

# The Politics of Cultural Programming in Public Spaces



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in Public Spaces

Edited by

Victoria Watts and Robert W. Gehl

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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# INTRODUCTION

ROBERT GEHL

In our digital media saturated lives, where we spend increasing amounts of time in “virtual worlds” such as Second Life or online on blogs and video sites, it can be easy to forget about public spaces. Unlike much content in virtual worlds, cultural programs in public spaces are events that are lived and experienced bodily and sensuously. Museum exhibits, public music performances, sports, arts festivals—these events and spaces are truly *immediate*, which is to say that they are lived bodily by those that participate in and produce them. While media might be involved, these phenomena are wholly different from broadcast mass media objects. This book, *The Politics of Cultural Programming in Public Spaces*, interrogates these events and spaces in order to discover—and recover—the ways in which they affect subjectivity. We offer this not in lieu of interrogations of our heavily mediated world, but as a reminder that public spaces and public events still matter to millions of people worldwide.

To this end, this collection groups together two seemingly different objects: events and institutions. Cultural events, such as festivals, protests, and concerts, are often considered one-time phenomena. Even events that are annual are seen as relegated to a brief period of time. Institutions, such as museums, are seen as more permanent, even timeless. Yet both are caught in complex political and economic webs, and both mutate through time as various constituencies struggle over their uses and meanings. Short-term events persist in cultural memory through news reports, eyewitness accounts, personal experience, and documentaries.<sup>1</sup> Museums and exhibits, for all their persistence, often undergo turnover in personnel and subsequently are sites of shifting political and cultural mores.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since this book deals with cultural programming in public spaces, all of the objects considered here are seen as intimately tied to heterogeneous geographical/political spaces. Seen in this light, drawing a distinction between, say a book festival and a sculpture garden, is more arbitrary than helpful. In the final analysis, no object is free of the web of determinations, and the essays in the book explore the ramifications of this fact.

Ultimately, we see this collection as a contribution to a cultural studies of the politics of spaces. In spite of the wide range of objects in question, we've found that the authors here have demonstrated insight into the complex politics of a wide range of public spaces. We see their work as part of the tradition of theorists of spaces and modernity such as Walter Benjamin and Doreen Massey.

### **From Benjamin to Massey: Withered Auras and Ludic Spaces**

At first glance, a reading of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction"<sup>3</sup> might seem to be out of place in an introduction to a collection of essays on public spaces. Cultural studies and media studies rely on a key theoretical argument Benjamin makes in this essay: that the unique 'aura' of particular works of art has been eliminated (or, as he puts it, 'withered') since the advent of mass media production technologies such as film and photography. For example, the *Mona Lisa* is certainly regarded as a unique art work available only for viewing in the Louvre. However, Benjamin's argument is that an art work can be viewed anywhere a mechanical reproduction of it is available, thus removing that work from its hallowed space, recontextualizing it both anywhere and at the same time nowhere. To use a contemporary example, the *Mona Lisa* and many other works of art adorn dorm rooms, lobbies, postcards, and Web sites, thus reducing or eliminating the uniqueness or aura of the original. The aura of the original work, Benjamin argues, has been withered by mass reproduction and distribution.

What is germane here is not the focus on media but rather Benjamin's overall argument. In other words, he was not making an argument about art history or technological change; he was making a *political* argument about the spaces that held artworks, an argument with potential to wither the aura of space as well as art. In "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," Benjamin was concerned with a class of people—whom he called the priests—who oversaw the rituals involved in the worship of authentic works of art. They were involved in protecting the original works of art and codifying the consumption of art by the public. As Benjamin argues, the aura of a work of art arises from its 'cult value'; priests controlled access to artworks, since cult artworks were dedicated to deities, not display. Some artworks remained hidden year-round. Thus, the *spaces* in which these works resided were strictly controlled, with the activities of any visitors to fall within the realm of spiritual protocol. It



was this political and cultural limitation to access which hallowed both the artworks and the spaces they inhabited.

This cult value was destroyed by mechanical reproduction. The artwork could be removed from its surroundings via the processes of photography or film and displayed elsewhere, thus making scarce works of art banal and challenging the hallowed status of the spaces that contained them. Those technological processes contributed to the withering of the auras of those spaces and works. However, lest my rendering of his argument makes Benjamin appear to be a technological determinist, consider his emphasis on the agency of the publics who sought to shift the production of creative works away from the elite:

With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers—at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for “letters to the editor.” And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy-nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship.

While the technology of printing presses certainly had an effect upon the production of media, Benjamin focuses instead on what people who traditionally did not have access could *do* with the new opened media spaces. They have made headways into this space, undermining prior distinctions between writer and reader. Overall, Benjamin was less concerned about the technological changes in modernity and more concerned with the processes by which average people can destroy elite-approved auras and liberate objects—and as we will argue, spaces—from control by an elite. Predetermined readings and rituals of works and spaces become undermined by the playfulness of the public.

This is where Benjamin's important essay can contribute to the conversation about spaces in which this book takes part. In the case of the priesthood, their analogues abound in the realm of public spaces: city planners and committees, state actors, corporations, church leaders, the owners of private museums such as the Spy Museum. Returning to the example of the *Mona Lisa*, the Louvre can be seen as a highly ritualized space; the display of the *Mona Lisa* behind thick plexiglass at the end of

an often crowded hallway is testament to this. The public-spaces-priesthood attempts to codify the ritualized use of their respective domains: in a city park, people are meant to relax between trips to work or shopping. In a museum, visitors are expected to absorb the pre-approved pedagogies of art and exhibition. In an office building, workers are expected to complete their duties.

However, as stultifying as any space might appear, these political structures can be just as malleable as the auras of artworks so long as multitudes realize their political potential to undermine or reshape the rituals proposed by the priesthood of administrators, political leaders, and bureaucrats. According to a compelling reading by Diane Morgan, Benjamin saw architecture as an artform/space which was a "dynamic, mobile, enlivening, ludic medium, akin to the cinematographic."<sup>4</sup> As she argues:

Using, occupying, wearing and tearing buildings at different speeds, according to different rhythms—the rhythms of various work patterns, the varying speeds and intensities of radically different lifestyles and relational formations—humans appropriate architecture as an art-form. Architecture in turn permeates all aspects of human life: it also surrounds and impinges on the human as his environment, inducing different states of being, producing various atmospheres which modify him through the senses.<sup>5</sup>

The thread of this argument is not fully developed by Benjamin, but it is well developed by Doreen Massey.<sup>6</sup> Her work, *For Space*, outlines a political method by which the aura of public spaces—their cult value as determined by elites—could be withered. For Massey, modernist thinking has typically viewed space as either conquered or waiting to be conquered, either by colonizers or by neoliberal capital (to use her examples). That is, space is subject to one, and only one, inevitable history: that of incorporation into the hegemony *du jour*. This, she argues, is a stifling conception of the historical and political possibilities of heterogeneous space. She argues that the history of any space has been seen by modernist thinkers to be in the control of elites and out of the control of the masses, and consequently this stultifies the political potentials of public spaces.

As Massey argues, the first step in producing a viable politics of spaces is to break them out of this conquered/to-be-conquered dichotomy. To do this, she argues that we have to think of spaces as heterogeneous, lively, and capable of having infinite histories. Massey sees the inevitable logics of capitalism burst asunder by the playfulness of myriad groups which co-create spaces. Despite the best attempts by city planners to program a

particular culture in these spaces, Massey sees the potentials of countless groups to determine countless new histories.

The aura of public spaces is not withered by mechanical reproduction (despite the existence of simulacra in Las Vegas and Dubai), but rather by the emphasis and recognition of the lively heterogeneous stories and potentials of all actors within those spaces. This is a different process than mechanical reproduction, but its results are the same: the recognition of a wide range of subjects who can become critics, experts, revolutionaries, flaneurs and, yes, flaneuses within public spaces. This recognition negates the status of the priesthood. For example, in a city in the United States, the priesthood of city leaders might imagine an open space of benches and greenery as having one predetermined story, perhaps as an interstice for consumption at adjacent shops or as a site of programmed festivals, and thus they concentrate their regulations on ensuring that this particular ritual be the predominant mode of use for that space, prohibiting other uses. Activists might have other stories in mind; the open space could be a site of protest. Artists might see a canvass for anti-hegemonic expression. Parents might see a safe space for their children. Migrant workers might imagine a space where they could gather to share a sense of community organized in dependence upon and in opposition to the modes of employment available to them. The list is—and as Massey argues should be—long, lively, and unpredictable, mapping what she calls a "geography of relations" which overdetermines the space in question.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, neither Benjamin nor Massey present their visions in a vacuum; both are acutely aware of the powerful forces which continuously attempt and re-attempt to ritualize public spaces in particular ways. Benjamin looks with trepidation to the rise of a Fascist aesthetic which glorifies the mass-produced machines of war. He sees this form of mechanical reproduction as a threat to humanity. Massey's work is a philosophical polemic against a long tradition of modernist thinkers who have downplayed the political possibilities of public spaces. In both, there is always the specter that elites will regain power by predetermining the history of spaces and ritualizing their uses.

We present this collection of works as further contributions to this tradition. These works explore the conflict and contradiction between the visions of the elites who imagine spaces to have one history and various public actors who imagine other histories. Ultimately, in the spirit of Benjamin and Massey, these works trouble the very distinction between 'elite' and 'public,' thus demonstrating the contingency in social structures which overdetermines the uses of public spaces. In some cases, the elites appear to have control; in other spaces, we see surprising acts of agency

and imagination on the parts of workers, protesters, activists, and artists; and in others, we see these lines blurring and in flux, with their futures uncertain.

## **Outline of the book**

### **Part I: Imagining Space in the City**

In this section, the authors explore the city, considering the multiple potential uses of space there. For example, Tim Gibson's chapter explores the manner in which city planners in Seattle worked to claim public spaces such as Westview Park for the particular needs of local businesses. By turning over city spaces to private "business improvement districts," encouraging particular uses whilst displacing alternatives, and enforcing strict regulation against loitering, Seattle's leaders unwittingly made the public space safe for protesters to use during the 1999 "Battle in Seattle." The aura of safety, created by those planners who sought to ritualize particular uses of the park, led to 40,000 protesters utilizing Westview Park to launch a successful demonstration against the WTO. Here, the history of this space, which was imagined to be part of (and symbolic of) globalized capitalism, became instead a symbol of the anti-globalization movement. However, to this day the businesses in charge of Westview Park struggle with—and sometimes gain advantage over—the anti-globalization protesters who attempt to hold political rallies on the anniversary of the WTO protests.

Fan Yang's chapter on the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong traces the competing desires of the city's administrators and the public. After the British relinquished control of Hong Kong, city administrators sought to establish themselves as world-class leaders of a cultural capital by creating a massive public space on the waterfront. To promote their vision, they sponsored a series of grand public events. According to Yang, their use of these spectacles was meant to distract the public, presenting an illusion of participation while eliding closed-door decision making. However, Yang also subtly elucidates the very real and very potent excitement of the public who vigorously sought to shape the outcome of the WKCD and did so through citizen's groups and activism. The imagined future of the West Kowloon waterfront oscillates between the elite vision of yet another landmark of globalized capitalism and a potential space for nascent civil society.

In her examination of several city festivals, Marina Peterson considers Los Angeles in a variety of scales ranging from local to global. Her objects

compel her to consider the desires of festival organizers and the often conflicting desires of festival participants. The festival organizers used the power of mapping and cultural programming to dictate the scope of the events; they sought to scale up Los Angeles from a collection of neighborhoods to a microcosm of the globe.

Chiara Bernasconi's chapter on *Nuit Blanche* reads somewhat as a response to Peterson's. During the *Nuit Blanche* art nights in various cities, participants used social technologies such as cell phones to map their own experiences of a major city festival. Bernasconi contrasts this spontaneous reorganization of the festival with the initial plans of the city administrators. Ultimately, she argues that festival planners must take into account—and now increasingly do take into account—the spontaneous use of social technologies and networks to enhance their events. Her findings illuminate the impact of social Web sites on our navigation of public spaces.

## **Part II: Intellectuals and Ideologies in Museums**

This section focuses on museums. Susan Ashley's remarkable chapter highlights the importance of museum and historical site interpretation, a seemingly mundane, uncontroversial, and heretofore neglected part of any visit to those unique spaces. Alluding to Benjamin, Ashley notes that museums and historical sites have powerful auras which present their visions of events, history, and culture as unimpeachably true. The corporate and governmental groups which run these sites do so in keeping with hegemonic norms. However, what the authorities might not realize is that heritage interpreters—otherwise known as tour guides and reenactors—have powerful roles in revising and resisting dominant visions of those spaces. These workers are not necessarily there to personify the language of those in power, but rather see themselves as face-to-face provocateurs who seek to radically broaden the thinking of their audiences. Despite this autonomy, however, Ashley notes that the creeping logic of neoliberalism is threatening heritage interpreters' abilities to be radical teachers, particularly by replacing them with media displays which can be more closely monitored and monetized—a sort of inversion of Benjamin's argument in “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.”

Kimberly Williams's examination of the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC focuses on the pedagogical goals of that institution. Williams argues that, despite the institution's avowed mission of an objective history of espionage, it seeks to portray the Cold War as a righteous conflict which was won by the United States largely through

covert actions. Through immersive and experiential exhibits, the museum presents the Soviet Union—and by extension any contemporary enemy of the United States—as feminized, irrational, and always dangerous. Her reading is against the intended grain of the museum, thus highlighting how archives of objects can be arranged and rearranged to produce a reality for museum visitors and how a visitor might pierce that reality.

Seth Feman's chapter on Alfred Barr is a careful examination of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent exhibits. Like Williams, Feman seeks to read this institution against the grain, challenging dominant scholarly interpretations of that space. His contribution is also notable because he reveals the sometimes conflicting desires of an elite who designs a public space, someone who is simultaneously “a Christian resolute about synthesizing his faith with modern art... an empiricist [and]... a Cold Warrior.” Feman's chapter thus reveals the cracks and hidden corners of an ostensibly smooth space: the pedagogical arrangement of art in the MoMA.

### **Part III: Making Space for Art and Politics**

We close with an examination of artists and activists who create spaces for their political projects, even if those spaces are liminal and transient. Michelle Moravec's history of the Women's Art Building in Los Angeles, specifically that institution's *Incest Awareness Project*, presents public space not as an empirical object but as a process. In this light, space is made public because alternative stories are made possible within it, and then those stories—in the form of feminist art—can be retold elsewhere in many different settings. Public spaces, in her view, are not simply discrete sites. Instead, they are a process. They occur whenever an artist confronts her audience with challenging work and where the audience is welcomed into a process of apprehending the work and having their consciousness raised. Public space is decidedly not an interstice where certain activities (particularly consumption) are allowed and others (such as political speech) shunned.

Building on the theme of the processes by which artists confront audiences and thus create lively new public spaces, Victoria Watts's interview with artist Edgar Endress highlights his desire to draw subaltern groups into dialogue and sometimes conflict with dominant discourses. His work involves taking banal and liminal public spaces and using them as stages for performances. For example, he has done photography in South American marketplaces, asking people to don masks and play roles for a camera, getting his subjects to engage with the powerful mythologies

they live every day. The masks encourage disenfranchised people to confidently perform in public spaces. His current work involves mobile performances, focusing in part on migrant workers in Washington, DC. His Floating Museum recreates the mobile sense of community engendered by taco trucks. As he explains, "There are more parking lots, more malls, more and more non-spaces in existence. I like the idea of taking that over, of putting something there that disappears in the landscape, in the architecture eventually."

The final chapter, Katrina Enros's look at Montreal's *Place des Arts*, examines that institution's cultural history. The *Place des Arts* was founded during the mid-twentieth century Quiet Revolution, a time of *Québécois* nationalism. As such, its design and leadership were subject to intense scrutiny by *Québécois* who bristled at their lack of involvement in the founding. The 1963 opening of the Place was met with protests since much of the planning was done by English-speaking professionals from Canada and the United States. Enros situates the history of the Place within the greater context of other buildings which were reinvented by societies emerging from civil conflicts. Her ultimate argument is that transformation of the Place is possible, as long as the *Québécois* do not turn their backs on the institution.

We offer these works as extensions of previous cultural studies interventions into the politics of public spaces. We recognize the power of media; how could we not, given the emphasis on virtual worlds, Web 2.0 mass publishing, and citizen media? However, we want to also recognize (and perhaps return attention to) the *immediacy* of live bodies in public spaces working with and against cultural programming.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gibson's chapter for an examination of the persistence of short-term events.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Ashley, Williams, and Feman's chapters in this book.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin. 2005. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." Marxists Internet Archive. February 2005. Accessed online at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Morgan. "The Distractions of the Built Environment: Architecture as a Collective Work of Art." *InterCulture*, no. Reproducing Art: Walter Benjamin's Work of Art Essay Reconsidered Patricia Allmer and John Sears, eds. (2007): 1-34. Accessed online at <http://interculture.fsu.edu/pdfs/morgan%20diane.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, "The distractions," 6.

<sup>6</sup> Massey, Doreen B. *For Space*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 10.





**PART I:**  
**IMAGINING SPACE IN THE CITY**

## CHAPTER ONE

### PUBLIC SPACE AND THE FEAR OF CITIES: THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL PROGRAMMING IN SEATTLE'S WESTLAKE PARK

TIMOTHY A. GIBSON

Looking back, it is difficult to believe that, in 1998, Seattle's city boosters actually labored long and hard to lure the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the Pacific Northwest. But labor they did. In fact, city leaders even drafted local celebrities (of a sort) to seal the deal, in one case handing visiting WTO dignitaries an official invitation signed by none other than Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates. According to editorial page writers at the time, hosting the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle would send a bold statement to the world about the city's newly minted world-class status. The WTO would "place Seattle at the focus of attention from the international business world,"<sup>1</sup> thus signifying Seattle's arrival as a "major world trading point."<sup>2</sup> The WTO meetings would, in short, serve as Seattle's coming out party, and the whole world would be invited.

Things didn't exactly work out as planned. Instead, labor, fair trade, and environmental activists flooded the streets, shut down the opening ceremonies, and transformed the event into a sometimes joyful, sometimes destructive, but always compelling "spectacle of the street."<sup>3</sup> By the end of the protests, when the pepper spray had cleared, riot police with gas masks stood guard over a smashed Niketown storefront, and 'Seattle' had become an international symbol not of high-tech capitalism but of a resurgent anti-globalization movement.

To be sure, whatever global political significance these protests enjoyed depended in large measure upon the saturation media coverage they received, and they received this coverage in large part because they were indeed disruptive as well as, in some moments, violent and destructive. At the same time, however, as DeLuca and Peeples note, this media coverage not only focused on violence and disorder, but it also addressed the grievances, slogans, and criticisms of the protestors. Indeed,

they argue that without the protestor's uncivil disobedience, none of these messages would have found their way onto the "public screen" and into the homes of millions of global citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the stunning success of the WTO protests also depended on something else, something decidedly non-virtual and non-digital: access to urban public space. To attract media attention, protests certainly must be dramatic and spark conflict. But they must also be *visible*.<sup>5</sup> This visibility, in turn, depends upon the presence of city spaces open to such public gatherings, preferably in well-traveled sections of the city, where the grievances of protestors can be quite literally *seen*. In the end, it is this interaction between real-world visibility in urban space and the power of mass media to project these images into virtual spaces that explains the efficacy of contemporary protest. Virtual space is emphatically not enough. Launching a new political website—even one that gets 40,000 hits its first day—is not news. Although certainly a public act, joining in an online political conversation occurs in private, most likely out of sight to all but the already-committed. Launching a protest of 40,000 people in the center of the city's commercial district is a different story.

And so it was in Seattle. In the early afternoon of November 30, 1999, nearly 40,000 protestors converged on Westlake Park, downtown's main civic square. Fresh off their early morning successes—which included disrupting the early sessions of the WTO meetings—most demonstrators hung out for a while in the park and then slowly found their way home. By the late afternoon, however, a remaining core of demonstrators—still thousands strong—found themselves confronted at the edge of the park by an overworked and agitated city police force determined to force them out of downtown. In response, protestors set dumpsters and trash bins on fire to form a crude barricade at Westlake's southern end (the corner of 4th and Pike). Over the next hour, the Battle of Seattle ensued in earnest, with protestors throwing bottles and police lobbing tear gas and concussion grenades.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, the police—reinforced by hastily mobilized units of the Washington National Guard—broke through the barricades, streamed into Westlake, and began arresting protestors en masse. By this time, however, the first day of the WTO was utterly disrupted, the Mayor humiliated, and what had begun as an attempt to project bold messages of Seattle's entrepreneurial vigor to global audiences had turned into the signature moment of the anti-globalization movement. At the center of it all was Westlake Park, a tiny patch of public space in the heart of Seattle's retail core.

In this chapter, I will argue that the ability of urban public spaces like Westlake Park to act as a vehicle for making political grievances and demands visible depends, somewhat paradoxically, on cultivating a sense of public order and safety. Abandoned urban spaces which inspire nothing among citizens but fear and loathing are poor candidates for spectacular protests. To be visible, protests require an audience, and to attract such a public, urban streets and parks must be marginally inviting and safe. And so it is that public fears of urban disorder become a key barrier to effective public protest.

Yet the manner in which order is maintained matters crucially. What we will discover is that, over the past thirty years, city officials and downtown business leaders have embarked on a series of strategies designed to restore public trust in the order and safety of urban public spaces—a sense of trust that had been largely undermined by decades of urban decline and capital disinvestment. Some of these strategies have been transparently exclusionary, aimed at keeping what developers call the ‘undesirables’ at bay through a variety of aggressive architectural designs and policing strategies. Such policies attempt to reduce fear among people of ‘the right sort’ by excluding those of the ‘wrong sort.’ For obvious reasons, these are the kinds of coercive fear-reduction that have attracted the lion’s share of attention, (and justifiable ire), from critical urban scholars.<sup>7</sup>

Other fear-reduction strategies, however, are more subtle. These strategies involve the subtle commercialization of public space, linked in many cases to the development of new hybrid forms of public-private governance and a related desire to ‘program’ key public spaces with cultural events. In many American cities, officials have begun to turn the management of local parks over to privately-funded ‘business improvement districts’ in which local retailers and landowners agree to fund the maintenance of adjacent public spaces so long as they are allowed to exert control over how these spaces are maintained and used. Ultimately, this desire to bring public space into the service of commercial revitalization has led to calls for downtown parks to be ‘programmed’ year-round with concerts and corporate-sponsored events—all designed to lure shoppers and regional tourists away from suburban malls and back into downtown shopping spaces.<sup>8</sup>

But what happens when the desire to offer cultural programs in public parks—in pursuit of either community or commercial goals—competes with, and perhaps even begins to displace, spontaneous political speech and organized protests? There are, in short, political consequences to cultural programming in public spaces, and nowhere can these consequences

be seen more obviously than in the recent history of Westlake Park in Seattle. This chapter therefore explores the complex political and ideological tensions at play in the call to increase cultural programming in urban public spaces. In particular, this chapter will discuss what happened when city leaders, citing the need to protect the park's popular holiday carousel (sponsored by Qwest©), denied a permit to activists organizing a rally marking the anniversary of the WTO protests. Drawing on this case study, this chapter will conclude by exploring how this turn to cultural programming is linked not merely to the commercial motives of retailers but more fundamentally to wider fears about social disorder in the American urban landscape.

### **Fear and Loathing in Public Space**

As the WTO protests highlighted, one of the most crucial functions of public space in a democracy is to act as what Don Mitchell calls, following Henri Lefebvre and Iris Marion Young, a *space of representation*—a space where groups of individuals can assemble, constitute themselves as a distinct group, and make their presence (and their demands) visible to a wider public.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, it must be recognized that public space serves far more than a purely democratic function. Indeed, one of the key virtues of, for example, a city park is that it acts as a 'commons,' that is, as a resource held by all, open to all, which can then be devoted to the pursuit of a wide range of goals and pleasures. Most of these goals and pleasures are resolutely mundane and very few of them have to do with political speech or politics in any direct way. Eating lunch, entertaining children, sitting in the sun, asking for change, people watching, scheduling a rendezvous—such are the quotidian uses of urban public space.<sup>10</sup>

Further, as Jane Jacobs famously argued, it is precisely this diversity of use that lends healthy public streets and spaces a sense of order and safety.<sup>11</sup> A well-traveled and well-maintained space, one open to a diversity of uses across both day and night, nurtures a web of informal surveillance. In this web, we all keep an eye on each other, and this tacit policing helps discourage crime and the kinds of disorderly behavior that instill fear among urban residents and visitors. Moreover, this diversity of use—and the web of surveillance it creates—further supports the ability of public spaces to act as an effective forum for political speech, for visibility depends upon a public who feels safe enough to assemble.

In the U.S., however, the ability of urban public spaces to support these diverse uses has been under assault during the past four decades. Topping

the list of threats has been the long-term withdrawal of federal and local governments from the production and maintenance of urban public space. This withdrawal has its roots, of course, in the by-now familiar story of postwar urban decline.<sup>12</sup> As Dennis Judd and Todd Swanstrom describe, the global economic crisis of the early 1970s—an era of declining corporate profits, oil shocks, high inflation, and escalating class struggle—quickly translated into a public fiscal crisis at both the federal, state, and local levels. The response of the neoliberal Reagan administration was brutal fiscal retrenchment, expressed most directly by draconian cuts to social services and urban development programs.<sup>13</sup>

It was not a good time to be a big city mayor. Facing both cuts in federal aid and declining tax revenues due to the flight of manufacturing jobs and rapid suburbanization, city leaders of whatever political stripe were forced into cruel austerity-style budgets, cutting expenditures in some cases between 15 and 20 percent during a time when demands for services and assistance rose to 40-year highs.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, in most cities, the parks budget—viewed as a luxury compared to fire and police—was the first to face draconian cuts.<sup>15</sup> In the end, when the era of massive cuts ebbed during the late 1990s, one national study found that an infusion of \$30.7 billion would be required simply to address the deferred maintenance needs of existing urban parks.<sup>16</sup>

The consequences of these cuts were profound. In Philadelphia, for example, the parks budget shrank from three percent of total city expenditures in the late 1960s to less than one percent by 2000. During this time, successive mayors eliminated the parks police and cut the maintenance staff by over two-thirds.<sup>17</sup> Today, as Alec Brownlow describes, only the “crown jewels” of the city park system—those high profile parks frequented by tourists and commuters—receive adequate care, while the remainder of the system has been left to rot. As a result, neighborhood parks like Cobbs Creek in West Philadelphia—public spaces that once supported a wide range of uses and users—have now become menacing and abandoned landscapes. Weeds have overgrown playfields, burned-out auto husks block park footpaths, and, as Brownlow discovered in his focus groups with local residents, Philadelphians who once used such parks as kids would never dream of letting their own children play there. And they have good reason: corpses are discovered at Cobbs Creek at a rate of about one per year.<sup>18</sup>

The vicious circle that consumed Cobbs Creek Park—this cycle of neglect, fear, and abandonment—has been repeated countless times across the urban landscape, as urban residents take stock of the declining condition of parks and express their dismay by avoiding them entirely.

Urban residents, in short, construct personal geographies of risk from whatever bits of social information are available to them—from personal experience to neighborhood gossip to the relentless portrayal of crime and violence on local television news.<sup>19</sup> The physical appearance of public spaces thus offers interpretive cues for residents looking to predict when, and under what conditions, they can safely occupy particular city spaces.<sup>20</sup> As the signs of disorder and dysfunction proliferate due to deferred maintenance and inadequate policing, the public responds with fear and avoidance.<sup>21</sup> In this way, overgrown grass around a jungle gym can suggest to parents not merely a history of shoddy maintenance, but also that the playground has been abandoned by other families and must therefore be unsafe.<sup>22</sup> Unchecked graffiti and illegal dumping can signify not merely a breakdown in urban civility, but also, and more importantly, that public authorities care little for this space, and, by extension, the people within it. Should we be surprised when residents respond to these signs by re-shaping their daily rounds in order to avoid and abandon these neglected and disorderly spaces?<sup>23</sup>

And here we arrive at the dicey politics that goes with discussing the connections between fear and disorder in city space. These are, after all, precisely the connections made by the recent generation of neo-conservative American mayors—including most famously, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani—to defend their ‘zero tolerance’ policies toward unlicensed homeless encampments, aggressive panhandling, and other ‘quality of life’ crimes.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on Wilson and Kelling’s “broken windows” theory of urban crime,<sup>25</sup> these mayors argued that both physical disorder (e.g., graffiti) and disorderly behavior (e.g., public drinking and aggressive panhandling) should be viewed not merely as the small stuff of gritty urban life, but rather as public enemy number one. In their view, disorder and incivility in urban space cultivates fear among the ‘legitimate’ public. It sparks a reaction of avoidance and withdrawal. In turn, this withdrawal of the ‘law-abiding,’ as former Seattle City Attorney Mark Sidran (a broken windows devotee) put it, not only removes the informal surveillance and social control that individuals exert on one another in public places, but it also attracts *true* criminals who rightly conclude that public spaces traversed only by the intimidated and afraid are good places to do business.<sup>26</sup>

Liberal and progressive critics of Giuliani and broken windows theory more generally dismiss this discussion of disorder and fear as a transparent attack on the poor and homeless, and of course this complaint hits the mark.<sup>27</sup> When proponents of broken windows theory define disorder as “behavior out of place,” they implicitly equate homelessness itself with a

lack of order and control.<sup>28</sup> To be homeless, as Don Mitchell has argued, is to be forced to attend to *private* needs (sleeping, dressing, urinating, etc.) in full *public* view. By definition, then, homelessness violates the orderly division of public and private spheres in bourgeois societies. To then criminalize these behaviors as part of a ‘zero tolerance’ campaign to ‘take back’ the streets—especially in the absence of a concerted effort to provide housing, food, and public health services—is, in a word, inhuman.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, to object to a particularly noxious political *use* of broken windows theory—in this case, to criminalize urban poverty and homelessness—should not lead us to dismiss out of hand the connections between disorder, fear, and abandonment. Nor should it lead us to minimize the consequences of fear and abandonment on the quality of urban life more generally. We should never forget, in other words, that the consequences of the neglect and abandonment of urban public spaces are felt most keenly by women,<sup>30</sup> the elderly, and the poor and working-class.

If parks become unusable due to physical decay or chronic incivility, the affluent, after all, can afford to join private recreation clubs. If things get really bad, they can seal themselves off from city streets with private security systems or escape altogether by fleeing into gated suburbia. When public spaces deteriorate, however, the poor are often stuck in place. They most likely make do by staying home. As Eric Klinenberg describes, a particularly dramatic example of this class dichotomy—and the tragic consequences of the fear of urban public space—came during the Chicago heat wave of 1995. During this week of triple-digit temperatures, hundreds of elderly Chicagoans—mostly poor, mostly African-American—remained so afraid of street crime that they barricaded themselves in their apartments and refused to leave, even as city officials pleaded with them to make their way to a cooling shelter. By the end of the week, over 700 elderly residents were found dead in their homes, killed by the stifling heat.<sup>31</sup>

The consequences of disorderly public spaces and the fear they generate are, in short, troubling to all who love city life. Not only do disorderly and ill-maintained spaces spark a vicious cycle of fear and abandonment, but the withdrawal of the public has a further noxious effect. It undermines the ability of spaces to serve as an effective stage for political spectacle and protest. To make political demands and grievances *visible* requires a public gathered in witness. In this way, the extent to which the public retreats behind the safety of a dead-bolted front door marks the extent of the public realm’s atrophy. The fear and withdrawal of the public from public spaces thus is a real problem demanding a real solution. What we will discover, however, is that the dominant solutions



advanced by city officials across the U.S.—in close consultation with downtown business leaders who are focused, as always, on drawing every available resource into the circuit of accumulation and exchange—do little to restore the ability of public space to serve as effective vehicles of political speech and spectacle.

### **Public Space and Cultural Programming: Taking Back the City, One Fashion Show at a Time**

Downtown merchants and landowners have long regarded public parks and streets with skepticism bordering on hostility. Part of the problem, from the perspective of adjacent landowners, is that these spaces lie beyond their control. According to federal law, parks and streets have from time immemorial been held in common by the state for public use. The public's free access to these spaces thus enjoys the most rigorous protection offered by the U.S. legal system, and attempts to regulate the use of streets and parks are given careful judicial scrutiny.<sup>32</sup> Private merchants and landowners, however, are accustomed to a different regime of spatial regulation—the regime of private property. Private property, after all, is based on the right to exclude.<sup>33</sup> This principle of exclusion thus confers upon the property owner a powerful set of rights. Within some very wide limits, owners can create whatever 'public' they wish within their properties, merely by including some persons and activities while excluding others.<sup>34</sup> The urban form is thus marked by an inherent tension between contradictory but perpetually juxtaposed regimes of inclusion and exclusion.

The tensions between inclusive and exclusive regimes of governing urban space have only been exacerbated in recent years with the widespread perception (held with particular zeal by downtown merchants) that urban public streets and parks have slipped beyond the control of public authorities. Downtown merchants, in short, are painfully aware that, due to thirty years of urban disinvestment and decline, central city districts, and especially public parks and streets, have become infused in the public imaginary with connotations of decay and danger.<sup>35</sup> Merchants also recognize that the disorderly and ill-maintained condition of adjacent public parks and streets does little to inspire wary suburbanites, not to mention tourists and business travelers, to venture into struggling downtown shopping districts. For this reason, public space is often viewed by the pillars of the downtown business establishment as something of a problem to be solved. How, in short, can public spaces in key downtown districts be managed in ways that support, rather than undermine, the

economic imperatives of retailers and landowners? How can these public spaces be governed in a way that resembles, at least in outline, the total control private owners exert over their own spaces?

Among the business class, then, one prominent response to the ‘problem’ of public space has been to encourage the re-design of public spaces in ways that seal off ‘legitimate’ users from contact with the ‘outside’ public. We see this strategy most forcefully in privately-owned corporate plazas that are nonetheless open to the public. As Gregory Smithsimon reports, although developers voluntarily built these quasi-public spaces (usually to win density concessions from city planners), they viewed these plazas as burdensome obligations and often commanded their architects to design them in ways that discouraged public use.<sup>36</sup> In many cases, architects responded by mercilessly deleting from their designs anything remotely resembling a place to sit so that pedestrians would have little reason to venture off the sidewalk and into the plaza. In other cases, an ingenious combination of plantings, tile styles, blank walls, and elevation differentials subtly signaled to outsiders that these ostensibly public spaces (often located at the base of an office tower) were more for the white-collar workers inside the building than the public milling on the street.<sup>37</sup>

Such tactics are not confined to office tower plazas. Local business leaders can also use their considerable influence in local government to ensure that city parks also repel unwanted users. For example, Straeheli and Mitchell write that when developers of Horton Plaza—San Diego’s signature downtown shopping mall—complained that users of nearby Horton Plaza Park were engaging in disruptive and disorderly activities, city planners responded by essentially making the park uninhabitable. They removed park benches, moved bus stops, and replaced the park’s inviting grass with prickly plants and flowers.<sup>38</sup> In the end, such coercive re-designs bristle with hostility to the street and the general public. They represent nothing less than a transparent attempt to speed flows of legitimate users into the private spaces of retailers and developers while at the same time sealing these users off from unplanned and unpredictable encounters in a public sphere viewed as hostile and dysfunctional.<sup>39</sup>

In recent years, however, downtown business leaders have begun to embrace alternative means of exerting control over adjacent public spaces. This shift in strategy marks a shift in the prevailing philosophy of control from a policy of coercion and exclusion (through aggressive designs and policing) toward appropriation and governance.<sup>40</sup> It is, in short, a shift from thinking of public space as less a problem to be contained and more as an under-utilized resource to be incorporated, transformed, and then

pressed into the service of developers and retailers.

The heart of this strategy was expressed forcefully twenty years ago by the influential urbanist William H. Whyte. If you are worried about the ill-maintained condition of parks and the disorderly ‘undesirables’ who congregate there, don’t sweep away the public *en masse* using coercive and uninviting designs. That’s throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, he wrote, “the best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make the place attractive to everyone else.”<sup>41</sup> Drawing implicitly on Jane Jacobs’ famous descriptions of the “dance of the street” in Greenwich Village, Whyte argued that well-used spaces are safe spaces. As the public masses in place, the space becomes self-policing. Gathered in sufficient numbers, people feel emboldened to check one another, to enforce prevailing social norms. The key is therefore to find some way to restore public confidence in public spaces, to draw the crowds in and to make them feel comfortable enough to stay.

Furthermore, a ‘reclaimed’ park that is well-used and lively could yield economic benefits as well. It could, in fact, offer jaded suburban shoppers and tourists something unique—an experience of diversity and urbanity wholly distinct from the blandness of suburban box stores and outlet malls. If planned and maintained correctly, in other words, urban parks and streets could become—along with the *de rigueur* professional sports arenas, festival marketplaces, aquaria, IMAX theaters, and brew pub restaurants—a key resource in what David Harvey has called “the mobilization of spectacle,” in which city boosters project bold images of urban vitality in regional and international markets to draw in consumers, tourists, and investors.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, from the perspective of retailers and landowners, transforming streets and parks into spectacles of urban vitality requires first that they be reclaimed and controlled. A lack of faith in the local state’s ability to reestablish this kind of control has thus led city business leaders to develop alternative strategies of governance—strategies that place the maintenance and control of public streets and parks into the hands of private associations of landowners and businesses. The proliferation of ‘business improvement districts’ (BIDs) across the American urban landscape offers one key example of this process. Nominally creations of local and state legislation, BIDs are essentially local associations of landlords and business owners who agree to assess themselves a special tax, over and above their usual local and state taxes. The funds generated from this special assessment are then poured into the BID, an organization controlled not by local government, but by a private board of governors elected from among the property holders within the district (tenants

usually need not apply). This money can then be used to pay for the maintenance, policing (via private security), and redevelopment of public spaces within the boundaries of the BID.<sup>43</sup>

In essence, then, the development of the BID represents an abdication of public responsibility—and with this transfer of responsibility comes the inevitable transfer of authority and control. As the BID begins to assume duties—planning, sanitation, maintenance, policing—once shouldered by the local state, business leaders feel emboldened to use their influence to shape the design and use of urban parks and streets more to their liking.

Consider the example of Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan. Established in 1934 as a pastoral haven from the surrounding city, Bryant Park's original designers purposefully cut the park off from its surroundings by encircling it with walls and lowering its plane relative to the street. Fifty years later, William Whyte blamed this design for the park's takeover by drug dealers, who used the park's relative isolation from the street to their advantage.<sup>44</sup> Enter the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC)—a non-profit BID whose board members included some of the largest telecommunications firms in the nation. With the resources of these powerful firms in hand, the BPRC engaged in an aggressive re-design of the Park, with a focus on cultivating, through every means available, a sense of security and safety. Private security guards were hired. Strict rules on overnight camping and panhandling were enforced. The park's new architectural and landscape design emphasized security as well, mostly by opening up the space to the surrounding streets to reduce the sense of isolation that frightened legitimate users while pleasing local drug dealers.<sup>45</sup>

Yet perhaps the most notable feature of Bryant Park's redesign lay in the BPRC's decision to 'program' the park as a means of attracting users of the 'right sort.' Following Whyte's advice that 'undesirables' are best repelled by making the park *attractive* to others, the BPRC brought in, first of all, kiosks selling all manner of yuppie-pleasing items, including the required tumblers of cappuccino. Two expensive private restaurants opened on site as well, providing another destination for midtown's business class. And then there are the events. A visit to park management's website reveals a summer schedule of over 15 events per week, from "HBO's Film Festival" to "Broadway in Bryant Park" to "*Good Morning America's* Summer Concert Series." Most events are free and open to the public, but most also have corporate sponsors. All event organizers pay a fee to access the park, and park rules even allow for some events to charge admission. In fact, perhaps the signature event in Bryant Park's calendar—the Mercedes-Benz© Fashion Week—is completely

closed to the public and colonizes the park for two weeks per year.<sup>46</sup> In the end, as Zukin writes, such events are part of a larger strategy of “pacification by cappuccino”—her term for the subtle use of lifestyle cues and urban semiotics to signal for whom this park is intended.<sup>47</sup>

If Bryant Park’s redesign was established on the foundation of private control and a commitment to cultural programming, we can see a similar process at work in Seattle’s Westlake Park. Over the years, the downtown business community has developed an uneasy relationship to the park, and this tension has its origins in the park’s early history. The idea for Westlake Park was the brainchild of Victor Steinbrueck, an architecture professor, who first proposed in 1968 that the city establish a grand European-style civic square at the intersection of Westlake Avenue and Pine Street. Soon, the plan gained enough traction to inspire the animosity of the downtown retailers, who expressed fears about how the park might disrupt the flow of downtown traffic and also serve as a congregation point for the city’s homeless. The Downtown Seattle Association (the main business association for downtown retailers and landowners and a powerful player in Seattle city politics) thus quickly countered Steinbrueck’s vision for Westlake with their own proposal to build a massive hotel-retail complex at the site.<sup>48</sup>

The debate raged on for ten years until, eventually, downtown business leaders pressured former Mayor Charles Royer, an early advocate of creating the park, into a compromise. Under Royer’s plan, half of Steinbrueck’s civic plaza would be devoted instead to a \$110 million office tower and upscale shopping mall. The other half of the square, essentially two small tiled plazas on either side of Pine Street, would be set aside as public spaces—and, with one plaza remaining in private hands, in fact, only the plaza on the south side of the street would become a full-fledged public park. In the end, Royer’s vision for Westlake—opened to the public in 1988—was, in one local journalist’s words, “mostly mall and office building, with two patches of park on what’s left over.”<sup>49</sup>

Having pared Steinbrueck’s vision down to size, the downtown business community then set about the task of ensuring the park served the priorities of neighboring retailers. One major opportunity came in 1996 with the formation of the inelegantly named Westlake Park Management Review Task Force. Created by a joint agreement between the city of Seattle and the Downtown Seattle Association and stacked with representatives from neighboring retailers, the task force was challenged to develop ideas for improving the park’s maintenance and management. Under the guiding hand of the DSA, however, the task force’s final report

moved well beyond this initial charge and instead offered a bold proposal that called for a thoroughgoing privatization of the park.

First, the task force called for the park's management to be turned over to a private, non-profit organization—tentatively dubbed (wait for it) “Westlake Park, Inc.”<sup>50</sup> Funded from a mixture of public and private funds (and governed by a board dominated by retailers and developers) Westlake Park, Inc. would be given the authority to “establish use guidelines and standards, to issue permits [for events and protests], and to decorate and improve the park.” At the top of Westlake Park, Inc.'s proposed to-do list would be to ensure the park “complement surrounding businesses,” mostly by achieving “standards of presentation...comparable to private business standards for customer spaces.” Indeed, the report called for the park to establish its own ‘brand,’ complete with a distinctive floral logo.<sup>51</sup>

But perhaps most of the task force's energies were devoted to promoting cultural programming as a means of revitalizing both the park and the surrounding retail core. Under the city's lackluster stewardship, the task force argued, Westlake Park typically hosted events only during July and December. Under Westlake Park Inc., however, the park would establish instead a “year-round program plan.” Such a schedule of events—from puppet shows to cultural festivals to sand castle contests—would encourage the public to “think of the park as an active place where there is always something happening.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, a rich schedule of cultural programs would also present Westlake Park, Inc. with an opportunity to *generate* some revenue. All that would be required would be to schedule a number of for-profit events, including corporate-sponsored promotions, outdoor fashion shows, rock concerts with admissions fees, and perhaps even weddings and coming-out parties. This rental income would then flow back into the park's maintenance and security budget, thereby reducing the need for future public and private funding.<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately, the bold idea of Westlake Park, Inc. died on the vine. What at first seemed a foregone conclusion (city staffers had gone so far as to write up the authorizing legislation) was derailed when a public backlash materialized, led in this case by a scathing editorial in the usually pro-DSA *Seattle Times*.<sup>54</sup> Yet, this setback notwithstanding, the commitment to cultural programming at Westlake has remained strong among Seattle's downtown establishment, reappearing again and again in subsequent City/DSA policy statements on downtown parks.<sup>55</sup>

This enthusiasm for cultural programming at Westlake can be explained by the way it serves, from the perspective of neighboring businesses, a number of important purposes. Scheduling events in urban public space offers suburban shoppers a reason to hazard a trip downtown,