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PUBLICNESS AS AN ARCHITECTURAL VALUE

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Abstract. That architecture should in some way serve the public good is an idea that mostly goes unquestioned. The corresponding idea that we know who the public is and what its good consists of largely falls apart in the face of even a little probing. This paper investigates the concept of the public inherited from the Enlightenment, its fate in recent times, and possibilities for its reinvention. The argument then goes on to suggest ways in which architecture can have relatively more or less of the quality of publicness.

Keywords: public good, Habermas, counterpublics, architecture.

The public realm and its decline

Recall the way the Greeks conceived of public and private – the private a realm of privation, good only for the satisfaction of basic necessity, but not for the exercise of personal autonomy; Autonomy was achieved in the agora – to feel that something may be missing in our current experience. In modern, affluent, capitalist societies, this Greek conception has been turned on its head. As Jurgen Habermas has observed, “With the expansion and liberation of (the private) sphere of the market, commodity owners gained private autonomy; the positive meaning of ‘private’ emerged precisely in reference to the concept of free power of control over property that functioned in capitalist fashion” (Habermas 1989). The private realm is now where the greatest autonomy is enjoyed; the public realm is where people must suffer compromises to their freedom. In affluent societies, it is easy to begin to regard the public realm as little more than a place to procure goods that one doesn’t yet have the resources to provide at home. Thus, restaurants and bowling alleys (as Robert Putnam observed in the book *Bowling Alone*), for example, will go the way of drive-in movies and public swimming pools once everyone who so desires is wealthy enough to hire their own chefs and install their own lanes at home. It is tempting to assert that the triumph of the private has only occurred by canni-

balizing the public, but what is more likely the case is that the private hasn’t so much eaten the public realm as it has fattened on its own success while the public withered. The unprecedented quantity of consumer goods made available in mature capitalistic societies has provided virtually unlimited vistas of personal autonomy – as long as the credit holds out. This expansion of the private has led to severely diminished expectations of the public.

Adding to this trend of a public realm diminished by personal affluence, as Habermas pointed out, is the structural change that occurred in developed nations in which the very idea (certainly the original meaning) of the public realm is rendered nearly incoherent. “Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable”, he writes “for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant” (Habermas 1989). What began in the seventeenth century as an intermediate realm between state and pure domesticity amongst an emerging reading, bourgeois social class – a realm capable of critical opposition to state authority – has, in recent times, become progressively less a self-organizing place of resistance and more a childlike beneficiary of welfare-state solicitations and consumer of capitalistic displays calculated, in a process Habermas terms ‘re-

feudalization', to generate widespread acquiescence. This has occurred because, as it developed, the bourgeois vision of open participation became progressively clouded in the nineteenth century by the unfair reality of an underclass apparently unable to penetrate into the public realm; a reality that was only overturned by radically democratizing the admission standards. This necessary move entailed the unfortunate side effect that, as it expanded democratically, the public lost its potential for critical self-appraisal and critical opposition to state authority: "The *principle* of the public sphere, that is, critical publicity, seemed to lose its strength in the measure that it expanded as a *sphere* and even undermined the private realm" (Habermas 1989).

Thus, Rem Koolhaas' assertion concerning the demise of public life that "everything has turned into shopping: Airports, museums, theme parks, even universities, libraries, and churches. Cities themselves are morphing into gigantic malls" (Ockman 2002) fits Habermas's diagnosis perfectly. Even if it were possible to reclaim a significant public realm, one capable of critical resistance to power, neoclassical economics would call into question the purpose. According to this view, an intensified private realm of leisure and consumption is the desired end result, so it seems, for which the bourgeois public realm described by Habermas was only a way-station. These days, it seems entirely reasonable to assert that if people want a public good, they can darn well go out, buy themselves one.

This economic interpretation of the good life has thoroughly inundated other, more politically engaged, conceptions of the good. It has, in particular, hastened the demise of the republican concept of democracy in favor of the liberal interpretation. In a republican democracy, personal initiative and self-improvement serve a greater public aim of participatory self-government; which is seen as the essential requirement for and expression of liberty. This republican conception of citizenship has been replaced in capitalist democracies by the procedural, liberal democracy. The liberal democracy operates, instead, on the assumption that the most important prerequisite for liberty is the right to be left alone; the most liberty is therefore secured by government that adopts a neutral framework to the activities of its constituents and lets each decide for himself or herself the ends worth pursuing. "On the liberal conception, by contrast (to the republican conception), liberty is not internally but only incidentally related to self-government. Where liberty consists in the opportunity to pursue my own interests and ends, it may or may not coincide with democratic government" (Sandel 1996). The liberal conception regards the republican view with suspicion; casting doubt on the idea

that an engaged electorate can be produced without cajoling and coercing people to participate and that coercing participation is a peculiar concept of freedom. Republicans believe that demanding participation is a small price to pay for the good of true self-government.

While the liberal view seems to abet the withering of the public realm, more aggressively libertarian conceptions even call into question whether such a thing as a 'public good' can really exist – echoing Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that "there is no such thing as society: There are individual men and women, and there are families". Public Choice theory disputes the validity of the distinction between individuals seeking their own gain, and something called the public pursuing a distinctly different set of goods. The public will, according to this conception, is not some mysterious, transcendent force for doing good in the world. It is nothing more than the sum of individual actions, and individual actions are primarily motivated by self-seeking ends. Therefore, the idea of serving 'the public' interpretation through architecture is just a sentimental fallacy, or else a disguised means of forwarding architects' own agendas. Public Choice theory justifies the incursion of the private realm of economic man into the political by arguing that the attainment of something other than sum of individual goods is not possible; and that the political realm is incapable, therefore, of improving mankind's lot over and above that which can be achieved by the rewards and penalties of the market. "Logically, if economic man maximizes self-seeking behavior in the economic realm, he also pursues selfish gain in social and political life. But where markets are self-correcting, politics is self-infecting" (Kuttner 1996). Politics is self-infecting because it only introduces inefficiencies into market mechanisms; it cannot correct them. If politics is incapable of doing anything but redistributing goods in ultimately self-defeating (because skewed and inefficient) ways, then the associated public realm that makes politics possible is best minimized.

It comes as little surprise, therefore, that as society has become more affluent, the public realm would begin to melt away. The seeds of this decline can be seen from the very beginning: Those who could afford to have always pursued a private conception of the good; the existence of the public realm has served as a sort of consolation for those without the means to create their own worlds. Certainly, the public television show "America's Castles" would support this interpretation. This program inundates viewers with images of houses that not only provided lavish living spaces, but also indoor pools, screening rooms, bowling alleys, and the like. The only reason for public bowling

alleys, public choice theory would suggest, is not that people find something unique out of bowling in public, but rather the economic limitations of their situations. Contemporary trends in housing production would tend to concur. For anyone who can, home has increasingly become a pleasure palace of private amenities. The public life is an inconvenient but fortunately minimally demanding activity made necessary by the facts that grocery delivery is hard to come by these days and having a dry-cleaning plant at home would be noxious. Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* has verified the dispiriting decline of so many venues of informal gathering in the latter years of the twentieth century – from civic and fraternal organizations, to bridge clubs and even, yes, bowling leagues.

To round out the retreat of the public realm, the philosophy of utilitarianism, which maintains a dominance on the public imagination through cost benefit analyses and similar explanations of decisions affecting large numbers of people, provides an ideal moral justification of the individualistic consumerist and liberal interpretations of the good. Utilitarianism is an outlook which cherishes, above all, “states of feeling as the source of all value in the world” (Hampshire 1978). The state of feeling usually identified as most worthy of cultivation is happiness. By privileging happiness as the ultimate good toward which all moral actions aim, utilitarianism provides further justification for the liberal and economic interpretations. This is so because the idea of happiness is virtually unintelligible as a public good. Happiness is something ordinarily experienced by individuals; group happiness, to have any meaning at all, is only the sum of individuals' happiness. Utilitarian outlooks favor the idea of architecture as a good that enables certain experiences that increase the overall happiness in the world, and this leads back to the conception of architecture as a consumer good maximized in a society as free as possible from the narrowing, distorting influence of government.

Rebuilding the public

The idea that actions and material goods are ultimately justified by their ability to increase the experience of happiness in the world parallels the hierarchy observed by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore that as capitalism matures and standards of living improve, consumption moves from material goods, to services, to information, and lastly to experiences (Pine, Gilmore 1999). This observed hierarchy provides empirical justification to utilitarian claims of the primacy of the experience of happiness, because this appears to be what people really are seek-

ing in the world. Happiness, or the perception of well-being, turns out, after all, to be exactly what people ultimately seek, once they have satisfied basic bodily needs. Bentham was right all along about the fundamentals of pleasure and pain. Michael Benedikt argues that architecture, too, has been swept into the justification of design actions through appeals to experience: “Although rather few architects today are interested in perpetuating the classical-historical pastiche that Postmodernism first favored, many are still interested in the proposition that all buildings ... ought to provide exciting and memorable encounters, albeit with trendier shards and curves or luminous twisted volumes crammed with electronic paraphernalia. Follow this trend and extend it, and ultimately we must arrive at a new general understanding of architecture – to wit, architecture as experience...” (Benedikt 2001). Thus, in the provision and consumption of beneficial experiences, the ultimate good that material items, services, and information all facilitate is finally satisfied by architecture too. These developments lead to the conclusion that, incomplete though the justification of architecture through the principles of classical economics may be, it at least catches the wave of the times in a way that its opposition may not.

The cumulative effect of the logic of classical laissez-faire economics, procedural democracy, and subjective philosophies of the good is to discourage the exploration for new interpretations of facts and values for public benefit. Classical economics instructs that nonintervention in market mechanisms is the speediest route for people to obtain what it is they want, liberal democracy holds that government is incapable of defining the good without coercion, and subjective philosophies of the good intimate that the good can only be found by looking inward. At every turn, the idea that the good can be sought via public forum in rational argument is discouraged or dismissed. Facts are seen as value neutral by these conceptions, and values are seen as incapable of rational exposition (due to their origin in the private realm), and therefore pointless for public debate. Indeed, the very idea of public debate becomes suspicious as inherently manipulative; “deliberation is taken to be mere logrolling, never legitimate consensus-building or problem-solving” (Kuttner 1996).

This sums up some pretty imposing barriers to refurbishing the idea of the public good.

The concept of the public inherited from the Enlightenment is in bad shape but it is not completely done-in. A variety of vital forms of opposition to the architecture of consumerism can be found to exist still. In the face of the declining fortunes of the concept of

the public, these movements often take the form of what Michael Warner describes as a ‘counterpublic’. Counterpublics “are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general... A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power...” (Warner 2002). In other words, they function much like the original bourgeois conception of the public described by Habermas – before that conception became so inclusive as to lose its critical capabilities. The chief difference between counterpublics and bourgeois publics is that counterpublics do not necessarily take responsibility for promoting all-encompassing visions of the good. Different rights movements, furnishing prime examples of counterpublics, are born out of repression, unlike the bourgeois public which was born out of a rising sense of autonomy. The counterpublic opposition movements Warner identifies seek to change opinion within the larger public as much if not more than they are concerned to pose a critical opposition to state authority – the traditional role of the bourgeois public. As the concept of the public at large is increasingly ground down, these counterpublics offer the best chance for meaningful change. This helps to explain why opposition movements continue to flourish while the general architectural public is hard to identify.

As welcome as this turn of events is, it still leaves a hazy outline of what it might mean in practice for architecture to contain or exhibit the quality of publicness. To some degree, its public good conforms to the negative sense allowed by consumerism and procedural democracy as a good that protects us from built environments that might otherwise inhibit our health, safety, welfare and pursuit of happiness. This would be noncontroversial by any standard, but it is not enough for the argument laid out here to hold because this form of good ultimately resolves into the private. A more robust and positive interpretation of architecture as a public good, however, may gain strength from an inherent weakness in any economic interpretation of the good.

The Achilles’ heel of the mutually justifying doctrines of mature consumerism, liberal democracy and utilitarianism is the doctrine of diminishing marginal returns, a fact of economic life that calls for reconsideration of Benedikt’s diagnosis of architecture as increasingly about experience. With diminishing marginal returns, eventually, the value of any given experience will diminish just as surely as will the value of more and more refrigerators, or more and more information, and

result in the demand for new, different, and better experiences. Thus, the experience economy is something of a shark, endlessly chewing through new experiences in search of happiness, requiring constant movement to avoid decline. Benedikt opposes the privileging of experience as the measure of architecture’s ultimate good with the idea of an architecture of reality, one that combines the necessary ingredients of presence, significance, materiality, and emptiness.

For the purposes of this argument, ‘emptiness’ is by far the most intriguing of these four criteria, and by it Benedikt means “a building’s lack of didacticism, a sort of indifference and generosity that we can’t or don’t want to explain” (Architectural Record, 2001, November). A building’s emptiness allows room for user interpretation. This idea of architecture’s ‘emptiness’ may point the way for works of architecture to effectively oppose diminishing marginal returns and join forces with the opposition hoping for a justification for the act of architectural design beyond the reward and punishment of the market.

Consider, for example, the space of the Capitol Mall in Washington, DC. Given diminishing marginal returns, one would expect that, through use, its value (the regard in which it is held and the significance it holds to Americans) would diminish over time, just as the thrill of a new car or a roller-coaster ride diminishes. Having hosted Civil rights marches and Martin Luther King Jr.’s stirring oration, the AIDS quilt demonstration, the million man march, and many other events during its history, we would expect it to be regarded as partially, if not wholly used up: March somewhere more interesting next time. But just the opposite is the case. The civil rights marches and AIDS quilts have only added to the resonance of the place – the value it holds in the minds of many Americans. It has *increased* in meaning and value through use, not decreased. The same holds for a myriad of public places: Rockefeller Center, The Hollywood Bowl, Golden Gate Park. These places’ ‘emptiness’ to expressions of public interpretation keep them young, from an economic point of view. Marketplace economics simply hasn’t the tools to account for the kind of value that doesn’t wear out, become obsolete, depreciate, or become otherwise consumed. The sorts of values which cannot be adequately capitalized are called market externalities. Architecture, however, can capture and should make use of market externalities.

The quality of publicness

Call this particular kind of emptiness that leaves itself open to public interpretation the quality of *publicness*. A building or part of the built environment

has publicness to the degree it encourages and allows unanticipated interpretations. Publicness in architecture is a quality that facilitates or encourages self-organized interpretation of the built environment. Guides are neither required nor desired. Openness to the unanticipated is the only possible defense against diminishing marginal returns because, no matter the ingenuity of the architect to anticipate possible uses and interpretations, eventually the ability to anticipate, mold, and channel interpretation will give out. Upon achievement of this eventuality, staleness of experience sets in, thus diminishing its value. Through its publicness, however, the built environment stands to be continuously reinvigorated.

As a basic value or justification for architecture, publicness is a “thick” concept that combines descriptive and normative content. Encouraging a sense of public possession of the built environment, however, runs counter not only to the societal trends discussed above, but also counter to a persistent strand of thought in contemporary architecture which encourages control, mastery, and aesthetic denial, and discourages open-endedness. Architecture with real publicness would have to be generous enough to facilitate others to make up entirely new narratives using the architecture as a prop. Prolonging a building’s value then would no longer depend on how cleverly misuse is precluded. It would depend more on the architect’s ability to negotiate ‘limitless democratic vistas’ (to borrow a phrase from Richard Rorty) of public reinterpretation within a building or space that is borne, of necessity, out of a certain ideology. Though the quality of publicness is “understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” (Warner 2002) this cannot be an argument for vast, undifferentiated space either. Such places offer too little for public possession to depart from. Instead,

the architect’s role in providing for publicness becomes the balancing of the definite and the indeterminate, the teleological with the openness of ends.

Can we identify features of publicness worth cultivating? And architectural features which discourage publicness?

Consider a work of public architecture close to my home: the memorial for the Oklahoma City bombing of the Murrah building in 1995. Allowing for democratic self-organized participation would greatly enhance its relevance and longevity. We might have much to say for the newer World Trade Center memorial. Though an elegant remembrance for those who suffered this catastrophe, there is actually not a lot to DO once one takes a tour. The experience will be largely the same year in and year out.

Public spaces in and around buildings can be sized to encourage or discourage public self-organized activity. Consider the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco by Renzo Piano and the similarly functioning building in Valencia by Calatrava. In the first the scale and sense of enclosure of the forecourt fosters a busy social setting whenever the building is open. In the second, sculptural buildings in a vast space intimidate all but the largest of crowds.

Or consider Sandy Wilson’s British Library which invites people to inhabit its forecourts and the similarly functioning yet windswept and forbidding *Bibliothèque Nationale*.

Governmental buildings, especially, need to convey a sense of hierarchy and of human occupation to enhance their publicness. Contrast the 1924 San Francisco City Hall with the much lauded Federal Building by Morphosis Architects just blocks away.

In the first, one can well imagine the seat of authority centrally placed in the rotunda. In the lat-



Fig. 1. California Academy of Sciences
Source: author.



Fig. 2. City of Arts and Sciences
Source: author.



Fig. 3. British Library
Source: author.



Fig. 4. Bibliotech Nationale
Source: author.



Fig. 5. San Francisco City Hall
Source: author.



Fig. 6. San Francisco Federal Building
Source: author.

ter, all sense of human occupancy seems deliberately erased – however exciting may be the form-making. This is not necessarily a case of traditional versus modern. Even in Rafael Moneo’s Murcia City Hall, a sense of hierarchy and human occupation translates through the form making.

The actual excitement of the architecture is often secondary. Even rather drab buildings, such as the Royal Festival Hall in London, can participate in publicness. The self-organizing character extends next door at the National Theatre, where public space is used to image new dimensions of spatial experience. These principles do not only apply to governmental buildings. Rowe’s Wharf on Boston’s waterfront, a 1980s development designed by Skidmore Owings Merrill provides a wonderful example of well-organized yet empty (in Michael Benedikt’s sense) space suitable for repeated public interpretation.

The possibility of coming together to possess a place like the Capitol Mall, if only for a while, makes

Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s vision of an aesthetic democracy of highly engaged citizenry palpable. The aesthetic democracy can, and should, have an intimate connection with public space. In the aesthetic democracy, aesthetic value emerges, not through the experience of taking in and savoring sensations as the connoisseur does, but through active participation. Unlike taste, value is a public affair, and also unlike taste, is oriented outward – towards putting oneself out into the world – rather than inward, of making oneself a repository for the most exquisite discriminations. In the pragmatist conception of knowledge, one comes to know oneself or anything else only through interaction with the world. In a sensory deprivation chamber, there is no self, or at least one cannot know if there is a self or not. Similarly with art. One comes to know of art and aesthetic value by the rich and various ways one can interact with it, not by how thoroughly one can isolate and purify the experience of it. This pragmatic conception is particularly good news for architecture, which is

the most immersive medium possible, encompassing as it does, not just the eyes or ears, but the whole body in a huge variety of situations. Out of participation emerges meaning and value, and Dewey was right to invoke the example of the Greeks in this regard. It hardly seems a coincidence that a society that enjoyed the most intense public participation also enjoyed intense aesthetic development of the built environment. Our isolating and savoring of Greek art and architecture can only impart a nearly colorless echo of that public world into which one could throw oneself in intense participation. Only in built environments of real publicness is this possible. In these places and spaces, people are encouraged to invent how they will participate.

Through a consideration of architecture as fundamentally a public good, a more effective defense of the value of the architecture profession itself can begin to be envisioned as the chief defender of the public good of the built environment.

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