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On Public Space

On Public Space

edited by Marianna Ascolese

9 Thymos Books



The contemporary city offers us multiple visions of very heterogeneous spaces. Suburban areas, large buildings-containers, liminal spaces of old centres, open spaces, fields and streets are translated into new potential urban phenomena that we could call public. Reading and recognising these types of spaces that are *between* different material and immaterial conditions offers the contemporary architect a new way of intervening, transforming and returning to the community places that are too often residual or unrecognised. Public space becomes a pretext for imagining, but above all for recognising, the new places for urban life, places that are no longer fixed, but changeable, reactive and adaptable to the dynamics of society and the needs of the community.

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physical signs, the way of composing formal demeanors and their consequent manifestations, reflecting on the core of architecture as a discipline while drawing a critical cross scenario on the contemporary European architectural debate.

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It was Henry Corbins gift to enable us to experience in this room thoughts that come from another language and culture, as if they were of our own hearts. He spoke from within his speech; he was his words. This rhetorical imaginative power is himma of which Corbin writes in his study of Ibn Arabi. This power of the heart is what is specifically designated by the word himma, a word whose content is perhaps best suggested by the Greek word enthymesis, which signifies the act of meditating, conceiving. Imagining, projecting, ardently desiring — in other words, of having (something) present in the thymos, which is vital force, soul, heart, intention, thought, desire.

James Hillman, *The Captive Heart*

On Public Space. Exploring Liminal Spaces in the Contemporary City
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On Public Space

Exploring Liminal Spaces in the Contemporary City

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The Public interior and its subjects

The interior in modernity has been regarded as a space at a remove from the public world, a space for the private self and ones intimates, a space in which one can be oneself. The notion of the public interior immediately presents a contradiction, in that *interior* and *public* would appear to be irreconcilable. The *public* would seem to infer an unbearable exposure of the self. How can one occupy a space of ones own, in which one can be oneself, in the midst of those conditions imposed by public life? Furthermore, are these conditions not likely to be reinforced by their confinement in an interior? Is it possible, given that the public interior creates conditions alien to private life, to imagine and realise a public interior that allows the self and the selfs interiority to flourish, and permits the self to *be* the self, among others, in public?

In thinking about what a true – or good – public interior should be, then its ability to nurture the selfs interior life¹, autonomy and agency amongst other selves in public would seem to be a requisite quality. However, those public interiors in the West that one might regard as representative or even exemplary have been, for the most part, spaces in which the self, the individual, the public citizen, has been variously conditioned towards normative behaviour, reform, obeisance to implicit and explicit ideology, or consumption. These public interiors furthermore exist in wider contexts, not limited to their location in the city or their connections to urban infrastructures.

¹ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. by R. Sennett, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs 1969, pp. 47-60.



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Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II
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They exist within the technocratic and ideological frameworks of thoroughly urbanised environments, which in themselves constitute conditions of interior: environments of frequently territorial scale in which a wide range of norms and ideas are either commonly shared, or imposed through ideology and mediated through policy, legislation, construction and various forms of representation. It is necessary, therefore, to see the public interior as a representative aspect of larger systems of ideas and policies intended to govern behaviour. Within the settings of the public interior, the individual or self is in fact a *subject* of those ideas that are both manifest and operative. The accumulation of these subjects comes to constitute the public, whose participation in the scenes of the public interior confirms their acquiescence, agreement, or obedience to the public interiors embodied ideas.

To discuss public interiors as scenes for framing subjects and shaping subjectivities, it will be necessary to illustrate those representative larger conditions of interior created through urbanisation. This will allow the situation of those emblematic (even exemplary) public interiors that either embody prevailing ideology, or notions of public performance of normative forms of behaviour. It will then be possible to inquire into the contexts, forms and ideas embodied in those public interiors, their affects, and their shaping of the subject. Finally, it will be possible to look at those public interiors that appear to resist tendencies of determination, which are predicated on the free agency of those who use them and ultimately define their character.

*The ideological interior of the continental
United States of America*

It is clear that European colonisation of the distant lands of others was typified by the setting out of settlements that bore the idea of their land of origin. The space of the settlement stands in opposition to space all around it: the space of the unknown and the other. The project (and process) of colonisation is one of expanding the domain of the colony (representing the idea) into that unknown to the point of its elimination. It follows that the other within this space is correspondingly either assimilated, enslaved, or eliminated. In the case of the United States, the latter course was followed. The project of colonisation (or righteous expansion of the colonies) was extended through the Land Ordinance, devised by Thomas Jefferson (1785): an ideological project enshrined in what appears to be a procedural policy of land surveying, marking and parcelling, using a grid applied at scales ranging from the territorial to the elemental: from the quasi-State to the township, the district, the homestead, and even the dimensions of building materials used for construction². Its premise was universal land ownership and individual freedom manifest in a non-hierarchical order that, in its deployment, was indifferent to geographical conditions and existing occupants. The mark of the Land Ordinance is easily registered when looking at American land and cities from the air; it is also built into European Americans sense of individual agency and its freedoms, fortified by an operative, antagonistic adjacency.

A certain kind of subject is created by such an environment – defined by the United States Government from the time of the Land Ordinance as the Interior – and a certain kind of

² Leonardo Benevolo (1968), "Court classicism and bourgeois classicism in the growth of the modern city", in Id., *The Architecture of the Renaissance*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1978, vol. 2.

public interior accommodates and is addressed to that subject, confirming their subjects perceptions of norms and privileges. One such *interior* is Central Park in New York; another was Pennsylvania Station; another, perhaps more familiar to contemporary European experience through its myriad iterations, is the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, the first interior shopping mall. Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, is an interior by virtue of being enclosed by buildings along its four boundaries, furnished with infrastructures and facilities, and its fiction of being a native and original sylvan landscape in the midst of the metropolis. As such, beyond glorifying the city itself, it legitimates the American urban project by providing citizens with its *image*, one which was introduced in the popularisation of photographic imagery of Yosemite in the West in the 1860s³. It performs this role in the way a glasshouse convincingly proposes itself to its visitors as a tropical paradise. The concourse of Pennsylvania Station, designed by McKim, Mead & White, assumed the form of the reconstructed *image* of the Baths of Caracalla as a means of communicating to railway commuters the nobility of the society in which they circulated, and that the greatness of New York was an echo of the greatness and unending significance of ancient Rome.

By the 1960s, the American environment was entirely urbanised, in that the *idea* of an Edenic landscape had become thoroughly fused with the fact of its occupation and domination by the effects of the city. This diffuse urbanism, whose elements were held together by motorways enabling highly individualised mobility and access, produced new typologies, the most emblematic the privately owned and operated *public* interior of the indoor shopping mall. The Southdale Center,

³ Mark Pimlott, "Territory and Interior: United States 1880-1939", in Id., *Without and Within: Essays on Territory and the Interior*, episode, Rotterdam 2007.



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Passage Choiseul
©Mark Pimlott

designed by Victor Gruen (1956), offered the *image* of an idealised village, familiarised by film and advertising, with square and street, protected from the extremes of inclement weather in Minnesota. Secured from weather and *undesirables*, the interior proposed a surrogate for urban experience – simultaneously resembling the new corporate office lobby – a purified space that allowed consumption to occur naturally, with as few internal boundaries as possible⁴. The Galérie des Boutiques in Place Ville-Marie, Montréal (1962), designed by I. M. Pei, Henry N. Cobb and Vincent Ponte, used this new, suburban and *regional* typology, importing it to the city centre and grafting vestiges of the *passages* or arcades of the early 19th century onto it: at once suburbanising the downtown, urbanising the connected suburbs, and completing the spatial, infrastructural and ideological continuity between the metropolitan centre and its territories⁵. Its image was complex yet *newly* familiar, fusing mall, corporate lobby, airport and some distant association with the European metropolis, and, specifically, Paris. The subject of this interior and that of the Southdale Center was intended to be the white-collar working man, his family, and his *dependents*: working women.

Urbanisation and the creation of the subject

In the United States, the abstractions of the Jeffersonian grid – complemented by ideology, the myth of originalism, self-realisation and supporting imagery – created a *subject*: white, European. The subject embraced the fictions of self-reliance, superiority to the other, ungovernability, independence. Such a subject could be directed, shaped, enhanced by policy and legislation that addressed their environment. The rationalism underpinning Jefferson's ideological environment was

⁴ Alex Wall, *Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City*, Actar, Barcelona 2005.

⁵ Mark Pimlott, "Prototypes of the Continuous Interior", in Mark Pimlott, op. cit.

echoed in Europe in the radical ideas applied to the making of the metropolis in the almost contemporary plans of Georges-Eugène Haussmann in Paris and Ildefons Cerdà in Barcelona. The object of these plans, the ordering and rationalisation of their cities distribution and infrastructures – including those of governance, tax collection, security, health and time⁶ – was the possibility of a new urban subject: one that could be reliable, whose behaviour would fall between acceptable norms. In Cerdà's mind, this subject was a new figure, the inhabitant of a complete urban environment, conditioned by that environment. In the extension of Barcelona, there was to be no more distinction between city and countryside; rather, the condition of the city – spread over a repetitive yet variously diffused grid – was to be everywhere⁷. This was another iteration of a condition of interior.

In Paris, the demolitions of the city centre (1850-1870), made in order to realise Haussmann's plan for the city's reorganisation tore into its medieval fabric and its *dark interiors*, the domain of the poorest, supposed fomenters of unrest, exposing them – and their denizens – to the light⁸. Districts were shaped into *arrondissements*, each with their own mayor and tax-collecting powers, bound and separated by a network of boulevards, designed for communication and rapid deployment of security forces. The boulevards for a template for new streets in the design of roads, pavements, and street furniture of all kinds, setting an environment of experience for the citizens of those districts for which the boulevards acted as at once a boundary and a site where not only other citizens but

6 Diana Periton, "Urban Life", in *The Intimate Metropolis* eds. by V. di Palma, D. Periton, M. Lathouri, Routledge, London 2009.

7 Ross Exo Adams, *Circulation and Urbanization*, Sage, London 2019; Joan Busquets, *Barcelona: The Urban Evolution of a Compact City*, Nicolodi, Rovereto 2005.

8 Marshall Berman (1982), *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Verso, London 1983.



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Tate Modern
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the image of the metropolis was encountered. That image was reinforced by the design of buildings themselves, which followed rules set for all new construction (other than important public buildings and monuments) concerning their materials, window proportions, balconies, string courses, cornices and mansard roofs⁹, becoming the uniform clothing of an interior containing – from ground to garret as humorously yet accurately portrayed by Edmund Texier¹⁰ – shops, commercial offices and/or servants quarters; and above, dwellings pertaining to social class, from the highest on the *belle étage*, to the lowliest under the roof. The metropolis, as shaped by Haussmann, was the same for everyone: the evidence of its workings and organisation were inescapable, and obliged its citizens to comply with its transparent workings. Richard Sennett writes of the metropoliss citizens adopting their clothing to mask their individuality and conform to their station, role, or occupation, with subtle distinctions of tailoring¹¹, akin to subtle indications that one might find that distinguish special buildings from more ordinary ones. In the city, one was exposed to its workings, exposed to its spectacle, exposed as a body. Clothes offered conformity and protection. One could retreat from this exposure to the private interior (yet, as in the paintings of Gustave Caillebotte, the city was always outside). The public interior was where the daily workings, movements and entertainments of the metropolis were most intensely seen and experienced, and where the pressing of the individual into managed behaviours and responses were most acute.

9 Benoît Jalon, Umberto Napolitano, *Paris Haussmann: A Models Relevance*, Park Books, Zurich 2017.

10 Edmund Texiers *Tableau de Paris* (1852), a cross-section of a typical Haussmannian *immeuble*, with its occupants in their place and ways of living.

11 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Knopf, New York 1977; and *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilisation*, Norton, New York 1998.



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Paris as laboratory for the public interior

Paris, as capital of the 19th century, was the nursery for the development of the Wests most memorable public interior typologies and tendencies. In the first half of the century, the *passage* or arcade, using the inner spaces of city blocks to create networks of glass-covered routes lined with shops, extended the existing street system, and then, preserving them under glass, idealised them¹². Citizens would find themselves in dream-worlds of displays, reflections and distances: only a purchase could grant access. They were public interiors by consent, affording anonymity and interiority. Their commercial success was short-lived: by the time of Haussmanns works, they were already in decline. The public interiors in the second half of the century are of a different order of scale, and address: they are interiors for a metropolitan population. They are in public use, but not necessarily public. In the case of Haussmanns Paris, material and spatial characteristics are shared across different kinds of use: the iron and glass *shed* is a format that comes to represent the metropolitan public interior, and is as useful to the train station as it is to the market, the library, the exposition hall, the *grand magasin*. It is a realisation of the ideal suggested by the passage, but, directly inspired by the exemplar of the Crystal Palace in London (1851), it speaks of metropolitanism and a coherent identity, and so involves the entire populace – resident, commuting and visiting – in its premise¹³. Its use suggests that the public interior of the city might be regarded as an emporium, with movement (in the case of the stations), exchange (in the case of Les Halles Centrales or la Bourse), study (Bibliothèques Sainte-Geneviève and Nationale), state propaganda (*expositions universelles*), or consumption

¹² Johann Friedrich Geist, *Le Passage: Un type architectural du XIXe siècle* (1969), Pierre Mardaga, Liège 1982.

¹³ Mark Pimlott, "The Shed", in Id., *The Public Interior as Idea and Project*, Jap Sam Books, Heijningen 2016.

(Au Bon Marché, *grands magasins*) as human activities that could be accommodated, observed, directed all under one roof. These were interiors in which appropriate responses could be induced – whether in response to an instruction regarding movement or social positioning (as was the case of Garniers Opéra) or probity, or consumption, or amazement, or rapture. They also served as outlets for the acting out of a prescriptive regime, built aspects of the bureaucratic, organisational and spatial control that typified the Paris of Louis Napoléon III and his prefect, Haussmann. The metropolis was the capital of an Empire, and its citizens should subscribe to this condition, in which the public interior, and the condition of interior of the city itself, represented its Idea.

Haussmannian Paris also served as the laboratory for public interiors in other Western cities through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What this laboratory established was that the public could regard themselves in these interiors as a public, one that belonged to an Idea, and revel at their place within it, and be regarded as they regarded themselves. Their public selves were on display to others, and yet they were also themselves in public. A compelling adaptation of Pariss innovations is the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milano, which, through the demolition of a medieval network of streets, created new streets, including one that connects the Piazza Duomo with Piazza della Scala, and the citys most significant religious building with its most significant bourgeois monument: Teatro della Scala. A palatial street system is preserved under glass, and the crossing, under a glass dome, made efforts through iconography to suggest to its citizens that they are at the centre of the world. The Galleria is a paradigmatic case, and reiterated in malls, supermalls, airports and casinos all over the neoliberal world. It demonstrates the object of those public interiors (in fact largely privately-owned interiors that are taken to be public): to create illusions of freedom, enfranchisement, and individual agency within prescriptive environments.

Conclusion: Another kind of public interior

In my book, *The Public Interior as Idea and Project* (2016)¹⁴, I proposed that the public interior in the West (or those interiors taken to be public) assumed characteristics that allowed them to operate on the imaginations and behaviour of their subjects. These characteristics were described as themes: Garden, Palace, Ruin, Shed, Machine and Network. In each, it was clear that the deployment of allusion, affordance or organisational device would affect desired responses in the urbanised subject (the subject inevitably affected by urbanisation), and that these themes have remained embedded in considerations of interiors made for public consumption, with predictable behaviour and performance as their object. Since that performance is directed towards the reinforcement of power structures, whether political or connected to capital, it seems necessary to welcome the idea of public interiors that, despite reliance on these themes or motifs for legibility, differ fundamentally, and offer instead some real freedoms of agency and association.

These share a certain tenor, being offered as spaces for agency and encounter, without the obligation to performance, obeisance or consumption. They include *prototypes* such as the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, designed by Victor Horta (1899); and the Maison du Peuple in Paris-Clichy (1939) designed by Marcel Lods, Eugène Beaudouin, Vladimir Bodiansky and Jean Prouvé; De Meerpaal in Dronten (1967) and T Karregat in Eindhoven (1974), both designed by Frank van Klingeren¹⁵; SESC Fábrica da Pompéia (1986)¹⁶ and Teatro Oficina (1984), both in

¹⁴ Mark Pimlott, op. cit.

¹⁵ Marina van den Bergen, Piet Volland, *Hinder en ontkenning: Architectuur en maatschappij in het werk van Frank van Klingeren*, Uitgeverij 010, Rotterdam 2003.

¹⁶ Luiz Trigueiros, Marcelo Ferraz, (eds.), *SESC-Fábrica da Pompéia: Lina Bo Bardi 1977-1986*, Blau, Lisbon 1996.



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Galleries Lafayette
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Airport Malpensa
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Sao Paulo, both designed by Lina Bo Bardi¹⁷; the open air swimming pool of the municipal park in Matosinhos, designed by Alvaro Siza (1962); and the Markthal/Stadshal in Gent, designed by Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem with Marie José Van Hee (2012)¹⁸. In each of these projects, despite their suggestions, allusions or evocation of familiar figures (garden, ruin, shed and machine in particular) there neither was nor is any obligation for their subjects to *perform*, or pressed into any form or service, or submitted to extractions of political or financial value. All of them, by making those who use them central to their objectives, invert the dynamic within those public interiors that attempt to pre-determine the behaviour and responses of their subjects. Instead of creating subjectivities, they allow their users to create themselves as subjects. Each of these truly public interiors, within their afforded realms, have suggested possibilities for individual pleasure, for being oneself in public, both alone and with others, for engagement and relations with others, for personal agency, for action, for varieties of freedom.

¹⁷ Zeuler R. M. de A. Lima, *Lina Bo Bardi*, Yale University Press; New Haven and London 2013.

¹⁸ Maarten Van den Driessen, (ed.), *Robbrecht en Daem: An Architectural Anthology*, Mercatorfonds, Brussels 2017.