Public Spaces, Private Spaces, and the Right to the City

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ABSTRACT

Two arguments have recently strongly influenced the theory and practice of planning: (i) public space is what basically characterises any city (the citizen’s right to the city is first and foremost a claim on public space); (ii) public space is crucial because it provides the physical fulcrum for public interaction and political debate. This article takes a critical look at these two ideas, highlighting: (i) that private spaces have also crucially contributed (and continue to do so) to defining and determining what a city is – the city cannot be conceived without considering both public and private spaces and the crucial synergy between these two spheres; (ii) that the public sphere does not come into being solely in public spaces (as testified by the Internet); furthermore, public spaces perform other roles and functions (besides making debate and confrontation possible), and these various roles may at times clash with each other. All these aspects suggest a more balanced approach to the understanding of urban spaces and their importance.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, Internet, Planning, Private Space, Public Space, Public Sphere, Right to the City

INTRODUCTION: RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES

In recent years, a large body of analysis and research has focused on the relationship between public space and the right to the city. As well-known, the concept of the “right to the city” is fluid, complex, and open to interpretation. This is certainly also due to the fact that Lefebvre, the author who first introduced this concept, does not provide a clear definition of it. As Purcell states (2002, p. 103): “Lefebvre’s right to the city raises more questions than it answers”. See also Brown (2013, p. 957): “Despite popular acclaim, the content of a right to the city remains elusive”. As a consequence, the concept itself has been interpreted in many different ways (McCann, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Parnell & Pieterse, 2010; Coggin & Pieterse, 2012; Chiodelli, 2013; Kuymulu, 2013; Purcell, 2014).

However, one of the most common interpretations is certainly the one which maintains that the right to the city is first and foremost a right to public space. As Mitchell (2003, p. 5)
writes: “The right to the city … is dependent upon public space”; in particular: “Debates and struggles over who has access to public space, and who is excluded, define the ‘right to the city’” (ibid., p. 6). Di Masso (2012, p. 138) also writes: “public spaces can be conceived as the natural arena for the enactment of the right to the city”. He continues: “Public life importantly depends on social and political contexts that make public spaces work for the common good. The public space reflects social exchanges between individual and collective affairs, featuring personal rights that are both politically and spatially grounded, such as the ‘right to the city’” (ibid., p. 124; see also Low, 2000).

Public space is considered crucial principally because it guarantees the political dimension of city life: in particular, because it provides a theatre for discussion on public and civic matters, for organising debates, demonstrations, protests, etc. This political propensity is considered the most distinctive feature of mankind. The notion originates from ancient texts by Aristotle whereby man is above all a “political animal” in that he/she is a being whose nature is principally expressed through civic debate and collective confrontation.2

See for instance Kohn (2013, p. 107): “Public (state owned) space is the most likely setting for polemical scenes that start conversations about the public good. Public space should not be viewed only as a site for leisure or recreation but also as a place where people can come together to meet as citizens rather than as consumers or clients. Public space is a place where individuals can unite in order to overcome the disempowering effect of isolation”. It is “a site where the conflict between opposing interests is made visible and subject to dispute” (ibid.). See also Di Masso (2012, p. 124): “The idea that public space has an intrinsically political significance seems to be widely supported”.

To our mind, this perspective is only partially convincing. What the above-quoted authors do is seek to foreground the political dimension and the right to the city as specifically located in public spaces. But they do so in a way that, while obviously recognizing the role of other urban (private) places and of other virtual (private) spaces, seems to belittle them. In this article we will defend a partially different perspective—not an opposite view, but simply a perspective that attempts to enrich and expand a certain dominant approach.

While accepting that public space is certainly crucial for the city, we will in particular argue that: (i) private spaces have likewise crucially contributed (and continue to do so) to defining and determining what a city is—indeed, the city cannot be conceived without considering both public and private spaces and the crucial synergy between these two fields; (ii) the public sphere does not come into being solely in public spaces (as testified by the Internet); (iii) furthermore, public spaces perform other fundamental roles and functions (besides making debate and confrontation possible), and these various roles may at times clash with each other.

This article is divided into four sections. In the first section we underscore the important role played (also) by private spaces in the city; in the second section we consider the diverse functions that a public space may assume; in the third section we highlight some fundamental implications of the preceding discussion, returning to the concept of the right to the city; the fourth section sets out our conclusions. In general, our discussion will focus prevalently on (Western) contemporary cities.3

**BOTH PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES ARE JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING THE CITY WHAT IT IS**

The distinction between public and private space is usually drawn on the basis of certain criteria, such as *ownership, access, or use* (Carmona et al., 2010). Here we will dwell mainly on the first of these three factors, namely ownership. We are obviously not claiming that ownership is “the whole story” when we speak of the difference between public and private spaces.