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Public Places, Public Pasts

**Gregory Ashworth, Peter Groot
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1 INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC PLACES, PUBLIC PASTS?

Peter Groote, Gregory Ashworth and Tialda Haartsen

It is currently axiomatic, at least in the contemporary academic literature if not always in practice that heritage is by definition contested. Sometimes this is merely a small, and rather esoteric, dispute effecting potentially only a few people. However it may on occasion turn into something far more serious. In such cases heritage may be labelled as dissonant (Turnbridge & Ashworth 1996). Dissonance and the resulting contestation may take place on two levels (Graham, et al. 2000: 23). The first lies within heritage itself, and deals with its functions: it is multi-sold and multi-consumed. Contestation between sellers and/or consumers may arise, as also between agents that object against specific functions that they regard as unworthy or improper. The tourism functions of heritage objects and sites are a major source of such contestation with those who use the heritage quite differently. Take for example a major monument such as Stonehenge (UK). In one sense this is a public site, being state financed and managed by a government agency, English heritage, on behalf of the British public and further being inscribed as a world heritage site and thus in that sense it belongs to all humanity. However potential users are strictly selected, with priority being given to 'serious' experts and to tourists whose visits are strictly constrained in time and space and whose behaviour is monitored and policed. Others, whether latter-day druids, new age pantheists or just other tourism operators or tourists behaving inappropriately, e.g. picnicking, are firmly excluded as not being members of the approved 'public' on this public site. The second level deals with society as a whole. Heritage is also a medium of representation, which can be and in practice is, used to communicate cultural values. It can be influential in the reproduction and contestation of cultures. Who controls heritage may change the "trajectory of such contestation in which cultural hegemony is the goal." (Graham, et al. 2000: 23-24). In this volume, Ashworth goes deeper into these questions, focusing on the government-expert-citizen triangle of control.

It is clear that on both levels contestation is mainly about who decides which resources should become heritage and who controls access to such heritage, whether for economic, social, political or cultural purposes. Interestingly, this is often tied to the seemingly more mundane question of physical access to the heritage place itself, as heritage at least in so far as it is contained in artefacts and sites, is always located somewhere. Who controls access to the site, may also control access to the representational instrument and determine not only who visits it but how it is to be visited, often including details of expected visitor dress and behaviour. Therefore, the question whether heritage and its sites are (or should be) in the public or private domain, is an important one. It is often discussed, not just in the academic, but also in the professional and popular discourses. However, in particular in the popular arena, it is also an often misinterpreted question and one that is sometimes answered in a too simplistic manner. Very fundamental aspects of the discussion, such as what constitutes the public and the private realms, are in themselves frequently contested and cannot be assumed.

Three key terms resound in most definitions of public space, namely: 'access rights', 'freedom' and 'everyone' (or 'the general public'). The simplest definition seems to be that public spaces are freely accessible to everyone regardless of the legal public or private title to ownership. This suggests that the concept of public (and consequently its antonym private) is to be defined on the basis of the absence (or presence) of exclusionary policies. Public places are open to everyone, and consequently there are no outsiders that will be excluded. Private places, on the other hand, are to be defined as exactly the opposite: outsiders can be excluded from entering and from participating in what is going on there. Obviously, this needs insiders as well who are in power to control access, or more generally to define who is an outsider. In this volume, Meijering, Huigen and Van Hoven deals with the topic of heritage creation by intentional communities, which she believes are in an intermediate position between private and public.

Public space, however, is often seen as more than just a neutral concept, defined on the basis of the criterion of accessibility. A cultural layer of meanings is then added: "Public sphere [is to be defined as]: a space for democratic public debate and argument that mediates between civil society and the state in which the public organizes itself and in which 'public opinion' is formed." (Barker 2004: 168). Public spaces are spaces where different people meet, where everyone can make him/herself heard, and can enter the public debate. "From a socio-cultural perspective, public spaces are defined as places of interrelation, social encounter and exchange, where groups with different interests converge." (Ortiz, et al. 2004: 219). This extension of the concept into the cultural realm probably explains the seemingly growing awareness that public space is under threat from privatisation and commercialisation. More and more spaces that used to be seen as public spaces, such as shopping malls or heritage places, have in the last decades restricted access in order to exclude particular social, economic or cultural groups, e.g. the homeless (Copeland 2004) or those behaving 'incorrectly' as defined by the place managers. Such exclusionary practices, no matter how understandable on the micro-level, are regarded as a cultural or political problem on the macro-level. If people are excluded from entering public spaces or are allowed only conditional entry, they are in a way marginalized and silenced: they are neither seen nor are their voices heard anymore in the public domain. This is most clear in heritage places that are overloaded with cultural meanings that are about justice and injustice, crime and punishment, or victims and perpetrators. The best known example is the UNESCO World Heritage site of Auschwitz (Van der Aa 2005). Yet why did the Killing Fields of Cambodia or and the Bamyán Buddha statues in Afghanistan fail to be included on the World heritage list (Ashworth & Van der Aa 2002) In this collection the chapters by Van Hoven on prison heritage, McDowell on murals in Northern Ireland, and Miller on the dynamics of post-Apartheid South African heritage deal with aspects of this sensitive topic.

Public spaces have from their inception as forum, agora and market place been places for human interaction, whether for economic, social or political reasons. In democratic societies public spaces have an additional significance in that obviously everyone should have access, in order to raise his/her voice and participate in public debates and so influence (public) opinion. This functioning of public spaces as democratic spaces raises another issue, namely their design.

"The planning, design and realization (creation and renovation) of urban public spaces have played and continue to play a fundamental role as elements that enhance urban social interaction, contributing to the residents' quality of life and to the fight against social exclusion based on age and gender" (Ortiz, et al. 2004: 219). Public spaces should be designed in such a way that people not just have access, but are specifically invited to enter, and stimulated to participate in discussions, e.g. through amazement (see e.g. Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996: 17). In this volume, Haartsen and Groote question the public character, including the design of natural heritage places in the Netherlands.

Decision makers, planners, designers, artists and the like are thought to have a more or less moral obligation to support democratic processes by creating or shaping public places that ordinary people should feel free to enter, to participate in public activities and engage in various forms of interaction. Is the implication that the choice of which spaces are defined as public places, as well as their design, should cater to the taste of the general public? Or, instead, should they deliberately be designed by experts in order to provoke people to participate in discussion? Obviously, the well-known government-expert-lay citizen tension in heritage management receives a new dimension here.

In short, discussions on the role and functioning of public places raises questions of power, responsibilities and contestation (see Graham, et al. 2000: 23-26), which can at the most fundamental level be defined as the intrinsic paradox of democracy: should everyone be invited to participate in public debates about public spaces or should these be left to those with 'the right expertise', however defined? In this book, we want to add some depth to the discussion, while at the same time fuelling the discussion with more in-depth data regarding concrete, often local heritage contestations. Howard illustrates this in a summarising chapter. In this he uses the case of Poltimore House (Devon, U.K.) to illustrate how what sometimes seem to be an academic debate may resound in local restoration and heritage management discussions and decisions.

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2 PLURAL PASTS FOR PLURAL PUBLICS IN PLURAL PLACES: A TAXONOMY OF HERITAGE POLICIES FOR PLURAL SOCIETIES

Gregory Ashworth

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores one aspect of the way public pasts are used within public policy in pursuit of public goals. The argument is based upon two propositions which, at least in principle if not in their practice, would be generally agreed by most commentators. First, public authorities have used public heritage as an instrument for the attainment of explicit or implicit contemporary policy objectives: indeed it can be argued that the involvement of governments in heritage, and cultural productivity in general, stems from a very specific requirement of national governments to create, foster and demarcate the concept of nation which alone legitimates their existence and justifies their exercise of that government (Ashworth 1991; Ashworth & Howard 2000, Graham, et al 2000). There are of course many cases of heritage being conscripted to the service of non-national jurisdictions and ideologies but the special dependence of nationalism upon the creation of and commitment to the mythical entity 'nation' explains the attempts at the 'nationalisation of the past' that have occurred. In short it has been assumed that contemporary societies will use heritage as an instrument in the invention and management of collective identity, most especially as expressed through the shaping of place identities because the existence of such entities underpins nationalist ideology. The implication of this proposition is that public heritage is principally motivated not just by political considerations but by a very specific and singular political objective: other considerations and uses, as well as other spatial scales of application are secondary and marginal.

Secondly, society has always been plural in some senses. The unity of character or purpose inferred by the imagined entity 'nation' was always a chimera, uneasily sustained by a complicity between governors and governed, for so long as it was in the interest of both. However, for various reasons, that cannot be pursued here, this conspiracy of suspended disbelief is increasingly less tenable than it was or even has become just untenable. There has been a diffusion through space of economic production, consumption, cultures, ways of life, belief systems and people themselves in a process we so inadequately label as globalisation. This may not be an exclusively twenty-first century phenomenon and, in many respects central to the aspect of the topic discussed here, is as much a consequence of the largely nineteenth century European imperial project. In seeming contradiction many have commented upon a fragmentation, indeed atomisation of society, and shift from the collective towards the individual. In any event the only agreement discernable in this heap of diffuse and varied ideas is that society has become more plural and that these pluralities are increasing and likely to continue to increase.

The tensions inherent in the two propositions are obvious. The first requires clarity, homogeneity and demarcation while the second provides opaqueness, heterogeneity and a bounding fuzziness. The aim, initiated in this chapter is more modest than the above broad brush generalisations of political objectives and social structures suggests.