Part

I

PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC LIFE

Part I examines the origins and current realities of public life and public space in America. Although there has been much discussion of the apparent decline in public life, we suggest that the recent public space renaissance demonstrates that it is simply taking new forms. The expansion in the number and types of public places seen today, including new commercial spaces, community gardens, greenways, and preserved natural areas, shows how changes in the ways we live together continue to shape the design and management of places. However, some motives for making public space do not adequately reflect user needs. As a result, there have been failures in design and management and much criticism. In the opening chapter, we discuss these issues and outline the essential values to consider in making public spaces.

Chapter 2 reviews the changing historical balance between public and private life, showing that important public life still occurs in public spaces. The key forces shaping public life are discussed, together with their effects on public space. Public life and public space change in response to these forces and, through its various transformations, public life continues to be central to our sense of community and culture.

In Chapter 3, we trace the evolution of specific types of public spaces such as streets, squares, playgrounds, malls, and community open spaces. The emphasis is on recent developments in public space as they have opened up and dispersed, with specialized types for different groups. The chapter concludes with a typology of the major public spaces that exist today.
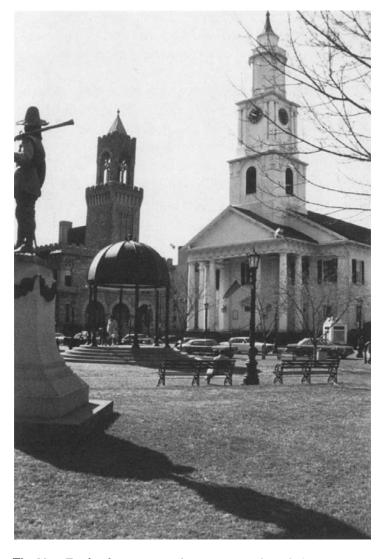
Chapter

1

THE VALUE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Public space is the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds. The streets, squares, and parks of a city give form to the ebb and flow of human exchange. These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart to the more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, the nodes of communication, and the common grounds for play and relaxation. There are pressing needs that public space can help people to satisfy, significant human rights that it can be shaped to define and protect, and special cultural meanings that it can best convey. These themes, to be explored and developed in this book, reveal the value of public space and lay the groundwork for improved design and management.

In all communal life there is a dynamic balance between public and private activities. Within this balance, different cultures place differing emphases on public space. Compare the Latin cultures of southern Europe, with their display of wealth and civic and religious power in palaces, town halls, and churches that face on main streets and squares, with the Muslim cultures of North Africa, with their limited number of public spaces apart from markets and shopping streets and yet rich design and expression in the more private domains of home, mosque, and Koranic school. Although the public–private balance is unique to each culture, it will shift under the influence of cultural exchange, technology, changing political and economic systems, and the ethos of the time.

In the relatively brief history of the United States, several such shifts have already occurred. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the functional needs of town and city required the building of roads and later paved streets, often laid out for convenience on a grid pattern. These simple spaces were the primary settings for public life, focused on daily commerce. Streets were complemented in New England by the common green

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The New England common with its communal symbols: church, town hall, band-
stand, and monument to the Revolutionary War. (Stephen Carr)

and elsewhere by town squares and public markets, taking their inspira-
tion from London prototypes or, in the Southwest, from Spain. These com-
mons and squares were, as in Europe, fronted by town halls and churches
and, together with markets, became natural meeting grounds for the pop-
ulace. In the nineteenth century, again influenced by European develop-
ments, Americans imported the boulevard and the landscaped public park,
both to celebrate the growing wealth and leisure of the upper classes and
to bring more beautiful and healthful settings to the working class, con-
fined in our growing and crowded industrial cities. Later came the reform

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movement, with its emphasis on play settings for the children of the work-ing poor, and still later the spread of small sports parks and playgrounds to serve the growing recreational needs of the middle classes, with their increased leisure time.

As middle-class and working-class people have moved to the suburbs, where they have private outdoor spaces, their way of living and use of public space has changed. On the functional side, isolated travel in auto-mobiles and an obsession with traffic flow have diminished and degraded the life of the street. The impersonal shopping center and commercial strip have replaced downtown as a setting for communal life. For these suburbanites, the backyard, the high school playfield or tennis court, and the remaining undeveloped countryside have replaced the public park as settings for family relaxation, while the television and the video cassette recorder have tended to keep the family at home, even for entertainment.

This suburbanization, together with the increasing difficulties of the city for those who remained, have led some social scientists to lament a decline in public life, suggesting that the balance in our society is shifting strongly toward the security and pleasures of private life (Fischer, 1981;

Social realists identify the shopping mall as the new center of communal life. (Ste-phen Carr)

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Lofland, 1973; Sennett, 1977). Even among the inner-city poor, known in the past for a vigorous public life, the home – when there is one – can become a haven against the threats of increasingly dangerous streets. More recently, views of absolute decline have been tempered by the idea of a transformation of public life into new forms of association and commu-nication that do not depend on primary relationships in traditional public places (Brill, 1989a; Lofland, 1983). Socializing at the PTA or the local church or temple and communicating through local newspapers or cable television might be seen as replacing dialogue in the public square. Even middle-class teenagers hang out at the shopping center, rather than the neighborhood street corner, where they could meet familiar adults.

A RESURGENCE IN PUBLIC LIFE AND PUBLIC SPACE?

If one looks away from these particular social trends and examines the urban environment itself, a strikingly different picture comes into focus. Since World War II, there has been a proliferation of public space types to meet the needs of an increasingly stratified and specialized public life. Not only are public spaces proliferating under the demands of different subgroups in our society, but most of these new spaces seem to be well

Since World War II, successful new spaces have often had commercial purposes. Ghirardelli Square, San Francisco, developed in the 1960s. (Stephen Carr)

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A fine fall day brings people to the Church Street Marketplace, in the center of
Burlington, Vermont. (Stephen Carr)

used (Glazer & Lilla, 1987; Lennard & Lennard, 1984). In the past thirty
years hundreds of new parks, pedestrian malls, plazas, atria, and com-
munity gardens have been built in all parts of the country with very large
public and private investments (Brambilla & Longo, 1977; Heckscher &
Robinson, 1977; Whyte, 1988). Older parks, playgrounds, and public
squares, allowed to deteriorate in the latter part of this century, are now
being renewed and revived in many cities. Farmers markets are increas-
ingly popular and, in a few vanguard cities, public market structures have
been renewed or created to house them. Street vending and performing
are back, and not only in the contrived settings of "festive marketplaces."
Outdoor cafés are enormously popular.

Beginning with the pedestrian mall movement in the late 1950s, most
American cities have been striving to improve their downtown retail and
office areas by creating new walking streets, parks, and plazas, and add-
ing trees where possible. Although some of these malls have been eco-
nomic failures, evidence from San Francisco, New York, Boston, Seattle,
Portland, Chicago, and many other cities suggests that people are using
downtown parks and plazas in increasing numbers (Cooper Marcus &
Francis, 1990; Frieden & Sagalyn, 1989; Whyte, 1988). The most recent
development in this renewal effort is the so-called festival marketplace, a
kind of in-town shopping center with an emphasis on boutiques, eating,

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and entertainment, supporting a new form of public life known as recreational shopping.

Many cities are struggling to reclaim old industrial waterfronts for public access and use. Some, including Boston, Baltimore, Seattle, and Philadelphia have already accomplished major transformations. Often these efforts start with annual waterfront fairs and festivals, drawing thousands to experience the magic of light, water, and people enjoying themselves. Many localities are also attempting to capture remaining "urban wilds," unbuilt wetlands and other areas, that can become nature reserves, opened to walkers and wildlife. In a few towns, efforts are under way to link such areas with town trails for jogging and cycling enthusiasts (Goodey, 1979). In the older neighborhoods, the community garden movement is booming. Record attendance at arboretums, garden fairs, neighborhood fairs, and festivals provides further evidence of people's desire to gather in enjoyable settings (Francis, 1987c).

What seem contradictory trends, the decline of older forms of public life and the resurgence in public space, instead may be complementary. At least for the middle classes of our society, nearby public space is no longer so necessary as a relief from crowded living and working environments nor as an essential setting for the social exchange that helped to hold

Detroit's Hart Plaza was designed as a festival space on the river. (Stephen Carr)

The resurgence of public space, where different people rub elbows. Gallery Place, Washington, D.C. (Stephen Carr)

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together the old "urban villages" with their social support systems (Gans, 1962). Instead, public spaces supporting particular types of public life become freely chosen settings for family and group enjoyment and for individual development and discovery. In the process of choosing the spaces for their public lives, people can also choose to experience other groups in settings that are conducive to relaxed exchange. Successful multicultural spaces add to the richness of the city as a learning environment and give hope to the American dream of cultural integration, or at the very least cultural understanding.

REASONS AND RESULTS IN PUBLIC SPACE DEVELOPMENT

The primary motives for making or remaking public spaces should be viewed against this changing panorama of public life in urban America. Goals most often cited by the producers and managers of public spaces include public welfare, visual enhancement, environmental enhancement, and economic development. Not always stated but also key in many settings is enhancement of the public image of the corporate or government producers and managers. The relative importance of these goals for the producers has shifted in response to the changing demands of various publics and to political and economic changes in cities. From the user's perspective, the resulting space may create a different set of benefits, some of which may not have been intended.

Public welfare has always been a primary motivation for creating or improving public space. The Greeks and Romans first paved and straightened streets to provide for movement and safety and they built their agoras and forums to provide convenient and noble centers for public life (Mumford, 1970). Still today these are the purposes most often used to justify street and plaza improvements. Parks, from their origins, have been seen as "the lungs of the city," substitute countryside where exposure to fresh air and sunlight, with the opportunity to stroll freely and relax, would serve as an antidote to the oppressive physical and psychological conditions of city life (Cranz, 1982; Heckscher & Robinson, 1977). Later, in the reform movement of the late nineteenth and early early twentieth centuries, this motive became even more explicit and we still build our parks and playgrounds to provide "recreational opportunities." Now advocacy groups often seek to define the dimensions of public welfare more narrowly.

Visual enhancement is also an ancient and honorable motive that raises new questions in our own social context. Roman emperors sought to outdo their predecessors in the provision of more and grander forums, basilicas, and baths to support public life in high style. In the Renaissance, Italian

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The perfect urban setting for grand entrances also works for just hanging out.
Spanish Steps, Rome. (Stephen Carr)

architects and sculptors, when given the opportunity, created straight streets
and piazzas, like outdoor rooms, as grand settings for the life of the times,
perhaps reaching an apex in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century.
Americans have tried their hand at such urban enhancement, seeking to
beautify central cities and major streets through unified designs of public
space coupled, sometimes, with controls over adjacent private develop-
ment. How to achieve broad aesthetic appeal in a democratic and cultur-
ally diverse society is a question to be explored in later chapters.

The goal of environmental enhancement is closely related, because trees
and greenery are also considered by most people to be aesthetically as well
as psychologically important (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). This objective is
more often used for larger-scale intervention, such as the acquisition of
land for nature reserves, the creation of town trails, or widespread tree
planting. It is likely that the growing public consciousness of environmen-
tal degradation, and of how human settlements relate to the larger ecosys-
tems of which they are a part, will create political and economic support
for more sensitive urban development, emphasizing preservation and en-
hancement of natural landscape, as well as the creation of new open space
and the "greening" of existing environments (Hough, 1984; Sale, 1990;
Spirn, 1984). The threat of global warming has already led to proposals