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## Changing values: public life and urban spaces

### Book section

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# CHANGING VALUES

## Public life and urban spaces

London's relationship with its public domain is changing. Walk along Kingsway, a busy thoroughfare split by an underpass and polluting traffic, and you will find nearly twenty new bars, cafes, sandwich shops and fusion-food takeaways, all of them opened in the past five years. They are crowded and thriving, and they spill out onto the street. Many have young French, Italian and Polish staff serving behind the counters, demonstrating a seemingly natural expertise at handling an espresso or toasting a panino.

These scenes are duplicated across London, in the high streets of Clerkenwell and Chiswick, Stratford and Stoke Newington. The new cappuccino culture reflects not only the pervasive presence of a younger and more international population, but also a new attitude to London's "old" public realm. Historically, London's public spaces have been residential squares, or larger parks. The city's current imagination of public realm encompasses spaces that are less green and more densely occupied; a shift in lifestyle that is both threatening and enriching. The downside is the pervasive consumerism that nullifies street culture; the upside is the recognition that the quality of the public realm – paving, lighting, street furniture and landscaping – does matter, and that we are beginning to take pride in how our city looks and feels after years of neglect.

Trafalgar Square must be the flagship

of this new-found attitude. Somerset House, Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the renovated Southbank, and the King's Road are others. Trafalgar Square had become a race track with three lanes of traffic whizzing round the "heart of the capital", where Londoners have traditionally met to celebrate, commiserate and protest. Only four years ago, it was hard to reach the heart of the Square; a perception reinforced by the statistic that in 1997 less than 10% of users were Londoners. The simple act of reuniting one side of Trafalgar Square to the National Gallery, and opening a grand staircase to the north, has redefined the sense of both enclosure and permeability to one of London's iconic urban landmarks. Today, tourists and Londoners alike use the space as a stage-set of theatre and reality. Regardless of the, at times, overly aggressive programming of events, Trafalgar Square does perform an important function in the public life of the capital; and all this without the overpowering presence of retail.

The Mayor of London has followed the lead of Rome, Barcelona and Copenhagen in initiating the 100 Public Spaces programme, which aims to transform three places in every London borough over the next decade. The goal is to create spaces that work throughout the day and year, for the many constituencies that are beginning to re-engage with the city's public realm. As such, they constitute a new approach to inner city liveability at a time of increasing density and rising demands for quality open spaces.

Behind central London's facade of happy consumerism lies another reality. London may be one of the world's greatest cities, yet its physical environment does not live up to this reputation, and in many ways it epitomises JK Galbraith's maxim of "private affluence, public squalor". The so-called public space of many housing estates is "SLOAP" (Space Left Over After Planning); abandoned territories of fear and conflict which only now are receiving attention. Much of London remains gritty to the point of squalor, with cracking pavement, unsafe lighting, an incoherent clutter of street furniture, poor design and shoddy workmanship.

While the tension between inner city residents and night-time revellers seems to have attained equilibrium in the streets of Barcelona, Amsterdam or Manhattan, London is still struggling to balance this equation. The City of Westminster famously reversed its decision to pedestrianise a large part of Soho because of the noise and disruption it caused to the local residents (i.e. voters), including acres of rubbish from heaving restaurants and bars. As inner-city regeneration grows increasingly reliant on the mantra of mixed-use development, its combination of different and at times incompatible activities can engender conflict and fuel a sense of increasing social exclusion.

As ever, in this profoundly mercantile city, private investors have got there first. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, London's developers created beautiful and sustainable set-pieces of urban design: the great squares and streets of Bloomsbury, Belgravia or Bedford Park. In the 1980s, Canary Wharf took the bold steps of investing in high quality open spaces for its privileged users in what was then an unknown location. This has paid off handsomely. Retail developers have taken note: the remodelling of the Elephant & Castle site will

replace an enclosed shopping mall with a traditional grid of streets, and interstitial landscaped public spaces. Today Broadgate, Paddington Basin and More London vie to create London's slickest and most controlled environments as unique selling points of these emerging commercial districts.

One pressing question is if, and how, London can leverage private funding for public realm projects without relinquishing control to private interests. The Elephant & Castle scheme illustrates the challenge of revamping a space's negative image while preserving its character and generating benefits for local stakeholders.

The promotional rhetoric of new projects at Stratford City, Elephant & Castle, King's Cross and White City privileges the design of their spaces over the design of their buildings, underscoring the significance of public space in realising the commercial potential of a regeneration area. While this signals a new-found engagement with the civic, the increasing privatisation of the "public" realm raises questions about whether and how London's public spaces can create the spontaneous possibilities of truly urban places and continue to be spaces where, as Richard Sennett put it, you feel safe "lost in a crowd."

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