



Delft University of Technology

The Public Interior and its Purpose: a re-assessment

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Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
La fabrique de l'infrastructure sociale vol.1 — Défis contemporains dans la ville post-Covid

Citation (APA)

Pimlott, M. (2022). The Public Interior and its Purpose: a re-assessment. In M. Berger, G. Grulois, B. Moritz, & S. Van Hollebeke (Eds.), *La fabrique de l'infrastructure sociale vol.1 — Défis contemporains dans la ville post-Covid: Metrolab Logbook* (Vol. 1, pp. 35-45). Metrolab.

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La fabrique de l'infrastructure sociale

vol.1 — Défis contemporains
dans la ville post-Covid

Metrolab Logbook

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Préface	5
Avant-propos	9
Introduction	13
Les infrastructures sociales et l’avenir de la vie civique	21
— Traduction de l'exposé d'Eric Klinenberg	
The public interior and its purpose: a re-assessment	35
— Mark Pimlott	
L'enclave inclusive.	
Potentiels et risques d’une intériorisation de la vie publique	47
— Mathieu Berger, Benoît Moritz	
Crise sanitaire, crise des lieux publics ?	
Une approche philosophique à partir de l'exemple des intérieurs publics	57
— Céline Bonicco-Donato	
Welfare space as social infrastructure	73
— Maria Chiara Tosi	
La programmation des infrastructures sociales à l’épreuve de la contagion	85
— Bruno Yvin	
Quel avenir pour les infrastructures sociales à Bruxelles après le Covid ?	101
— Justine Harzé, Tom Sanders, Miguel Vanleene	
Conclusion. Vers une politique d’infrastructure sociale	113
Bibliographie	123
Colophon	126

The Public Interior and its Purpose: a re-assessment

Mark Pimlott

Introduction

After COVID-19, might one think of the public interior differently? Might the public interior treat the people who use it differently? There is a long history of the public interior shaping or conditioning its subjects and forming subjectivities. Rarely do those subjects challenge the projections of public interiors or alter their conditions. One might imagine (or hope) that the orderly submission to consumption or other subtler exhibitions of power might be diverted by other possibilities, by, say people-watching with civility, or by associations that are independent of prescribed modes of behaviour. One is largely aware that the public interior becomes public by some common consent – it is taken to be public – when it is in fact most often a privately owned, operated and secured space, which implicitly filters its public, and very often does so explicitly, affording limited *enfranchisement* or denying it entirely as it does so.

The public interior, even if truly public, is a space that has demonstrated a long tradition of being oriented toward spectacle: that of power, and consumption. In both instances, privately – or publicly – owned, people are conditioned to accept the public interior's message, which is inevitably portrayed as natural, transparent, conventional, and uncontroversial. What might happen if the abundance of determining conditions is redirected or profoundly altered? What might people demand, or welcome, as they find or desire themselves to be more self-determining subjects?

What's the public interior?

To answer these questions, it is probably necessary to establish more precisely what the public interior is, or might be, before we begin to discuss a condition that is 'post-Covid'. Thereafter, we might discuss both what we would like the public interior to be, and possible or likely directions it might be subject to.

In my view, the public interior is an interior realm that citizens take to be public, in which they can appear to others, as themselves, in public. I must qualify this, as this appearance pertains to those who feel themselves enfranchised as citizens, in every space. In the public interior, an agreement is assumed, but not necessarily present between those that own the interior, and those who use it. But the fact that such a space is taken to be public implies an order of freedom, which is in fact presented as an *aura of freedom*.

Today, we might think of the public interior, the one that we miss in our period of COVID-19-induced isolation, as describing the station, the transportation hub, the museum, the theatre, the library, the shopping centre, even the office. These are all scenes for our gathering, our movements, our association, our appearance.



Figure 2. Kulturhuset, Stockholm. Reading hall. Peter Celsing, 1978. Photo Holger Ellgaard, Source: Kulturhuset archive, Stockholm City Archives

Now, with the majority of these spaces either closed, or accessible in a limited way, the matter of our appearance is immaterial. Our appearance is dangerous. We do not appear. It becomes difficult to imagine how we might appear in the future. The distances we are obliged to maintain to keep ourselves and others safe from the pandemic are either imagined to remain in some form in the future, or disappear, and that things return to normal. This moment marks a pause in

our consideration of the public interior, obliging us to ask what the public interior is, and does; and what we want it to be: how we desire our agency to be in the future.

The public interior, as it first appears and as it has developed, has used an aura of freedom in order to impose degrees of coerced or controlled behaviour for specific purposes through a range of appearances and organisational formats. In my book, *The Public Interior as Idea and Project*, I described the public interior's appearances and organisational formats as abiding by a set of themes in their proposition and design, namely, the garden, the palace, the ruin, the shed, the machine and the network. The realisation having been that public interior had either proposed itself in modernity as an allusive condition, in which its imagery communicated certain fictions of engagement for its users; or, that the public interior proposed itself as a device or system, whose organization conditioned its subjects' experience and relations.

In both propositions, the public interior seemed to convey the intention of forming its subjects and their subjectivities, situating those subjects within specific relations of power. The public interior could be observed as offering the most concentrated scenes of power relations, leavened by fictions of freedom, enfranchisement, and agency.

The condition of interior: history and context

The public interior is not an isolated feature of the city. It has come to exist within a *condition of interior*, an ecology of agreements (or impositions) that are ideological or in the service of power, communicating power relations. In a system of *laissez-faire*, freemarket or neoliberal capitalism, this condition is continuous, affecting all spaces of life, from the home to the spaces of production and consumption. The condition of interior pervades everything. Within the setting of capitalism, this condition is presented as natural, transparent: a free space offering freedom through a freedom to choose, a freedom to consume. The condition of interior is articulated most intensely in the public interior, regardless of building type.

In my book, *Without and Within: essays on territory and the interior*, I wrote about the development of a 'continuous interior', and the relation between the imagining and claiming of territory, specifically in the American West, and the ensuing development of endless or continuous interior spaces, largely predicated on consumption, from the shopping mall to the airport and museum.

That interior was at first an imaginary, ideological space, which, through a system of appropriation, the conquest of land, the elimination of its indigenous population, its surveying, parceling, claiming, extraction of resources, mythification, acquisition of representational tropes and devices and patterns of occupation, yielded building types (and interior types) that perfectly represented its fusion of control and illusory freedoms.

This American version of a condition of interior echoed and refined the colonialist strategies of territorialisation and urbanisation practiced by Spain,

Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Britain and Belgium. The setting out of settlements and land was intended to establish a projection of ideas of home over indigenous populations, rendering them subjects to another order, creating other conditions for their existence, drawing them to the body of the mother country (or company).

The specifically American version of this, which assumed a particular nature to the landowner, was a product of modernity, a rationalisation beyond the measure of the body that would control other bodies, at the expense of the bodies of the other. Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance (1785) sets out a system, a grid, which defines the survey of territory, its measure, its setting out, the division of land, the establishment of settlement, the internal organization of the settlement and its institutions, the parcelling of land and lot sizes within, and, by extension, the measure of standard building materials. All of this set without having laid eyes on the land itself. And, naturally, without acknowledging the existence of those who live there.

The space of the continent became the continent's interior, managed by a federal department of the interior. In the 1860s it became a space of exploration, a space of war, a space of conquest, a space of exploitation and extraction, a space of myth, and an apparently infinite space of embodied ideology.

At this moment, the myth of the American space as an interior depended on *images*, those of Yosemite: a space 'discovered' by white European Americans was a garden of Eden, proof of God's anointment of the American project, legitimating its claim upon the domain of the other (who it eliminated with vigour), and which, through rhetoric (the doctrine of Manifest Destiny) transformed its ideological groundwork into a construction of truths that justified all further exploitation, and guaranteed a 'free space' for the superior, conquering, white, European settler. Eden, of course, is an interior, a walled Garden (*hortus conclusus*).

A *condition of interior* furthermore informed the urban project, wherein homesteads, settlement and cities across the land, all marked by the imprint of the Jeffersonian grid and its promise of independence and self-realisation secured through work, were further legitimated by the image of nature within the city. The urban parks of Frederick Law Olmsted, who also had advocated for Yosemite to be made a national park, reinforced the notion of the city being a blessed interior, of a piece with the territory it dominated and economically exploited, and that that territory, presented as an image, was also part of this interior.

The mall as public interior

In the United States, this is the idea that the public interior inherited, and ultimately expressed (for this is a long and complex story) through the form of the indoor shopping centre, or more commonly, the mall. The first of these, the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, developed and designed by Victor Gruen, was located at a key point within a network of motorways serving a

large suburban region, that connected them to the larger region and the city. The Southdale Center's imagery was a fusion of 'village square' filtered through the lens of media and design, and corporate lobby, as if to make the point that the sites of white-collar work and white-collar consumption were inexorably bound together.

Work, dwelling and leisure (entertainment consumption) were unified, in the words of the architect Kevin Roche, by the 'umbilical cord' of the motorway and telecommunications systems, reinforcing the territory's status as ideological and experienced interior.

The interior of the 'town square', with benches, sculptures, fountains, projected 'safety'. This was reinforced by a proprietary security team, who would clear out 'undesirables'. These were most often black and brown people, and youth. The shaping of the public was a restriction on who could legitimately be treated as a subject. The space of the mall was for the use and edification of white, blue- and white-collared workers. The town square bore resemblance to the new office lobbies in urban downtowns, drawing both together in their representations of a coherent urban and social order.

Modernity and urbanization: from the passage to the Palace

It is noteworthy that condition of interior emerges at the beginnings of modernity, detached, as the architectural historian Leonardo Benevolo remarked, from the direct experience or measure of the human body. Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance perfectly represents this turn from the body to operative system. The public interior, as we have come to imagine it, also emerged in modernity, first, as an ordered realm idealising the street in the form of the *passage*, offering dream-worlds to its users.

The *passage* prefigured what would happen to Paris under the re-structuring and rebuilding – or more precisely, urbanisation – of Louis Napoléon III and Baron Georges- Eugène Haussmann, in which the city itself was rendered an ordered, controlled and equipped interior; a machine for forming urban subjects and subjectivities.

The purpose of urbanisation, as defined by Ildefons Cerdà, was to at once rationalize urban organization, extend that organisation over the whole territory (thereby producing a total urban condition, and eliminating any distinction between city and countryside), and shaping its occupants as urban subjects, thereby producing subjects who conform or behave 'predictably'.

The public interior as we have come to understand it – a space for urban masses, as opposed to the intimate dream-worlds of individuals within the *passage* – is a space that has been forged within processes consistent with those rationalisations of the modern state, its institutions and its representations, or, more precisely, its displays. The Crystal Palace, designed for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London by Joseph Paxton – the first Universal Exposition – was vast enough to contain thousands of visitors and a mature tree in Hyde Park.



Figure 3. Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, London. Transept from the Grand Entrance, Souvenir of the Great Exhibition. Sir Joseph Paxton, 1851. McNeven, J., Ackermann & Co. (publisher), © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crystal_Palace_interior.jpg

It was a display of artefacts from all over the world, with an emphasis on the spread, capacities and power of the British Empire. The Crystal Palace, beyond displaying artefacts (and people) displayed power, in an environment that promised transparency, access, and an image of a world, while hardly being there. It offered a notion of freedom, and elation at the immensity and accommodation of the imperial project.

It is known that Aristide Boucicaut admired it and used it as inspiration for the construction of the *grand magasin* Au Bon Marché in Paris (Boileau, Eiffel) because of the universal accessibility to things – consumer goods – apparently afforded by the deep, light-infused interior; an interior that suggested that it simply contained a portion of the world. Here, the public interior, like that of the passage, is also a privately-owned interior. It is the promise of freedom – in this case, freedom to consume – that makes it feel so, to be taken to be public by its users. The interior also suggested that it was a kind of palace, but in this case, one open to a truly general public, who were for the first time to see the prices of items openly shown. The public, positioned in relation to artefacts so that they might be purchased, were transformed into consumers.

The range of *soi-disant* public interiors of Paris returned to a singular morphology, whether market, train station, library, museum or exhibition hall.

The shed of cast-iron and glass was favoured by Louis Napoléon III as the image of the Parisian metropolis. All of these reinforced the image of the public interior, each reinforced the identity of the metropolitan subject. The spectacle of the public interior could be seen as one with the momentous changes to the fabric of the whole city of Paris, and changes to the urban subject, who the city was effectively creating: a working, producing, consuming subject.

This change, tied to the creation of wealth through the industrialised powers' exploitation of colonies' resources, was reflected in the proliferation of universal exhibitions, following on from the Great Exhibition of 1851. Paris held a series of these up until 1937, and in the nineteenth century, these celebrated industry, technology and machines, which were displayed using the same methods: vast space, transparency, abundance, spectacle. The great iron and glass shed was the predominant figure of the *exposition universelle*, held many times in Paris, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The structural engineering of the spaces was spectacular, but so was the arrangement of artefacts, notably industrial machinery.

The spaces of the exhibitions were intentionally overwhelming; they also shared a kinship with the new spaces that represented the metropolitan aspect of the city.

Elsewhere, the public interior, as exemplified by the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milano, seemed to be an environment that resembled the city itself, yet sustained under glass like an exotic plant; an ideal street, a hypertrophied passage, which assured its users, the citizens of Milano, that despite the ruptures between an industrialised present and an artisanal past, that their most public space was at the centre of the world. The public interior, here, and in Paris, offered fictions, or even fantasies, for citizens to engage and identify with. These, too, formed the urban subject.

When one looks at the history of the public interior, one sees that it has, frequently, communicated in order to inculcate; it has overdetermined in order to affect behaviours and agreement. For most of its history, it has traded in promises of freedom, enfranchisement, and self-realisation. That history has demonstrated that the public interior has been a space of control, a space of ideology, a space that reinforces power relations, or of the representation of ideas or pretenses that sustain that dominant ideology. It has, as a consequence, been readily susceptible to programmes of capitalism. Within, values are established, and a form of contract is assented to between 'user' and 'owner', in which the owner sets the terms, determines the representational schema, the worldview. Within the framework of capitalism, there is endless capacity for accommodation, and disruptive elements are often, in the end, absorbed (if it can prove to be financially exploitable). There is an extraction logic to the spaces of capitalism, which the public interior is the supreme representative.

The paradigmatic public interior, whether we like it or not, is the shopping mall, devised at the height of American post-war capitalism (a collaboration of state and industry) having developed on from the fusion of *passage* and *grand magasin*, the latter deriving from the colonialist (empire) propaganda of the great exhibition's and *expositions universelles* 'crystal palaces' and their spectacles

of extraction and exploitation. The mall is complemented by or continuous with the corporate lobby; the lobby and the mall are fused in the museum, and the transport hub.

What's the future of the public interior?

We are faced with a condition, now, in which the diffusion of consumer contact with both online vendors and technology 'empires' (Shoshana Zuboff) extends the reach of the market, the extraction of information which perpetuates control. One can imagine a great clamour to maximise this extraction of information from those companies that benefit from its monetisation. There is a danger that the enthusiasm around 'smart cities' will yield even more control to those technology interests who can 'make everything easier', Google perhaps the most prominent among them, their Hudson Yard development in New York and cancelled Sidewalk project in Toronto offering models as to what one might expect of the future of the public interior. When companies such as these make themselves indispensable to municipal authorities who cannot afford to control the various forces in play, or form the policies to control them, then one sees a very serious erosion of the idea of 'the public sphere' and, for that matter, democracy itself.

COVID-19 measures have served to put a pause on the use of the public interior, its aura, and our contact with it. In the space of appearance (Arendt, 1963), we do not appear. Instead, the public interior has temporarily become a pariah space, with few people, most attempting to maintain their distance, using it only as they strictly need. Retail facilities, which tend to dominate experience or serve as its omnipresent white noise are largely closed, or operating on diminished schedules. The relative absence of this activity would seem to recall an earlier, simpler time. You may remember a variety of anachronisms: with fewer to no airline flights came quiet, clean skies. One could listen to birdsong.

After the pause, what may come? There is an assumption that COVID-19 has broken all patterns, and that nothing will be the same again. It may well indeed be different: many commercial concerns have been put out of business; security measures will probably remain in either aggressive or vestigial forms long after the pandemic has been suppressed.

What might happen if the abundance of determining conditions is redirected or profoundly altered, and that true engagement, and agency, was possible? This is not an unlikely scenario: one notes that many commercial interests, particularly in the catering and retail industries, have been badly affected by the damage caused to the economy by the coronavirus and measures taken to slow its spread. Chains of stores with thousands of employees, from coffee to clothing, have closed many outlets, with the fear that their brands and their market presence may never fully recover. The public purse has been drawn upon to set up furlough schemes, prop up businesses and some industries and pay for provision of medical equipment, care, hospital beds and tracking and tracing systems.

In addition, money has been squandered, and corruption, or at least incompetence, have been rife. People have, through it all, suffered enormously, yet have learned, through their struggles, to sustain themselves differently. They have learned to become more self-reliant, cautious, and independent. They have learned to value different things in the absence of the consumption of commodities: their families, reading, cooking, making. They have become conscious of the value of links between generations. They yearn for movement, association, and action. What might people demand, or welcome, as they find themselves to be more self-determining subjects, flâneurs?

Post-Covid, a moment which may be some time off yet – one year, two years – people will gather again, mingle, consume, travel, behave badly. Perhaps familiar patterns will be altered, but what is notable is that after earlier understandings that the natural environment might benefit from the shutdown to airline travel and consumer activity, financial packages from government to individuals and industry tended to promise a kind of revival of the way things were pre-Covid; with economies' ambitions restored to levels of growth that have become 'expected' or 'demanded'. A return to 'normal' has been central to policy, rather than the use of this period of pause and disruption as a time to completely reappraise environmental and economic policy. There is, disappointingly, from our governments, a narrative of re-setting things, to reinstating neoliberal precepts of unsustainable economic growth.

This is a moment for complete re-appraisal, yet core aspects to ideas wherein the city is treated as a capital – and information – producing resource – as opposed to an environment for people – continue. We continue to develop, enthusiastically, workshops on Smart Cities, whose offer of technological solutions to problems seems to serve the interests of tech industries that profit from mining information on human interaction, behaviour and feelings, rather than the well-being of citizens. This seems to be a profit-motivated address to problems may be better addressed by holistic attitudes to urban economies, and environments.

When we speak of the post-Covid public interior, we have the opportunity to think about what we desire, distinct from notions imposed on the public interior concerning our behaviour or performance or patterns of consumption or production of information, the mining of our data, our personalities. We might begin by considering who 'we' are, and who has not been included in the social contract. How might they be included, and how might they, and all of us, be served by the public interior? What kind of public interior would benefit all of us, would enfranchise all of us, the citizens of our societies? How might the public interior serve our health, our legitimacy, our humanity, our empathy and relations to others? How might the public interior serve our sense of being in the world, our sense of the natural world? How might our public interiors allow us to ask how we might exist with others, with other living creatures and organisms, in a world in which we are, of necessity at this stage, not the most important of them?

We all might consider other futures, imagine other paradigms. And here, I want to turn to the part that can be played by architects (but it could be others involved in the making of the city) who advance an enhanced notion

of responsibility and agency. You will know these examples already, but they seem to have anticipated the need for other paradigms. The examples are representative of what we might aspire to make.

Building with citizen and community:

The role of architects in the design of democratic public interior

In the public interior as we desire it to be, we hold onto the notion that we should have some kind of real freedom; that we should have agency. There are other models from the past, in which possibilities of agency or other affordances that we might see as positive present themselves: the Maisons du peuples of Horta in Brussels, and of Lods, Beaudouin, Bodianski and Prouvé in Clichy, both strangely bound to the imagery of the metropolis and the factory ... the public agoras of Van Klinger in Dronten and Eindhoven, the enfranchising institutions of Lina Bo Bardi in Sao Paulo and other public interiors that do not fit the capitalist or neoliberal paradigm, which we continue to see as the norm. The treatments of these 'other' public interiors offer us lessons, in that they propose resistant models in the face of a prevalent condition of spectacle and consumerism, in which civic infrastructures and culture marketed as spectacle are increasingly transformed into vehicles for the exploitation of captive consumers, from airports to train stations.

The first examples are two projects by Frank van Klinger: De Meerpaal in Dronten (1967), and 't Karregat in Eindhoven (1974). Each imagines an interior shared by a local community, with modest common facilities. In the first instance, these are a theatre, some spaces for light sport, a market, a restaurant, a bar, a place to watch television projected on a screen. This is a Fun Palace (Cedric Price, 1957) with none of the rhetoric of cybernetics or choice.

In the second instance, the public interior is the meeting place surrounded by essential community agents: the doctor's surgery, the nursery school, an elementary school, offices for small businesses, the local supermarket. Under one roof, a landscape of meeting and engagement. It was very real, and suffered from very real issues that arise between people. A self-balancing system that did not quite work, that required less interiority and more 'being in the world'.

Three of Lina Bo Bardi's projects in Sao Paulo also serve as other kinds of models. The Museum of Modern Art, and particularly the space covered by the art galleries suspended above it, offered a free space for citizens, naturally including those who had no particular interest in modern art. The space was a gift, with material and proportional qualities, that sheltered citizens, that accommodated them, actions and events, all while situating them in and over the city.

SESC-Fabrica da Pompeia was a former factory, whose meaning was utterly transformed by its conversion to a local cultural and social centre, with facilities for gathering, study, crafts, art, and, through theatre, sport and leisure – and its disruption of the integrity of the factory space – play. Its programme, curated by Bo Bardi promoted the natural desired state of the citizens, in

opposition to alienating labour. Bo Bardi's *Teatro Oficina* could be described as an occupation of an existing space, its long proportions transformed into a kind of street theatre through the addition of galleries made of scaffolding, drawing performers and audience into one relationship. It is also 'incomplete', a large window onto an adjacent empty lot providing an opportunity to grow plants, to accept anomaly and accident. The accidental public interior, encouraging appropriation and uses that could be described as mis-use, was central to the success of the ruined spaces of the *Palast der Republik* in Berlin, after the collapse of East Germany, and after the building had been stripped of asbestos and all its representative fittings. The ruin, the space voided of intention, became a space of play and imagination. *The Stadshal/ Markthal* in Gent is an interior, or simply a shelter, one under which citizens can gather, talk, meet, stay warm, and see themselves as citizens together, looking out to the city all around them. There are no pressures to do anything else in this public interior, in this urban hall.

The public interior as we might imagine it need not necessarily be inside; by being within the spaces of our urbanised environment, our spaces are already held within a condition of interior. What they can do within this condition is witness it. Citizens in the public interior may not only see each other, engage with each other, or be alone amongst others, they may also think about their place in the world, or simply revel in it.

In the swimming pool designed by Alvaro Siza for the municipal park in Matosinhos, Leça da Palmeira – *Quinta da Conceição* – people of all ages find themselves at play among the trees. They are somewhere, not alone, not subject to any determinations other than being creatures among other creatures, in the world.

Conclusion

After the pandemic, we should allow the public interior – indoors or out – to be free from exploitation, from the conditioning of subjectivities, from the obligation to consumption, from the extraction of personal data. We should allow it to be free. Here, around the Acropolis in Athens, Dimitris Pikionis designed a series of pathways, using discarded material – *spolia* – and humble paving, to make a specific ground, upon which one might be conscious of the rhythms of one's own body, of the lay of the land, of the occasional presence of the Acropolis itself, of others, of trees, birds, the sky, of one's place in the world. This, too, might be a model. We might, therefore, welcome the public interior as a place where individuals can be alone, in public, with their own thoughts. Here, in London, in a square of my own design, individuals can look down and read the names of other places, or hear voices from other places, and, for a moment, transport themselves there or to some place in their minds where that place resides. Being in the world is being at once here and elsewhere, with everyone.