of public gathering as well as more peripheral spaces tentatively occupied by subaltern groups and minorities—are seen as the ground of participatory politics, popular claim and counter-claim, public commentary and deliberation, opportunity for under-represented or emergent communities, and the politics of spontaneity and agonistic interaction among an empowered citizenry. Here, the social dynamics of public space are judged as the measure of participatory politics.

How should we judge the civic and political achievements of urban public space in light of the gap between readings within and beyond the urban canon? Is it possible to side with the agnostic reading without endorsing the steady erosion of public space worldwide from privatization, excessive policing and downright neglect, which has resulted in the running down of public facilities, derelict or dangerous streets, the flight of the middle classes into gated communities, and the over-surveillance and customization of prime land (Smith, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Low and Smith, 2006)? Low (2006, p. 47) warns, for example, that 'if this trend continues, it will eradicate the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people from different gender, class, culture, nationality and ethnicity intermingle peacefully'. She thus insists that we

'make sure that our urban public spaces where we all come together, remain public in the sense of providing a place for everyone to relax, learn and recreate, and open so that we have places where interpersonal and intergroup cooperation and conflict can be worked out in a safe and public forum'. (ibid.)

Viewed in this way, only the brave or foolhardy would wish to question the importance of retaining vibrant and inclusive urban public spaces. Even if the civic and political effects of public space may have dimmed due to the rise of other formative spaces, 'the distortion or disappearance of public space' as Fran Tonkiss (2006, p. 73) has recently argued, 'can be seen as an index of the weakening of public life and also a causal factor in its decay. Public spaces are downgraded by the same processes that reduce any coherent notion of the public sphere in itself.' While I do not wish to dissent with the view that the character of public space and that of public life are closely connected, I do wish to dissent in this paper from the assumption that the *sociology of public gathering* can be read as a *politics of the public realm*. My

argument is that the dynamics of mingling with strangers in urban public space are far from predictable when it comes to questions of collective inculcation, mediated as they are by sharp differences in social experience, expectations and conduct. This is precisely why even the most imaginative attempts to engineer social interaction in public space, from experiments with street theatre and neighbourhoods with front porches, to multicultural festivals and slow food celebrations, are normatively ambivalent. Some people might come to develop solidarity with others as well as with the city through such engagement, while others will not, depending on background, disposition, expectations from public space and response to the commons. It is also my argument, following those who stress the plural sources of civic and political culture in contemporary life, that sociality in urban public space is not a sufficient condition for civic and political citizenship. Accordingly, it is too heroic a leap to assume that making a city's public spaces more vibrant and inclusive will improve urban democracy.

This is not to deny public space a role in shaping public behaviour or indeed even a sense of the commons. Public spaces have not become just another site of private spill-over. I disagree, for example, with critics who claim that the increasing use of public spaces as citadels of consumption stands for a politics of hedonism, urban disregard and social indifference. There is ample research showing that the contemporary trend towards urban retail, leisure and tourism is accompanied by the intensification of both individual hedonism and friendship or public regard (Miller, 2001; Gregson *et al.*, 2002; Miles and Miles, 2004; Binnie *et al.*, 2005). It reveals that even the most frenzied and commoditized forms of urban consumption have not displaced the inquisitiveness, enchantment and studied regard for others nostalgically reserved for the city of great public exhibitions, *flânerie* and public deliberation. Through and beyond the consumption and leisure practices, the experience of public

space remains one of sociability and social recognition and general acceptance of the codes of civic conduct and the benefits of access to collective public resources. It continues to be an experience that supports awareness of the commons, perhaps falling short of fostering active involvement in the life of a city, but still underpinning sociability and civic sensibility.

My aim in this paper is to trace a line in between these two interpretations of the cultural politics of urban public space—one still expectant and the other complaining of privatized consumption. Working with the grain of everyday usage, I wish to suggest that the workings of urban public space are politically modest (as sparks of civic and political citizenship), but still full of collective promise. I locate this promise, however, in the entanglement between people and the material and visual culture of public space, rather than solely in the quality of social interaction between strangers. This move, following an earlier publication in this journal (Amin, 2007a), stems from an insistence that technology, things, infrastructure, matter in general, should be seen as intrinsic elements of human being, part and parcel of the urban 'social', rather than as a domain apart with negligible or extrinsic influence on the modes of being human. Accordingly, the formative sites of urban public culture—collective forms of being human through shared practices—need not be restricted to those with a purely human/inter-human character, but should also include other inputs such as space, technological intermediaries, objects, nature and so on. One of the insights of a post-human reading of the social is that the collective promise of public space is not reducible to dynamics of inter-personal interaction that prompt a sense of 'us' or ease with the stranger, as the urban canon on public culture would have it (see Wood and Landry, 2007, as a recent example). Instead, there may be more at work, and in the form of influences that have more to do with the nature of the setting itself than the patterns of human association and sociality within public

space. This is not to reject social interaction theory outright, but to weaken its grip by arguing that interaction is not a sufficient condition of public culture, has a tacit dimension that has to be acknowledged, and is always mediated.

My argument is that the link between public space and public culture should be traced to the total dynamic—human and non-human—of a public setting, and my thesis is that the collective impulses of public space are the result of pre-cognitive and tacit human response to a condition of 'situated multiplicity', the thrown togetherness of bodies, mass and matter, and of many uses and needs in a shared physical space. I propose seeing any resulting recognition of others and of the common weald as the outcome of a habit of unconscious reflex, at best 'pragmatic reason' (Bridge, 2005), towards the orderings of plural space, rather than as the outcome of inter-human recognition and accommodation. Inculcations of the collective, the shared, the civic, arise out of the human experience of surplus; mass and energy that exceeds the self, that cannot be appropriated, that constantly returns, that has emergent properties and that defines the situation. There is, however, an important qualification to my thesis. This reflex of 'trust in a situation' is not a characteristic of all forms of placed surplus, but only when public space is structured in a certain way. It is linked to particular forms of public space. Following Jane Jacobs (1961) and in more recent years Richard Sennett (2006), I trace the 'virtues' of urban surplus to public spaces that are open, crowded, diverse, incomplete, improvised, and disorderly or lightly regulated.

Starting with an explanation of civic formation when urban public space is structured along these lines, the paper goes on to identify interventions in public space that build on various reflexes of studied trust in the urban commons as a way of strengthening civic appreciation of shared urban space and, more generally, civic hope in the complex and super-diverse city (Vertovec,

2006). The reflections centre upon the mobilizations of four keywords of civic formation in public space; ‘multiplicity’, ‘symbolic solidarity’, ‘conviviality’ and ‘technological maintenance’.

Situated multiplicity and social practice

How should we encapsulate the rhythm of daily life in urban public spaces, the resonances of collective repetition and endurance? This is not an easy question to answer, for public spaces come in many forms: open spaces of different kinds such as parks, markets, streets and squares; closed spaces such as malls, libraries, town halls, swimming pools, clubs and bars; and intermediate spaces such as clubs and associations confined to specific publics such as housing residents, chess enthusiasts, fitness fanatics, anglers, skateboarders and the like. In turn, every public space has its own rhythms of use and regulation, frequently changing on a daily or seasonal basis: the square that is empty at night but full of people at lunch-time; the street that is largely confined to ambling and transit, but becomes the centre of public protest; the public library of usually hushed sounds that rings with the noise of school visits; the bar that regularly changes from being a place for huddled conversation to one of deafening noise and crushed bodies. There is no archetypal public space, only variegated space-times of aggregation.

But is it possible to identify common rhythms of social response in similar types of public space? Clearly, how people behave in a noisy square in which pedestrians are constantly avoiding other bodies and objects will be very different from that in a smaller square laid out for café life and convivial mingling. On the other hand, it could be argued that spaces with similar patterns of organization, usage, vitality and inclusion do share common social traits. For example, relatively safe spaces that are busy, open to all, free of frenzy and lightly regulated—whether they are parks, squares, retail centres, museums or

libraries—appear to be marked by an ethos of studied trust towards the situation. The negotiation of space and of bodies in this kind of environment seems to be guided by mechanisms that somehow render the strange familiar (such that people feel largely unthreatened in the company of strangers and unfamiliar things and occurrences) and the familiar strange (such that menacing or embarrassing intimacies are avoided). Consequently, transactions are conducted in a relatively efficient and safe manner, the threat of unanticipated violence, fear and anxiety that always hangs over a gathering of strangers is avoided, and the positive gains of presence in public space are noted tacitly or consciously by participants (Paulos and Goodman, 2004). Urban complexity and diversity are somehow domesticated and valued through the social experience of this kind of urban public space.

It is easy to forget how considerable a cultural and social achievement this is, given the myriad prospects of anomie, indifference, self-interest, opportunism and hostility among strangers in the contemporary city of amassed diversity, continual and rapid flux, and increasing unfamiliarity. And that such a form of collective response might arise out of situated spatial practice rather than the rational or ethical choices of social actors makes this achievement even more significant. How is it that a particular kind of rhythm of urban public space is capable of strengthening a civic culture of tolerated multiplicity and shared commons? What is responsible for the civic outcome? My claim is that this rhythm cannot be reduced to the nature of inter-personal interaction among strangers. For a start, even the most creatively managed civic spaces—the historic square cleared of motorized traffic, the street or bazaar that hums with the noise of market stalls and pedestrians, the busy and well-kept park that offers a pleasant and safe haven to all—are places of highly qualified interaction. These are spaces where people who already know each other meet in known corners, where there is a clear tactic of acknowledgement or avoidance between strangers even



Figure 1 Public space and studied trust: chess in a New York park (photographer: M. Kaggan)

when in close proximity, where familiarity takes time to build and comes from invention and repetition (Figure 1), and where the glimpse of recognition with a light touch is always tinged with the anxiety and fear that circulate at the edges of the public space (Robinson, 2006; Watson, 2006). In making this claim, I do not wish to diminish the significance of free mingling in inclusive public spaces. Instead, my intention is to underline the circumspect nature of social interaction which, I would add, rarely involves transgressing long-accumulated attitudes and practices towards the stranger.

If, as I believe, a social ethnography that involves familiarization of the strange cannot be explained in terms of a culture of inter-personal negotiation within urban public space, drawing on practices of civic education, deliberative encounter or stranger recognition, as would have the classics of urban sociology, how else might it be explained? I wish to argue that such a civic outcome, when not threatened by darker

forms of urban division and exclusion based on the erosion, excessive surveillance or manipulation of public space, can be read as a form of positive social reflex to the condition of 'throwntogetherness', a term coined by Doreen Massey (2005) to signal the whirl and juxtaposition of global diversity and difference in contemporary urban life. In Massey's work, the term is not intended to signal a particular normative direction to urban life or to public life in general, but my proposal is that the ontology of 'throwntogetherness', when visibly manifest as the relatively unconstrained circulation of multiple bodies in a shared physical space, is generative of a social ethos with potentially strong civic connotations. I wish to argue that this form of situated multiplicity or surplus, excess contained in a confined physical space, produces social effects. By situated surplus I mean spaces with many things circulating with them, many activities that do not form part of an overall plan or totality, many impulses that constantly

change the character of the space, many actants who have to constantly jostle for position and influence, many impositions of order (from buildings and designs to conventions and rules). The swirl of surplus matter in a given space—its localization in a busy and diversely used market, square, park, housing estate—and its experience as a force of that place, has a more than incidental impact on urban public culture. My argument, thus, is not drawn from a reading of plurality in general, but from a particular spatial embodiment of surplus; the mingling of bodies, human and non-human in close physical proximity, regulated by the rhythms of invention, order and control generated by multiplicity.

There are two claims I wish to make, echoing the writing of pragmatists such as William James (2003) and other theorists of pluralism interested in the relational dynamics and self-regulating properties of complex systems (e.g. DeLanda, 2000, 2006; Connolly, 2005). The first is that ethical practices in public space are formed pre-cognitively and reflexively rather than rationally or consciously, guided by routines of neurological response and material practice, rather than by acts of human will. The vitality of the space, its functional and symbolic interpretation, its material arrangements, the swirl of the crowd, the many happenings form a compulsive field of action and orientation. Many a commentator since Baudelaire and Benjamin interested in the social, affective and psychological effects of the modern urban crowd has sought to capture this aspect of public space. These compulsions of the situation also include an ethical orientation guided by the complex practice of negotiating the space and by the strength of embodied and sensory response within a plural setting; an orientation that may come to the conscious forefront from time to time and which is undoubtedly inflected by ethical influences formed elsewhere in a person's life, but one that exerts considerable force in that time-space as an ethical pulse generated by the situation.

The ethics of the situation, if we can put it in these terms, are neither uniform nor positive in every setting of throwtogetherness. The swirl of the crowd can all too frequently generate social pathologies of avoidance, self-preservation, intolerance and harm, especially when the space is under-girded by uneven power dynamics and exclusionary practices. My second claim, thus, is that the compulsion of civic virtue in urban public space stems from a particular kind of spatial arrangement, when streets, markets, parks, buses, town halls are marked by non-hierarchical relations, openness to new influence and change, and a surfeit of diversity, so that the dynamic of multiplicity or the promise of plenitude is allowed free reign. There are resonances of situated multiplicity/plenitude that have a significant bearing on the nature of social and civic practice. At least five that merit conceptual and practical attention can be mentioned.

The first resonance is that of surplus itself, experienced by humans as a sense of bewilderment, awe and totality in situations that place individuals and groups in minor relation to the space and other bodies within them. What Simmel tried to explain in terms of behavioural response among strangers when placed together in close proximity in urban space—from bewilderment and avoidance to indifference and inquisitiveness—might be reinterpreted as the shock of situated surplus, experienced as space that presents more than the familiar or the manageable, is in continual flux and always plural, weaves together flesh, stone and other material, and demands social tactics of adjustment and accommodation to the situation (including imaginative ways of negotiating space without disrupting other established modes, as shown in Figure 2). The resonance of situated surplus, formed out of the entanglements of bodies in motion and the environmental conditions and physical architecture of a given space, is collectively experienced as a form of tacit, neurological and sensory knowing (Pile, 2005; Thrift, 2005a), quietly contributing to a civic culture of ease in the face of urban diversity and the surprises of multiplicity.



Figure 2 Surplus: parkour, or free-running, in London (photograph courtesy of www.urbanfreeflow.com)

These surprises are rarely disorienting, for a second resonance of situated multiplicity is territorialization; repetitions of spatial demarcation based on daily patterns of usage and orientation. The movement of humans and non-humans in public spaces is not random but guided by habit, purposeful orientation, and the instructions of objects and signs. The repetition of these rhythms results in the conversion of public space into a patterned ground that proves essential for actors to make sense of the space, their place within it and their way through it. Such patterning is the way in which a public space is domesticated, not only as a social map of the possible and the permissible, but also as an experience of freedom through the neutralization of antipathies of demarcation and division—from gating to surveillance—by naturalizations of repetition. The lines of power and separation somehow disappear in a heavily patterned ground, as the ground springs back as a space of multiple uses, multiple trajectories and multiple publics, simultaneously freeing and circumscribing social experience of the urban commons.

A third and related resonance of situated multiplicity is emplacement. This is not just everything appearing in its right place as a consequence of the routines and demarca-

tions of territorialization. The rhythms of use and passage are also a mode of domesticating time. Public spaces are marked by multiple temporalities, ranging from the slow walk of some and the frenzied passage of others, to variations in opening and closing times, and the different temporalities of modernity, tradition, memory and transformation. Yet, on the whole, and this is what needs explaining, the pressures of temporal variety and change within public spaces do not stack up to overwhelm social action. They are not a source of anxiety, confusion and inaction, and this is largely because of the domestication of time by the routines and structures of public space. The placement of time through materialization (in concrete, clocks, schedules, traffic signals), repetition and rhythmic regularity (so that even the fast and the fleeting come round again), and juxtaposition (so that multiple temporalities are witnessed as normal) is its taming. Accordingly, what might otherwise (and elsewhere) generate social bewilderment becomes an urban capacity to negotiate complexity.

The repetitions and regularities of situated multiplicity, however, are never settled. This is because a fourth resonance of throwntogetherness is emergence. Following complexity theory, it can be argued that the interaction of bodies in public space is simultaneously a process of ordering and disruption. Settled rhythms are constantly broken or radically altered by combinations that generate novelty. While some of this novelty is the result of purposeful action, such as new uses and new rules of public space, emergence properly understood is largely unpredictable in timing, shape and duration, since it is the result of elements combining together in unanticipated ways to yield unexpected novelties (DeLanda, 2006). Public spaces marked by the unfettered circulation of bodies constitute such a field of emergence, constantly producing new rhythms from the many relational possibilities. This is what gives such spaces an edgy and innovative feel, liked by some and feared by others, but still an urban resonance that people come to live

with and frequently learn to negotiate. This is what Jacobs (1961) celebrated when championing the dissonance of open space, receptive to the surprises of density and diversity, manifest in the unexpected encounter, the chance discovery, the innovation largely taken into the stride of public life.

A final resonance can be mentioned. We could call it symbolic projection. It is in public space that the currents and moods of public culture are frequently formed and given symbolic expression. The iconography of public space, from the quality of spatial design and architectural expression to the displays of consumption and advertising, along with the routines of usage and public gathering, can be read as a powerful symbolic and sensory code of public culture. It is an active code, both summarizing cultural trends as well as shaping public opinion and expectation, but essentially in the background as a kind of atmospheric influence. This is why so frequently, symbolic projections in public

space—lifted out of the many and varied material practices on the ground—have been interpreted as proxies of the urban, sometimes human, condition. There is a long and illustrious history of work, from that of Benjamin and Freud to that of Baudrillard and Jacobs that has sought to summarize modernity from the symbols of urban public space, telling of progress, emancipation, decadence, hedonism, alienation and wonderment (Amin, 2007b). Similarly, politicians, planners and practitioners have long sought to influence public opinion and public behaviour through the displays of public space.

These resonances of situated multiplicity condition social action in quite powerful ways. One social reflex is that of tolerated multiplicity, structured around the tacit and unconscious negotiation of anonymous others, plural objects, assembled variety, emergent developments and multiple time-spaces (see Figure 3). I believe this is how difference and similarity, the known and



Figure 3 Tolerated multiplicity: pedestrians cross the road to Osaka Central Station, Japan (photograph by Adrian O'Rourke).

unknown, continuity and change are tackled in public space, and not, as frequently assumed in writing on the politics of difference, through cognized tactics of negotiation or affective response towards others. This is not to deny inter-personal attitudes and practices in public space their significance (this would be folly, if we remember the acts of those bent on malice and harm towards others). Instead, it is to argue that the social experience of multiplicity itself can be regarded as a form of inculcation, alongside, perhaps even under-girding, habits of inter-personal association in public space.

Secondly, however, such a social reflex is far from given. Tactics of territorialization and the general ordering of public space (with excesses of surveillance and control never far removed) are central technologies of public orientation. The ordering of space is a tool of social regulation, assurance and delegation. Similarly, the emplacement of time in public

spaces is a means by which the bewilderment of being in the world—fast changing, stretched, multi-speed—is addressed, perhaps even given a ring of enchantment and wonder. None of this comes with automatic guarantees, tied as it is to the poetics of experience in a given place. The point, though, is that spatial ordering, like other sources of cultural orientation such as education, media influence and public debate is essential in the making of a public (see Figure 4 for an imaginative example). Strange, therefore, that much of the history of thought on the civic and political inculcations of public space has chosen to focus on the dynamics of deliberation and social interaction, rather than on the rules and routines of ordering, which are usually treated as the nemesis of public culture.

A third social reflex is symbolic compliance. If one role of public space is to frame and test the pulse of public culture, then what is projected about, and from, them is of crucial



Figure 4 New orderings: six bicycles against one carpark (photograph by Adrien Rovero).

relevance. The atmosphere of a public space, its aesthetics and physical architecture, its historical status and reputation, its visual cultures, subtly define performances of social life in public and meanings and intentions of urban public culture. The symbolic projections of public space have to be taken seriously, not trivialized as distractions or inauthentic fetishes, as has become common in contemporary lament on the ‘theming’ of urban public space through excessive consumptive hedonism (Amin, 2007b). Such denials woefully underestimate the power of symbolic projection, working at the interface between public culture and public space. The projections—cast out from billboards, public art, the design of space, public gatherings, the shape of buildings, the cleanliness of streets, the sounds and smells that circulate, the flows of bodies—come with strong sensory, affective and neurological effects. They shape public expectation, less so by forcing automatic compliance, than by tracing the boundaries of normality and aspiration in public life. In our times, the projections in public space of the cultural cutting edge, social desire, matters of public concern, the uses of public space, norms of freedom and safety, and so on, are important summations of contemporary collective life, the measure of individual and social standing and possibility.

Public space and civic culture

In this section, I look at whether urban civic culture—a sense of the commons, shared assets, civic involvement—can be strengthened through mobilizations that work with the social reflexes and resonances of situated multiplicity. I have suggested at the outset that the connection between urban public space and *demos* has become fragile owing to shifts in the uses of public space and the growth of other political spaces and institutions. The thrust of the preceding discussion, however, has been to show that the connection with *civitas* remains strong, under certain conditions of plural and inclusive

organization of public space; conditions that I believe must be traced to the situation itself and not reduced to the character of human interaction within it.

Given this emphasis on the situation and its impact as a force-field of influence—not instruction—working in the background as a kind of collective unconscious, any course of normative intervention suggested by the reading of situated multiplicity has to be grasped as a hint of possibility rather than one with tool-kit certitude. The suggestions offered below to strengthen civic culture, therefore, should be read as keywords to unlock new principles of urban public space, without any hint of slavish replication of the ideas or examples cited. There are four keywords that spring out of the preceding reading of public space, discussed in turn below: multiplicity; symbolic solidarity; conviviality; and technological maintenance.

Multiplicity itself is the most obvious keyword of urban civic culture suggested by the reading that I have offered, understood as an urban good in its own right as well as a source of urban sociality and emergence. Unqualified multiplicity, however, is no guarantor of any of the latter outcomes. Simply throwing open public spaces to mixed use and to all who wish to participate is to give sway to practices that may serve the interests of the powerful, the menacing and the intolerant. We know this from the daily abuses suffered by vulnerable people such as migrants, minorities, asylum seekers, women and children, those who look different; all victims of the cruelties that unregulated co-presence can bring. It is just this kind of consequence that has forced progressive urban planners on many an occasion to seal off particular public spaces or parts of public space for sections of society at risk, as the history of women’s public baths or parks reserved for children confirms (Watson, 2006; Iveson, 2007). Therefore, and depending on circumstances, policy effort to promote multiplicity as a principle of urban inclusion and civic acceptance of the right of the many to public space might indeed necessitate making special,

perhaps even separate, provision in public space for certain groups in order to ensure that multiplicity does not result in harm.

Yet, there are other examples of diversity juxtaposed, where multiplicity resounds with vitality and promise, with fear and anxiety kept at bay through rhythms of movement, talk and watchfulness that act as informal sources of regulation. This is precisely what is at work in markets, bazaars and communal gardens, where the intensity of presence, negotiation and regard for the situation, crowd out panoptical surveillance and malfaisance. At the scale of the urban communal garden that is shared by many ethnic and social groups, the promise of multiplicity is the result of occasional sharing, curiosity in the neighbouring plot and a sense of common purpose often mobilized by threats to change things (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Armstrong, 2000; Shinew, 2004). At the larger scale, such inclusive ordering of multiplicity can be the product of overlapping interests and informal reciprocal arrangements among the occupants of public space, as Lyons and Snoxell (2005) have shown in their work on market traders in Nairobi, or the compromises resulting from continuous jostle for space among many participants, as Moyer (2004) has shown in her work on poor youths looking for work in the up-market streets of Dar es Salaam. In all these examples, the accommodations and achievements of multiplicity have to do with the wisdom of the crowd or the 'eyes of the street' as Jacobs (1961) put it, the active juxtaposition of diversity, the play of ground-up and distributed watchfulness, and an entanglement of uses—economic, social and cultural—that promises individual and collective benefits.

A second keyword of civic promise suggested by the preceding analysis relates to the symbolic uses of public space. Arguably, the history of modernist planning has been an experiment of precisely this sort, with intentions for iconic buildings, monumental art, and massive squares and boulevards, never far from the desire to foster a sense of awe, gratitude, fear or modesty among the people

in the face of big urban provisioning. This is a stark example of the use of public space for emblematic compliance. Similarly, mass political, religious and cultural gatherings—fed by the spectacle of numbers, moving speeches, music, imposing architecture—actively rely on the symbolism of the event to generate intense feelings of social solidarity and union. Many a regime has been toppled or propped up by the clamorous solidarities of mass congregation in public space, frequently in ways least expected by the architects of public assembly (Batuman, 2003). The significance of mass demonstrations in iconic public spaces—from Tiananmen to those in Kiev during the Orange Revolution—should not be lost.

It is not this kind of mobilization of solidarity that I have in mind, central though it is for any account of the ways in which public space can project social togetherness. Instead, I am interested in symbolic visualizations in public space of solidarity in a 'minor key', as a kind of public commitment to the margin. This is a form of solidarity towards the emergent and always temporary settlements of public culture, serving to reinforce civic interest in the plural city, the rights of the many, the margin brought to the centre, the legitimacy of the idiosyncratic and ill-conforming. Its symbolic projections are oriented towards aesthetic disruption rather than hegemonic confirmation, but always in the spirit of reinventing the ties that bind.

Many examples of innovative urban effort around the world can be cited. One example derives from the long legacy of radical urbanism advanced through forms as diverse as liberation theology, legislative theatre, community art and mass popular events. Today, this tradition is emblematically represented by the World Social Forum in its urban gatherings around the world, which mix protest, education, pleasure and enchantment through many bold and imaginative cultural inventions in the name of multiple solidarities and common interests stretching across and beyond a city. Feared by interests keen on conformist and non-clamorous uses of public

space, these cultural experiments come with extraordinary capacity to unlock new social imagination and energy, by showing that urban public culture can be organized in ways that are more plural, temporary and inclusive than the debilitating conformities of elitist urban planning (Groth and Corijn, 2005).

Another good example of solidarity in a minor key is the use of public art to jolt settled cultural assumptions. The most well-known experiments relate to the injuries of race and ethnicity. Some of these commemorate painful legacies, in the way that the Power of Place project in Los Angeles has attempted by remembering the slave and midwife Biddy Mason (Hayden, 1995), or in the way that new-genre arts projects such as the District Six Museum, BLAC, Returning the Gaze, and In Touch Poetry Bus Tour in Cape Town (Minty, 2006) have sought to publicize past and present social inequalities (e.g. against women, as Figure 5 shows). Others celebrate the multicultural city. In

Birmingham, for example, this includes imaginative ventures such as placing comic strips in the back seats of taxis telling the stories of the city's Asian cab drivers, blind-folded walks around the city centre to encourage experience of the city without the distortions of visible difference, or photographic projections on prominent public buildings of the varied ethnicity of faces on the street (see Figure 6, and Kennedy, 2004). How successful these public expressions of cultural solidarity are in combating ethnic and racial prejudice is a matter of conjecture, but at the very least they are a powerful signal of the kind of urban public culture that is officially desired in a city.

Another closely related genre of 'minor symbolic projection' that has emerged in recent years, but is hardly conceptualized in these terms, is the use of urban public art to force public reflection. This is an important aspect of the contemporary urban shift from civic monumentalism towards art forms



Figure 5 Symbolic projection—memory. 'Leisure Time' by Donovan Ward, forming part of the public art project 'Returning the Gaze', Langa, Cape Town (photograph by Nick Aldridge).



Figure 6 Symbolic projection—multiculturalism. Birmingham Portraits, 2001 (photograph and installation by Beat Streuli)

intended to surprise, spark the imagination or narrate hidden vernaculars. The works of art include the use of community mosaics and other graphic visuals of hidden injuries such as the plight of the homeless (see Sharp *et al.*, 2005), imposing artworks such as the Angel of the North in Gateshead, England, that invite public reflection on the appropriate symbol of local unity and togetherness (see Figure 7), or forms of phantom art that appear in the night, often in the most unlikely places, with the deliberate intention to unsettle received wisdom. This has become the trademark of the anonymous London artist who signs as 'Banksy' and seeks to raise awareness of contemporary geopolitical indignities (Figure 8) by connecting ordinary people going about their daily business to distant events through graphic images.

Conviviality is a third keyword of civic inculcation prompted by a reading of public

space as situated multiplicity, but, contra current interest, I wish to propose it as a form of solidarity with space. Conviviality is a word that has begun to circulate in thinking on social inclusion and cultural recognition, in recognition of the power of daily negotiation of difference in the workplace, public spaces, schools, housing estates and the like. This interest stems from the recognition that the ethnography of encounter in the street and neighbourhood, school and workplace, park and square, is a crucial filter of social practice, affecting emotive, sensory, neurological and intellectual response towards both immediate others and the world at large. Conviviality is identified as an important everyday virtue of living with difference based on the direct experience of multiculturalism, getting around the mainstream instinct to deny minorities the right to be different or to require sameness or conformity from



Figure 7 Symbolic projection—wonderment. 'Angel of the North' by Anthony Gormley (photograph by Andy Higgs).

them (Sennett, 2000; Sheldrake, 2001; Amin, 2002; Sandercock, 2003; Gilroy, 2004; Keith, 2005; Watson, 2006). The turn towards ethical practices based on daily negotiations of difference has begun to appear in urban policy practice, through attempts to build social solidarity and cultural understanding through interventions working the grain of inter-personal interaction. These involve measures to bring together people from different backgrounds in common spaces (e.g. mixed housing estates or youth clubs) or common ventures (e.g. school twinning or multicultural festivals).

The kind of urban conviviality that I wish to stress here is of a different sort, namely, a brush with multiplicity that is experienced, even momentarily, as a promise of plenitude—one way of interpreting *convivium*. Is the shared experience of the well-stocked and safe, park or street and community centre or library not such a brush, based on interest in the possibilities of serendipity and chance, the

gains to be had from access to collective resources, the knowledge that more does not become less through usage, the assurance of belonging to a larger fabric of urban life, perhaps even the knowledge that the space can recover even from minor violations (e.g. see Karsten and Pel, 2000, on public response to skateboarders in Amsterdam)? This is conviviality towards the situation, mediated by the collective experience of bodies, matter and technology (Latham and McCormack, 2004; Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2005a; Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006), with empathy towards the stranger emerging, if it does, as a by-product of the convivial experience of situated multiplicity. Recognizing this implies a shift in thinking behind socially inclusive urban policies towards public space, which have become far too focused on logics of human recognition and interaction. It requires, for example, starting out with a much more comprehensive audit of the sources of civic ease in public space, an exercise that might reveal how the design and lay-out of mundane intermediaries such as sewage systems, traffic rules, public toilets, street furniture, spaces for dogs, children, cars and pushchairs, affect not only the social experience of space but also the civic remains of such experience.

To acknowledge the agency of mundane intermediaries is to gesture towards a fourth keyword of civic inculcation through the uses of public space, namely, technological maintenance. The city is a machine of objects-in-relation with a silent rhythm that instantiates and regulates all aspects of urban life (Amin and Thrift, 2002). The objects already mentioned, along with postcodes, pipes and cables, satellites, commuting patterns, computers, telephones, software, databases, regulate urban provisioning by setting the delivery systems, Internet protocols, rituals of civic and public conduct, family routines and cultures of workplace and residence. The urban techno-structure is the life-support of cities (Gandy, 2005), as made amply evident when infrastructure such as sanitation, clean water, electricity, telecommunications and transport, shelter



Figure 8 Symbolic projection—surprise. Banksy's figure of a Guantanamo Bay detainee placed inside the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride at Disneyland (photo placed on 8 September 2006, www.woostercollective.com).

and health care lack or fail. But, this techno-structure also bristles with intentionality. Nigel Thrift (2005b) has described it as a technological unconscious with interactional intelligence, acting as the hidden hand of both urban organization and social practice (see Figure 9). It is the filter through which urban society reads and accepts demarcations, measures achievement and worth, and assesses what it is to be modern. Identities, supply, functionality and social power are all tangled up in this machinery of provision and regulation.

No politics of urban civic culture can ignore the power of this hidden republic. This is partly a matter of revealing and arresting the use of technology as a weapon of social control, affecting civic trust and expectation. Contemporary urbanism is impregnated with 'new software-sorted

geographies', as Steve Graham (2005, p. 5) argues, daily and silently measuring the worth of particular zones and sections of urban society. Graham writes of the proliferation of bio-metric technologies to sort social 'desirables' from 'undesirables' and the development of new facial recognition software so that the 'guilty' can be named before the event through new street surveillance technologies. How these qualifications of the promise of urban plenitude based on securitization of public space can be addressed is not self-evident, not least because of the now pervasive entanglement between urban technological systems and the social life of cities. A start, however, would be to reveal the 'values, opinions and rhetoric ... frozen into code' (Bowker and Leigh-Star, 1999, p. 35, cited in Graham, 2005, p. 1), so that hidden assaults on civic conviviality can be publicly

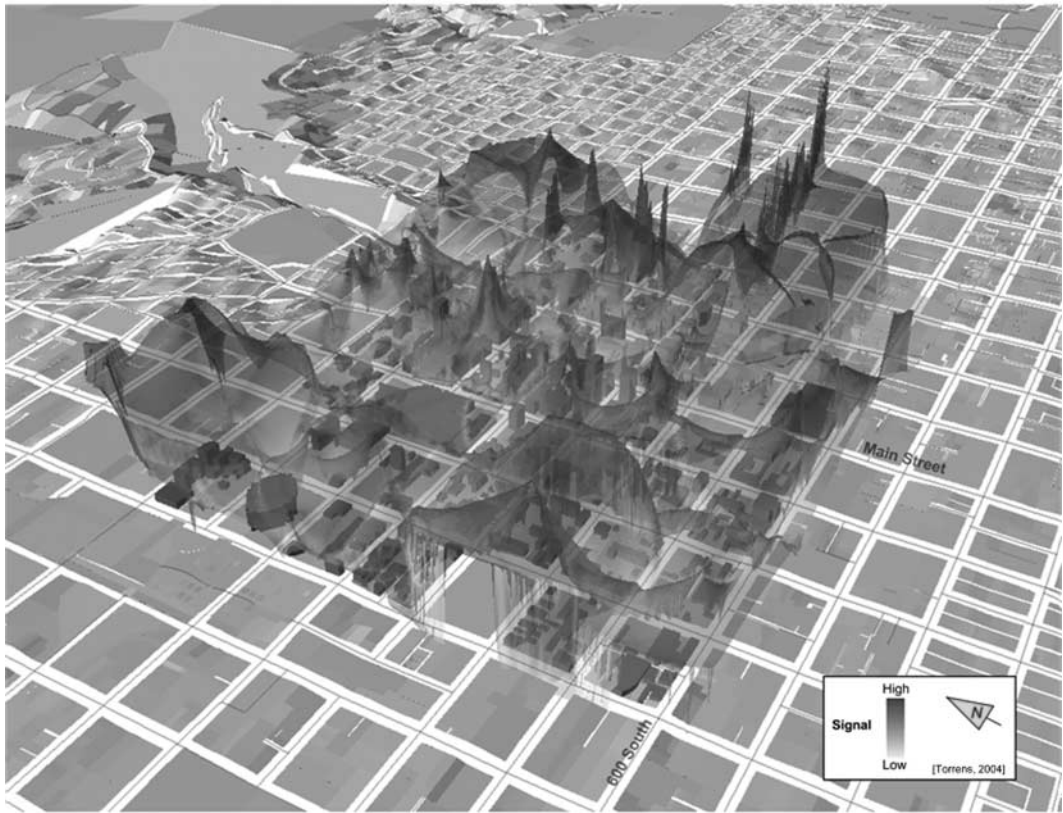


Figure 9 Urban maintenance. The invisible geographies of wireless internet provision in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah (image by Paul Torrens, www.geosimulation.org)

exposed as a first step in pressing the case for democratically argued alternatives for organizing the urban public infrastructure (see, for example, Horelli and Kaaja, 2002, for urban environmental alternatives proposed by young people through extensive Internet consultation, or Blickstein and Hanson, 2001, on alternatives to car culture in public space developed out of a combination of public demonstration and cyber-communication).

Acknowledging the urban technological unconscious is also a matter of working with the life-supporting role of the urban infrastructure, which, when it works well, functions day and night to prevent urban collapse and chaos (Thrift, 2005b). This role often comes to light only when cities are confronted by sudden and large-scale threats, as vividly illustrated by the response

of London to the bombings of 7/7 and of New Orleans to Hurricane Katrina. London bounced back with remarkable speed as a machine of movement, work, livelihood and daily life, once the technological unconscious kicked in to restore the city and its connectivity. In contrast, New Orleans switched off as a city owing to the tardy response from the federal state and long-standing neglect of the machinery of urban maintenance (underpinned by a public ethos of sacrificing a commitment to the public commons and the common weal to the vicissitudes of market society). For once, America was awakened to the risk and degradation daily suffered by vast numbers of inhabitants in cities of the Global South stemming from a dysfunctional urban infrastructure, an awakening that some at least now see as the product of

an ideological blind spot to the idea of a universal public. The quality of urban maintenance, it is my argument, also affects the urban civic culture. When the basics of shelter, sanitation, sustenance, water, communication and the like are missing, the experience of the city, of the commons and of others, is severely compromised, producing solidarities of largely an exclusionary and wretched nature (Davis, 2004; Swyngedouw *et al.*, 2006; MacFarlane, 2008). Such a structure of maintenance does nothing for the promise of plenitude or for the experience of multiplicity as an enhancement. A politics of urban maintenance has to make explicit the link between the techno-structure and the formation of a public. When this happens, as was the case in the city of Bologna in 1978 when bus fares were scrapped, and then again in 1998 when the public authorities promised free Internet access, the habit of solidarity comes to be woven into the urban unconscious and, most significantly, prided as such by the urban population.

Conclusion

These reflections from a post-humanist perspective on the link between the commons and public space are projections from an imagined place, and not a summary of particular public spaces in particular urban contexts. If this imagined place has material moorings, it is as an amalgam of the most promising examples of surplus made to work as such. These would include bazaars and shopping malls in which difference is treated as a virtue, streets and squares of free and safe mingling, parks and other recreation spaces resonating with vitality and mixed use, libraries and schools that sustain public interest and reach out to the reluctant, bus shelters and car parks that are not the dumping ground for the dregs of society, buses and trains that work and offer a pleasant experience to the travelling public. Here, the qualities of multiplicity, conviviality, solidarity and maintenance can be expected to crowd

out malfeasance, reinforcing a sense of shared space.

Outcomes on the ground, however, are a matter of context, shaped by the material dynamics and historical legacies of individual public spaces. They are not the mirror of some ideal. This would be to imply that policy outcomes can be achieved regardless of the fine-grain of time and place. This raises an important question the expectations of efforts to populate public spaces, make them safe, increase their openness to difference, experiment with inclusive projections, and ensure proper maintenance. At best the interventions come with emergent force, facilitating new spatial combinations and new rhythms of usage and regulation that will jostle against old combinations and rhythms. New civic achievements will involve some not others, will soon become hybridized, and will take time to stabilize. Linking public space to civic ideas requires a good measure of hope without certitude from urban actors.

Another final qualification must be made. Although I have dissented from the view that urban public space is a site of political formation and human recognition, I have agreed that it remains an important site of civic becoming. This is no trivial achievement, but it too needs to be placed in context when thinking about possibilities for urban well-being and collective recognition. The achievements of public space presuppose other dynamics of inclusion, notably provision of the means to ensure that humans can participate as fully fledged social subjects in urban life. This is centrally, a matter of ensuring equity of provision of the means of subsistence and sustenance. Urban well-being is inextricably tied to the nature of the work/livelihood/survival opportunities offered within a city. In an age of increasing state withdrawal, capital mobility, distant ties and transnational positioning, urban elites and markets are progressively withdrawing from local collective obligations. It is no longer clear, for example, who assumes the responsibility of providing the

means of survival for those unable to flourish under the market or through social advantage. Increasingly, the urban masses are being abandoned to fortune, pushed to the remote and liminal zones of cities, and denied the basic rights of urban participation.

In these circumstances, cities are becoming ecologies of surplus that can only yield a politics of the fittest, with the collision of bodies in public space reduced to a game of appropriation of the commons, based on pathologies of envy, suspicion and resentment. Public space becomes a synonym for collective privatism and social antagonism rather than social agonism and civic formation. This condition of 'situated multiplicity' is far removed from the condition I have described. It cannot yield a sense of the commons without sustained effort to improve social well-being and justice. People have to enter into public space as rightful citizens, sure of access to the means of life, communication and progression. Without this guarantee, now so severely tested by market society and related forms of corporatism, interventions in public space will amount to no more than tinkering on the edges. The social capacity that grows from an active public sphere—nourished by state-protected welfare, high quality public services, a vibrant public culture, and public spaces for the many and not the few—cannot be left to fortune, now so intoxicated by the excesses of the market (Jacobs, 2005).

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