

And the winner is.....The Community

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Abstract

In December, TIME Magazine declared that 2011's person of the year was – The Protestor. In that case, 2011's place of the year must have been – The City Square. The 20th Century diminished this urban typology, but during last year, as communities fought back against the ravages of global capitalism and political domination; the square was able to re-assert its credentials as the place of the people.

During the latter part of the 20th Century, while a small number of exemplar city centre squares continued to be attractive places, the vast majority acquired either an image of empty spaces or an unattractive picture as traffic islands. Communities need public spaces as places for assembly. They are the physical manifestation that each community is coherent and vibrant. Increasingly, it is being recognised that identity and place have enormous roles in reinforcing society.

This paper will review the origins of city centre squares; identify the reasons for their decline in the 20th Century, as part of commodifying and homogenising cities. It will consider the global pressures and the potential for re-establishing public squares as part of reversing the erosion of the public sector and the public realm; and reclaiming city centres from private global interests for the benefit of communities. The relationship of squares with symbolic buildings will be analysed, as significant icons of society; and finally some of the events of 2011 will be identified as a kind of revitalisation of public squares around the world. If cities can be re-established in a way that their buildings and spaces are meaningful to their people, then the winner is ...the community.

Biography

Professor Bob Giddings studied Architecture at Newcastle University winning two prizes in design competitions. A Master of Arts in Urban Studies was followed by a Doctorate in Architecture from the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies at the University of York. His research in Architectural Design Methodology and Urban Design has produced numerous conference papers around the world. He has published significant academic journal papers; and a book with Margaret Horne on architectural representation, titled *Artists' Impressions in Architectural Design*. In 2003, he was invited to be a member of the International Jury for the city centre design competition in Kragujevac, and has been Visiting Professor at Belgrade University Faculty of Architecture since 2004.

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Introduction

In December, TIME Magazine declared that 2011's person of the year was – The Protestor (TIME, 2011). In that case, 2011's place of the year must have been – The City Square. The 20th Century diminished this urban typology, but during last year, as communities fought back against the ravages of global capitalism and political domination; the square was able to re-assert its credentials as the place of the people. During the latter part of the 20th Century, while a small number of exemplar city centre squares continued to be attractive places, most became neglected and many were lost. This followed the decline in traditional community activities and the perception of comfort generated by internalising external spaces; coupled with the commodifying of city centres in which they were merely viewed as commercial and retail opportunities. Communities need public spaces as places for assembly. They are the physical manifestation that each community is coherent and vibrant. Increasingly, it is being recognised that identity and place have enormous roles in reinforcing society.

Origins and Decline of City Squares

Urban space has always been the place for the community rather than the individual and therefore public rather than private in nature. Historically, activities that occurred in urban spaces have been representative of that settlement. They were places where the framework of society was formulated, and where economic activity thrived. A common theme among urban pioneers is that the popularity of particular cities is derived, at least in part, from space that is defined by buildings rather than the commercial 20th Century model in which buildings are seen as artefacts dropped into space (Alexander, 1987). Squares are special urban spaces, provided for the benefit of the public. Initially, this facilitated ready defence against external aggression but the developing courtyard form offered more symbolic value. Of all types of urban space, squares are the most representative of the values of the societies that created them – the agora, forum, cloister, mosque courtyard are all examples. Traditional functions included:

Trade: buying and selling, depository and manufacture

Information: dissemination of news – place of social activity

Recreation: games, teaching, lunch and conversation

Protection: militia, training and drill, gathering in times of danger

Piety: holy inspiration and prayer, open space before a church for worship

(French, 1983)

However, Krier (1979) articulates a general feeling that towards the end of the 20th Century, these functions had either become outdated or changed location, and public squares had become synonymous with empty spaces. The loss of symbolism in particular, was greatly lamented by Giedion (1962). The empty spaces were often filled with vehicles and many squares presented an unattractive picture as traffic islands. Gehl and Gemzoe (2001) observed that the private car was invading public space. The loss of squares as places for citizens, seemed to hasten the commodifying of cities in which they were viewed merely as commercial and retail opportunities; and the downgrading of the public realm by privatisation.

Privatisation and Globalism

Modern landmarks started to reflect the values of commercialism, where offices and retail units replaced buildings and spaces that were more representative of society. A major concern about this kind of privatisation is that it enables anonymous and unaccountable organisations, who may be operating at a global scale, to usurp the local and accountable public sector. There also grew a perception, mainly emanating from the United States that public spaces were dangerous places and fear of crime began to deter people from using them (Woolley *et al*, 2004). This was exacerbated by concepts such as Central Business Districts. Outside working and shopping hours, these kinds of urban centres are deserted and therefore perceived as dangerous places. Whereas, in many popular

European cities, mixed use areas include residences above ground floor level; so that 24 hour occupation of buildings is maintained and natural surveillance provides for defensible space, reassuring those using city spaces at any time – in a similar way to Newman's (1973) proposals. Much of the negative perception was aimed at young people, and notions such as urban youth culture, clientele of the young with large disposable incomes (Worpole and Knox 2007), and youthful playscapes (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002) dominating city centres, encouraged increasing privatisation. At the same time city centre streets and squares became covered-in as shopping malls. They have the illusion of being public, especially as they occupy public space, but are actually operated by the private sector (Giddings et al., 2005). Unlike civic spaces, these malls are created to encourage the private act of consumption. They are designed for shopping and no other activity. For Minton (2006), even their private security does not even equate with safety, but just represents an additional degree of privatisation of public space and a further withdrawal of the state from its traditional territory. The case for building over city space is usually made in terms of increased comfort and convenience for the public, especially in relation to protection from the climate. However, collective outdoor activity has been as much under threat from the reduction of suitable spaces as any concern about the weather. Events such as outdoor markets, concerts, political meetings, charitable collections, theatre, religious gatherings, sporting events like road races and cycling, spectacles such as firework celebrations or laser shows, and many more functions – all have valid roles in 21st Century society. They are only hampered by the lack of suitable spaces and the ambivalence of authorities to encourage them.

In many cases, the process of privatisation happens through public-led urban regeneration initiatives, with resulting developments being owned and managed by private landlords who have the power to restrict access and control activities (Minton, 2006). It also offers the private sector another opportunity to operate a form of social control through segregation, and the attendant growth in private security enables a reduction in police costs. Private developments in public space provide further income for government through the tax base, as well as offering profitable ventures for private enterprise. What is left of public space is often rented-out for commercial purposes; and what has been termed café-creep (Kohn, 2004) spreads commercial interests even deeper into the public realm. Moreover, city centres are becoming increasingly similar with the same chain stores, eg Zara, Starbucks and McDonald's, appearing in ever growing privatised shopping space. Meanwhile, commercial leisure shows the same films anywhere in the world. This undermines the diversity of cities, reduces their culture, and assists the concept of cities as commodities. Success is perceived as a consumerist life-style based on a global economy. City economies have become less rooted in their regions and are therefore vulnerable to international pressures. As cities lose control of their economies, public infrastructure begins to decline as privatisation reduces public investment.

In addition, there are groups of new masters, to whom citizens find themselves subordinated. The United States of America is now regarded as the only world superpower. It also hosts the international levers of real power including The United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Chomsky, 2004). The elite of its government can bring major cities to a standstill through a visit by just one of the individuals involved. They take over the city – restricting commercial aeroplanes at the airport, closing streets and squares, issuing warnings that townspeople should remain in their houses, while helicopters patrol the skies (Chomsky, 2007). Global pressures are exemplified by this latest version of the master race, in which Joe Biden, Vice-President of the United States of America (see Figure 1) (United Press International, 2009) can bring the great city of Belgrade to a standstill and President Obama's visit to Egypt left him asking – where is Cairo's traffic problem? (see Figure 2) (Demotix, 2009). It is like a temporary invasion by a small number of superior beings who are so neurotic that they cannot be near normal people. It resembles life reflecting art, as the notion of superior beings dominating, but also being separate from a subordinate society, is well represented in literature and film, from the War of the Worlds onwards (Wells, 1898). Ostensibly, it is one person but he or she comes with an enormous entourage that controls the local law enforcement, which in turn controls the people. It is a long way from the democratic government that these individuals are supposed to represent.



Figure 1: Joe Biden



Figure 2: Cairo – where are the gridlocked streets?

The Importance of City Squares

There is a growing body of evidence that public space is able to deliver a range of benefits across economic, social and environmental spheres. A high quality public environment can have a significant impact on the economic life of urban centres. The presence of squares and other public spaces become vital business and marketing tools, and local companies are attracted by public places and these correspondingly attract customers, employees and services. Public space is open to all, and as such represents a democratic forum for citizens and society. It can bring communities together, providing meeting places, and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. This space can shape the cultural identity of an area; be part of its unique character, and provide a sense of place for local communities. One of the benefits of high quality public space is its potential for social activities (see Figures 3 and 4). Well-managed festivals and other events can have a very positive effect on the urban environment, drawing the community together and bringing economic, social and environmental benefits. They can, in particular, reintroduce the kind of civil society that has been lost in too many cities (Woolley et al., 2004). According to Mattson (1999) citizens have made it clear that they need space where they can persuade others of their viewpoints. Lack of public space is an insidious expression of lack of democracy. In the past, public space was invested with symbolic power that could evoke pride and public interaction. A crucial role for architecture and urban design in a democracy is the creation of public space that encourages civic interaction and discourse.

Even the explosion in electronic technologies is not a threat to public spaces. Although it is possible to work alone in any location with the latest computer-based gismo; even in the 1990s, it was being discovered that people prefer human contact and would willingly come to city centres for face to face meetings (Sassen, 1994; Castells, 1996). Public squares have important social and cultural roles, providing people with places to meet, rest or stop and talk. These activities evidently take place where outdoor areas are of suitable quality. They also provide important focal points, which demonstrate that visitors have reached the heart of the city.

The planned dispersal of public symbols in many countries is reducing the citizen's sense of self (Rogerson and Rice, 2009). In particular, transferral of the symbols of local government from the city centre to an anonymous hinterland, has not only reduces the influence of local government (Chandler, 2001) but has also reduces the sense of people's lived experience. Historic or otherwise, significant buildings need a context, and squares can be an expression of civic pride, historic power and importance (Chesterton, 1997). The significance of a renaissance of buildings and activities that define society cannot be over-stated; and the importance of bringing symbolic buildings back to prominent positions in city centres; and locating them in proper settings is at its core. This leads to the concept of a square for every symbolic building. Increasingly it is being recognised that identity and place have enormous roles in reinforcing society.



Figure 3: Chamberlain Square as a beach, and Figure 4: The Bullring, Birmingham UK

The whole concept of the public realm is that its very existence creates space for use by all. Human life, activity and culture depend on the environment (Davidson, 2000; Giddings *et al.* 2002). The layout of a city can encourage social interaction or act as a form of social control. In the latter case, if spaces for assemblies, rallies, events, entertainment etc., either do not exist or are so ill-conceived that they are not welcoming, then the inhabitants will live their lives independently or at best in small groups. Certain political organisations delight in this form of social control but it does not suit mature European societies. In Stuttgart for example, social interaction in public spaces is greatly encouraged (see Figures 5,6 and 7). It is suggested here that the kind of ethos, which enables useful public space to thrive, strengthens the identity of place and the deep psychological connections of the community with the place. This approach becomes all the more significant when the buildings are also considered. This city centre contains some powerful symbols of society (see Figure 8). The Rathaus (Town Hall), symbol of local government and political order, stands with its main entrance opening onto Markt-Platz – the physical and metaphorical focus of the city. The Altes-Schloss (Old Castle) is a symbol of history, longevity and past conflicts resulting from a less developed society. The Justiz Ministry symbolises law and order, and the Stiftskirch represents spiritual fulfilment. These three buildings define Schiller-Platz, only second in importance to Markt-Platz in the spatial hierarchy. The buildings around this square are the only ones in the centre to pre-date the 20th Century (Sterra, 1991), a reminder that they do not represent temporary or transient values. The square itself pays homage to the great German poet, indicating the significance of the Arts. Along Dorotheenstrasse is the Markthalle, symbol of trade and sustenance. The proximity of the church and market illustrates the two sides of human need ie spiritual and physical. The proposition is that the community is psychologically re-assured by the clarity of these symbols as its people move through the public spaces. There is a permanence of civilisation that is associated with the layout.



Figure 5, 6 and 7: Stuttgart Wine Festival Germany

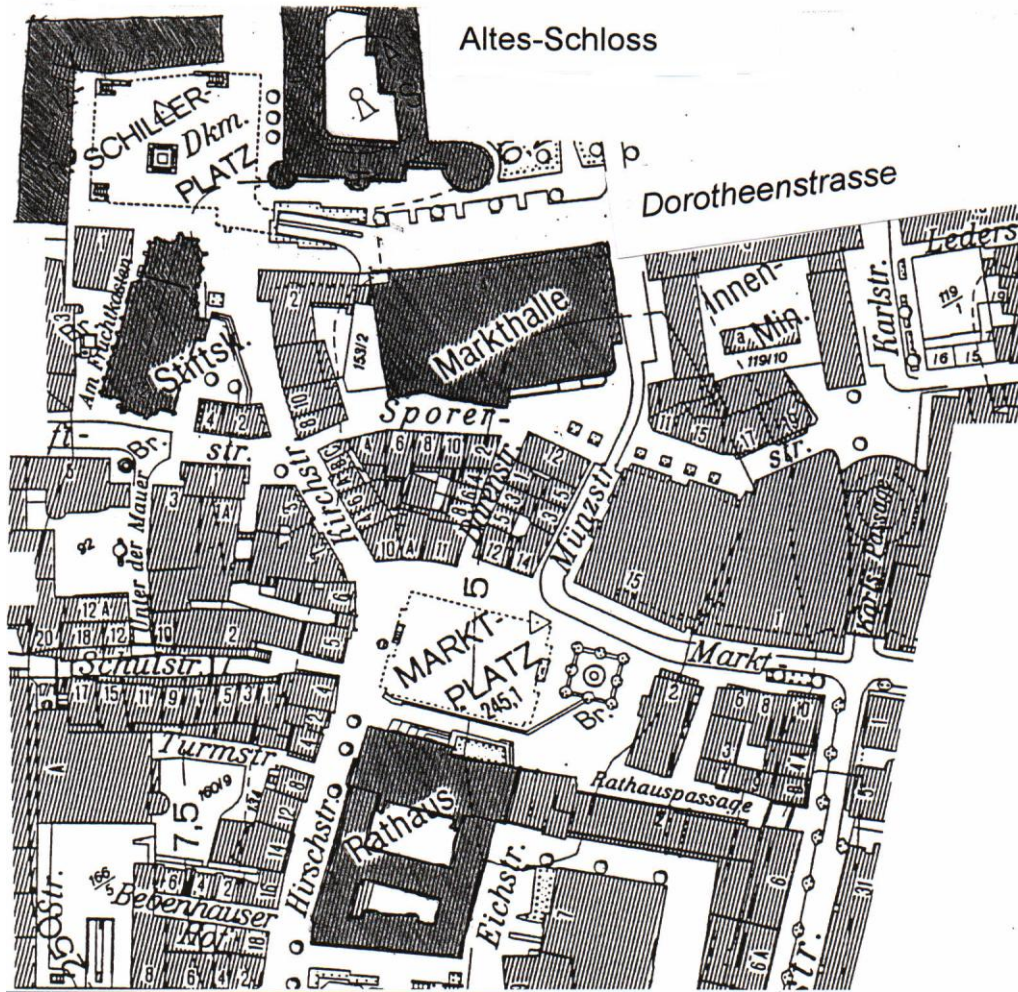


Figure 8: Plan of Stuttgart City Centre

Reintroduction of City Squares

While a not insignificant proportion of city space has been taken over by the global economy, sometimes almost hidden between the great blocks are the interstices of the city fabric. In these spaces local interests can thrive, un-noticed by their powerful neighbours. These locally-dependent uses can occupy much greater symbolic and material importance than indicated by their territorial size (McNeill, 2000). As nation states are increasingly subjugated by international power of all kinds, the more cities emerge as a driving force in the making of the new society. Local knowledge is invaluable as a means of counter-acting the invasion by business corporations, occupying meaningful space (Castells, 1994). However, with such an uneven contest in the battle for valuable city space, the locals may only ever hope for little victories. According to Morley and Robbins (1995) local collective action is needed against the standardisation of global culture, to reassert local independence against the abstract and bureaucratic power of transnational agencies. The appeal of a Europe of 'Heimats' (Applegate, 1990) (translated as the homeland or the local place) eg Basque, Lombard, Breton and Corsican, is one of these collective actions. The Basque country was united against Franco's fascist regime, centred on the cry of 'Basque Homeland and Freedom'. As the dominant force, Franco has been replaced by the global economy. In a context of declining Fordist industry – metal manufacture, steel production and shipbuilding - the people worked with the local government to modernise existing skills. The Basque machine-tool industry benefitted massively from successful small-firm partnerships between public, private and co-operative interests (Cooke and Imrie, 1989). The significance of the Basque experience is that places can be reclaimed from global interests. The latter are purely commercial and have no connection with communities and their needs. It is only a local public sector supported by a local private sector that recognises the importance of city squares.

In recent years, there have been numerous city centre pedestrianisation schemes throughout Europe, aimed primarily at rescuing pedestrians from the domination of motor vehicles. For example in 1981, there were approximately 1450 pedestrianised precincts in UK towns and cities (Roberts, 1981). By 1995, approximately 37% of principal city streets in the UK were pedestrianised compared with less than 5% in 1971 (Colliers Erdman Lewis, 1994). While in Copenhagen, there was 20,500 m² of pedestrianised space in 1968, 50,000 m² in 1986 and 71,000 m² in 1995 (Gehl, 2006). Pedestrianising city spaces is literally a step forward as it shows the public demand for them; but it has its limitations. First, large areas freed from vehicles can reduce options for drivers, and generate choking routes at the periphery. Secondly, streets designed for vehicles may not feel particularly comfortable for pedestrians. Thirdly, surrogate squares are often generated at road junctions, without the possibility to introduce spaces that really act as squares. The dimensions may not be appropriate, gaps between enclosing buildings too large, and so on. City design requires networks of properly conceived streets and squares – introducing pedestrians to symbolic buildings, culture, entertainment as well as commercial activity. The re-introduction of public squares needs to be viewed as part of reversing the erosion of the public sector and the public realm, and reclaiming city centres from private interests for the benefit of communities. The central idea is that people need spaces in which they can conceive of themselves as citizens committed to political debate and persuasion; and as neighbours with common educational and cultural needs. Without these spaces, citizenship wanes (Mattson, 1999).

A Recent Revival

During the last year, the re-emergence of the role of public space in the (re-) formation of societies has been the epitome of the old mantra – ‘think global act local’ as the ‘we are the 99%’ campaign, the international anti-capitalist groups aiming to limit corporate power, occupied many city squares around the world (see Figure 9). The organisation of the groups demonstrated the ironic notion that cyberspace – one of the fundamental tools of global placelessness provided the social networking that powered the anti-capitalist global reaction. Arguably for the first time, protesters felt the reassurance that they were not alone. City squares also acted as assembly points for political resistance. In 2011, over one million protestors occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo as part of an eighteen day revolt. They took ownership of the square (see Figure 10). It became so symbolic that the citizens returned after the uprisings to repair the pavements, remove graffiti and clean the area. As Hajer and Reindorp (2001) point out – the character of urban space is determined by those who occupy it, and all spaces are expressions of power relationships (Killina, 1998). Symbols do not have the same meaning for visitors as they do for citizens. A series of earthquakes caused huge destruction in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011. It is perhaps surprising that among the fires and floods, loss of homes and workplaces – the angst of the Canterburians was largely reserved for the damage to the city centre cathedral and its public square (Robinson, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusions

Although considered to be the most symbolic of public spaces, city squares had become substantially neglected by the end of the 20th Century. However, at the beginning of the 21st Century, their value to communities started to be expressed once again. In 2011, they became the backdrop and home to ‘The Protestor’, acclaimed by TIME magazine as the person of the year; in the fight against global capitalism and repressive political regimes. Urban space has always been the place for the community and therefore public rather than private in nature. Its decline more than coincided with the attempted domination of cities by privatisation and global capitalism. While it is true that the traditional functions of squares were becoming outdated or moved in location, the differentiation between the cause and effect of privatisation is difficult to decipher. Anonymous and unaccountable organisations, which may have been operating at a global scale, began to usurp the local and accountable public sector. At the same time, public city spaces began to be perceived as dangerous places, which in turn deterred people from using them. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, as cities became commoditised; outside working and shopping hours, urban centres were becoming deserted and thereby seen as dangerous. This is in sharp contrast to popular European cities where mixed use ensures continuous natural surveillance by different users. Even public-led urban regeneration resulted in developments that were owned and managed by private landlords. Some of the most insidious privatisation takes place where superficially attractive environments are created. Unfortunately, the coffee shop has given way to café-creep.



Figure 9: 'we are the 99%' campaign



Figure 10: Tahrir Square in Cairo

Throughout history, self-professed master races have been disastrous for normal people and places. The latest breed of world elite can bring major cities to a standstill in the most graphical form of globalism. This may be very damaging for the psyche of their citizens. It raises all sorts of questions about the rights of access, being and participation in city centres. It is also self-defeating as the new masters never see cities as they really are. As the 21st Century unfolds, there is a growing body of evidence that public spaces and city squares in particular, can deliver a range of benefits across economic, social and environmental spheres. Meetings, social ties, cultural identity, unique character, community events, symbolic power, civic pride, public interaction and above all democracy – are all enhanced by the presence of city squares; and the place for public symbols is in the city centres and not some anonymous hinterland. The relationship between a symbolic building and its square is at the heart of cultured and civilised society. Deep psychological connections between people and place are enhanced as citizens walk from city square to city square, each containing a symbol of society.

The Basque case is very significant in its response to decaying global industrialisation. It demonstrates the need for a local public sector supported by a local private sector in the battle for place, against globalism. The car can be perceived as an instrument of globalism, with its inhabitants isolated from society by a brand name. Pedestrianisation, as a means of rescuing pedestrians from the domination of motor vehicles, enables people to be recognised and interact with one another; provided the city squares are properly conceived and are not just part of paved-over road network. During the last year, the re-emergence of city squares in the (re-) formation of societies has been the epitome of the old mantra – ‘think global act local’. Groups of citizens occupied their squares, while using social networking, one of the tools of global placelessness to communicate with one another – this provided local action with global re-assurance. Headed by the Arab Spring, city squares also became the assembly points for political resistance. Meanwhile in earthquake torn Christchurch, citizens with devastated homes and destroyed workplaces mourned for the damage to their city centre cathedral and its public square.

If all cities can be re-established in a way that their buildings and spaces are meaningful to their people, then the winner is ...the community.

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