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*Open to Debate: The Speakers’ Corner Experience – Public Space & Public Sphere in the 21st Century*

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**Background** This discussion paper arises from a collaboration between Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design (CSM), part of the University of the Arts London, and Speakers’ Corner Trust (SCT).

CSM has produced some of the most important artists, designers and performers over the last 150 years and has become one of the largest providers of art and design education in the world. Alumni have created iconic designs from the London Routemaster bus and the Chopper bike to Dior fashions.

SCT is a new registered charity which promotes free expression, public debate and active citizenship as a means of revitalising civil society in the UK and supporting its development in emerging democracies.

SCT pursues its aims by forming local Speakers’ Corner Committees made up of representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors which ‘own’ and steer projects designed to stimulate and support public discussion and debate. As in SCT’s first two projects in Nottingham and Lichfield, the Committees’ work may include establishing new Speakers’ Corners in public spaces as symbols of citizens’ rights, focuses for civic identity and platforms for public engagement.

1: The public sphere and its transformations

Public space and the public sphere are different entities which do not necessarily coincide. We think of public space as plazas, parks, roads and paths where people are free to come and go. The public sphere, on the other hand, is increasingly the virtual space in which ideas are exchanged and discussed, for example, through the medium of television and newspapers or through open blogs on the internet.

A number of questions arise. Can public space be a site for debate and discussion? Whose views and ideas might be exchanged in what kinds of spaces? What are the obstacles that mitigate against the use of public space as public sphere? How can design interventions foster the use of public space as an arena for public debate?

History can illuminate these questions. The modern notion of public space emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries, as the sociologist Jürgen Habermas has identified. He explains how the concepts of public and private space are Greek and Roman in origin. In the Greek city state, public life was strictly separated from home life. Public life – political debate and action – went on in the market place or agora. The layout of the city accommodated, indeed facilitated meeting and the exchange of ideas. Participation was, however, only available to free citizens – in other words, to masters of households; women and slaves were excluded. So, ironically, membership of the public sphere was based on status as head of the private sphere, the home.

Habermas discusses how this model of the Hellenic public sphere and its spatial manifestation, the agora, has been handed down to us via Renaissance architecture and enshrined in Roman law that defined the private and the public. He goes on to trace the emergence and decline of coffee houses in 17th and 18th centuries as places of debate, pointing out their reliance on conversation and print as means of communication and the importance of their location in heart of the city.

This discussion is later developed by thinkers such as Richard Sennett and Neil Postman. These authors argue that the public sphere which emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries around the coffee houses was initially eroded in the mid 20th century by the emergence of new broadcast media as well as the de-centralisation of the urban form.

The criticism that these authors level at broadcast media is that they are dominated by large corporations which own them and shape their content which is further influenced by a dependence on corporate advertising. Thus, the public ceases to have an active engagement in public debate and instead becomes a passive audience for media content. In other words, we wander the city centre bombarded by adverts in a daze of received messages about which products will make us happy and have little opportunity to express or communicate our own ideas or opinions or to engage with those of our fellow citizens.

The criticism of urban development is that suburbanisation – as first railway-based and then car-based suburbs developed – led to a decline in civic engagement at public spaces in city centres. In other words, roads and car parks sliced through our cities, separated city quarters and isolated city communities that no longer venture to the centre of town.

According to this view, changes in urban form follow developments in transport and media technologies. This perspective paints a gloomy picture of disengagement and isolation. In response to these phenomena some recent trends in urban regeneration seek to restore the vitality of the city lost during the second half of the 20th century. A growing body of urban theorists and planners, social policymakers, city brand consultants, educators and urban artists are seeking to make our cities more “liveable”.
2: Public places and their transformations

One of the most potent symbols of the democratic ideal and the role of public place in sustaining public life and discourse is that of Speakers' Corner, on the edge of London’s Hyde Park. It was established by an Act of Parliament in 1872, which authorised its use as a place for free speech. It had been a place of assembly for those fighting for their rights since the middle of the 19th Century. It was here that the Chartists, the Reform League, the May Day demonstrators and the Suffragettes held many of their greatest rallies.

Speakers’ Corner symbolises the kind of forum for debate sought for today’s post-industrial, highly mediated cities, encouraging face-to-face interaction and real-life conversation, albeit arranged by people texting each other, recorded by shooting and uploading video on YouTube, reported on twitter or documented on face book. The form, location and constituency of the original Hyde Park Speakers’ Corner does need to be developed because unfortunately, partly at least because of its location in a park detached from the daily hubbub of city life, it has become a tourist attraction, a place to be photographed rather than a place of civic engagement.

Jan Gehl, the urban design theorist and practitioner, focuses on the potential of well-designed public spaces. Gehl argues that public spaces in cities have traditionally performed three key roles as a place to meet, a market place in which to make transactions and a channel for movement. Good public spaces, he contends, while serving these roles are also characterised by the presence of people remaining or lingering when they have no pressing reason to keep them there. He argues the success of public space can be judged by whether or not people are engaged in optional and/or social activities, such as having a conversation, sitting or simply watching others. These public places are successful because they are “personalisable” public spaces, home-from-homes, or “third spaces”. By design and intuition, they strike a balance between public, personal, political, natural, and financial place-making.

According to Gehl, it is possible to define and describe cities in one of the following four categories:

• the “traditional city”, where meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare continue to coexist in balance, for example Venice
• the “invaded city”, where a single use, usually car traffic, has usurped territory at the expense of the other uses of city space
• the “abandoned city”, where public space and public life have disappeared, for example Los Angeles
• the “re-conquered city”, where the powers that be are working to find a new balance between the uses of the city as meeting place, marketplace and thoroughfare.

Copenhagen, which has gradually been transformed over 40 years by Gehl’s practice, is a good example of the “re-conquered city”. Its redesign was based on careful observations of people and their needs. Gradual changes to its public realm allowed people time to modify their habits and find new ways to use and enjoy the city. Copenhagen today is a car-free, people-centered city, where people come to the centre purely to interact with each other.

Similarly, in North America William Whyte founded the “street life project”, dedicated to observing how city spaces work. It is the inspiration behind Project for Public Space, a foundation dedicated to creating people-centered spaces and educating people about public space. Like Gehl, Whyte believes that designing successful public spaces starts with observing people. However, he also emphasises the need to talk to the people who use those spaces. Designers must find out not only how city dwellers use the space but also how they desire to use the space. Whyte’s work has served as an inspiration for Dan Biederman who is responsible for the regeneration of Bryant Park in New York City.

In the UK, CABE Space has been set up to work with national, regional and local bodies to transform parks and public spaces in response to shifts in contemporary culture.

Interestingly, although public spaces designed on the basis of theories by Gehl, Whyte and others have proven successful in that they are well used and have also increased value and business in and around them by offering access to commodities, experiences and knowledge, these theorists and practitioners seldom discuss developing public space as a platform for engaged civic debate. The challenge of fostering and imbedding public debate in public space still needs to be addressed more widely.
Re-thinking public space and the public sphere

Aware of the lack of public spaces as places for debate, several innovative artists and design practices are exploring alternative ways of designing and sustaining spaces that are co-designed with the public, inviting debate and engagement from the very beginning of the project. In diverse ways, such as making public installations, producing books, holding firework displays or “hijacking” places for specific events and interventions, they encourage people to interact with their environment and with each other.

One artist who is designing such urban interventions is Rafael Lozano Hemmer. He explores ways of engaging people through his art installations. His Voz Alta (Loud Voice) is a highly symbolic memorial commissioned for the 40th anniversary of the massacre of students by state police in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City in 1968. Participants speak freely into a megaphone placed at the spot where the massacre took place. As the megaphone amplifies the voice, a searchlight “beams” the voice as a sequence of flashes. If the voice is silent, the light is off and as the voice gets louder, the light’s brightness increases. The observer is drawn in as a user.

This interaction with devices leads to interaction between users, deriving from their shared experience. Furthermore, awareness that other people have experimented with the device invites and raises participation levels. Hemmer often incorporates recordings of previous users into the installations. One example of this is his Microphon. Initially, people only say something short like “hello”, but when they realise that the resulting echoes are actually recordings from previous participants, they start making longer speeches.

Another artist working in this interventionist vein is Marnie Slater. Her work investigates the roles of artist and audience by focusing on the nature of their interaction. For SCAPE 2008, a biennale of Arts for the Public Space in New Zealand, she circulated a call for volunteers and proposed that they plan, write and choreograph their own tour of a work, site or event. These tours could happen anywhere at any time, and there would be no restriction on the content or approach. In this way, the visitors became the curators.

Other examples of groups working in this field include Public Works, an arts/architecture collective which uses art-led processes to explore how existing social dynamics can inform spatial, architectural and urban proposals and City Mine(d), a production house for urban interventions, dedicated to the development of new forms of urban citizenship, the re-appropriation of public space and the creation of public artwork.

The shift from a place-based to a user-led approach enables the quality of public space, whether at neighbourhood level or on the scale of a whole city, to be evaluated in terms of how well it supports a range of public experiences such as belonging and companionship, risk taking and adventure, and reflection and learning.

The think tank Demos focuses on public services, cities, communities and culture. Its central concerns are power and politics and its aim is to find ways to empower people to shape their own lives more effectively. Based on a study of three British cities, People Make Places is a Demos publication about people’s participation in public space. This study led to the definition of the public space as an experience created by an interaction between people and a place, instead of a predetermined physical space. People, far from being passive observers and users, take the initiative and create places and experiences. Some seek spaces that give them a sense of security, others look for experiences that contribute to self-development, while yet others search for situations that enable them to develop esteem among their peer group.

There are also examples of citizens themselves actually reclaiming abandoned city spaces as a space for debate. For example, a group of citizens took over the Municipal Market of Kipseli, an abandoned market place in one of Athens’ most densely populated neighbourhoods. They cleaned it and opened it up to the public as a safe space where people could gather freely to express their thoughts and feelings and connect with fellow citizens. This is a space created by people for people. It is not organised along commercial lines. No one profits from its existence yet hundreds of people have gathered there and participated in all sorts of activities.
4: **A Speakers’ Corner for the 21st century**

The work and insights of the organisations and individuals cited above suggests that there is both an appetite and a need for a Speakers’ Corner for the 21st Century.

The authors advocate a user-centered design approach whereby communities co-create their own version of Speakers’ Corner to suit their needs, interests and environment. The co-design of Speakers’ Corners should ensure that the users’ needs, desires and value systems are incorporated into the shape and the system and that the community ‘owns’ the outcomes and can develop the scheme independently as their priorities change.

Through their collaboration with Speakers’ Corner Trust, the authors are currently engaged in developing a series of prototype Speakers’ Corners working in multi-disciplinary teams to design spaces for people and with people.

In summary and in answer to the main question posed at the beginning of the paper, public space can be a site for citizenship, debate and discussion but history shows that it can be exclusive, easily eroded by technological change and urban planning, obscured or eradicated by commercial interests and forgotten even by leading thinkers as an important element in the complex organism of the city.

But the indications are that the time is right to pursue a deeper understanding of how public space and public sphere might overlap and to research and explore through active engagement with different communities and prototyping how Speakers’ Corners might improve our environment, our lives and the quality of our democracy.

5: **Questions and challenges**

Given the ease of access to instant and largely unmediated exchange between citizens over the internet, is the public sphere now a cyber space and has public space lost its function? If so does it matter?

In an age of material aspiration, personal privacy and independent living, what role could/should public space play in shaping communities and strengthening citizenship?

How can public space and the public sphere serve each other?

How can public space be claimed/reclaimed for citizenship?

Should there be a duty on local authorities to create/retain public space which serves the public sphere?

Do we need a new theory of/movement for public space?
Notes


2 The issue of the decline of the public sphere is explored in Sennett’s 1974 book The Fall of public man (London: Faber). It is a study of changing forms of public life and city life. Sennett argued for a more formal public culture and was critical of what he saw as the rise of a self-indulgent counter-culture. Neil Postman focuses on the role of media technologies in weakening the intellectual recourses available for public discourse, for example in his Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business (London: Methuen, 1987).

3 Information on this citizen initiative can be found at: http://indy.gr/projects/agora-tis-kypselis/project-home.

Websites

http://www.csm.arts.ac.uk/
http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/
Let's Get To Know Our City Again in http://indy.gr/projects/agora-tis-kypselis/project-home
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