

# Street Politics

Michael J. Shapiro

I write from Prague, where, unlike in most urban formations, the main city street plays an iconic role; it references a history of political protest. However, before elaborating on the protest iconography of the Prague street, Vaclavske nam, I want to locate the ways in which the design of urban space is actualized in everyday life in the cities of the world. Three functions stand out; the first involves dwelling, the second seeing, and the third moving.

With respect to the first function – dwelling – the design partitions and coordinates residential, commercial and leisure functions. At times these are organized to segregate different classes (Robert Moses' redesign of much of New York stands out with respect to the segregation function). With respect to the second function – seeing – the design of urban space is allegiance-inspiring; it involves sightlines that afford urban dwellers and visitors views of iconic buildings and statues, which reference key founding moments in the past and/or authoritative political functions in the present (Here, L'Enfants design for Washington DC stands out as exemplary. Its manifest intention was to make the buildings housing executive, legislative and judicial functions visible from many vantage points). Rarely are the streets themselves iconic. Their dominant role is involved with the effectuation of movement.

As for this third function: As Lewis Mumford famously points out, streets were once part of an asterisk design, radiating out from an exemplary, often spiritual center. In modern times, though, the streets are designed in a grid-like form in order facilitate the finding of addresses, and to create the efficient circulation required to move labor forces and consumers in ways that enable commerce. As a result, most of the time spent dwelling, seeing, and moving in urban space involves the rearticulation of those proprieties that constitute its proprietary, allegiant and commercial functions.

It follows, then, that to violate the everyday phenomenology in which these three functions are being rearticulated is to engage in an exemplary act of politicization. The political force of the Occupy Wall Street sit-in is clearly derived in part from its disruption of the familiar phenomenology of the street. We could render the effect in the terms Jacques Rancière suggests. Such political acts involve a 'repartitioning', or a change in the way that political is portioned-off from the non-political. However, unless some unusual markers are left behind to reference the event of the protest, that repartitioning is unlikely to endure. It is for this reason that I evoke the Czech experience.

Returning from a visit in the Czech countryside, I left the Prague train station on foot and tried to orient myself on the city map in order to find my way back to my hotel. In a short period of wandering, I was able to find my way because of the visibility of the Wenceslas statue at the top of the long city street, Vaclavske nam (mentioned above). However, while the statue of a Czech saint, associated with allegiance to an early founding period, commands respect for an early period in the historical consolidation of the people, the street also references and valorizes protest. When Soviet tanks invaded on August 21, 1968, to quell a national uprising, the bullets fired from the tanks left pockmarks in the national museum just above the Wenceslas statue. The Czechs have purposely left those pockmarks on the building to commemorate the street protests. On November 17, 1989, that same street was again a site of protest, part of the 'Velvet Revolution' that freed Czechoslovakia from Soviet domination. To mark that episode, flowers are frequently laid at the foot of the Wenceslas statue. Hence, in the Czech case, the phenomenology of the street includes enduring markers of the politics of the street.

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