

What a Public Space Must Leave Possible

A market changes a street without destroying it.

For a few hours, tables occupy the pavement, deliveries interrupt passage, and people gather around things that were not there that morning. Routes narrow. Some movements become difficult, others more likely. A place that normally accommodates many unrelated activities is given over, temporarily, to one dominant use.

Then the market ends. The tables are folded, vehicles leave, and what was briefly dense with exchange becomes passage again, or somewhere to wait, meet, cross, or sit. Nothing about this return is especially dramatic. It happens often enough to be almost invisible.

Yet the space has done something quite particular. It was strongly claimed without being permanently consumed by that claim.

I have come to think that this ordinary capacity for change is one of the less obvious qualities of public space.

We usually describe publicness through conditions in the present. Can a place be entered? Who may remain there? What is permitted? Is it accessible without payment? Is it lively or empty, controlled or informal? These questions matter, but they also encourage us to judge a place at a particular moment, as though its public character could be read from what is happening there now.

Perhaps it also has to be understood through time.

A place may be intensely used and still retain the ability to become something else. Another may look open and accessible while much of what can happen there later has already been decided. The difference is not simply between occupation and emptiness. It lies in what the occupation leaves behind.

I use the term **public capacity** for this: not the number of activities a place can accommodate at once, and not another name for flexibility, but the continuing ability of a shared space to receive uses, people and relations that its present condition does not yet contain.

That ability can survive considerable restriction.

A street under repair may lose half its width and continue to work around the interruption. A rule requiring cyclists to dismount in a crowded market limits one form of movement while making others easier. Emergency services interrupt ordinary use because, for a time, something else has priority. Delivery vehicles occupy pedestrian ground because the shops surrounding it depend on being supplied.

None of this fits comfortably with the idea that more openness always produces more publicness.

Sometimes a shared space can only remain usable by limiting what can happen within it. The important distinction is not between regulation and freedom, but between restrictions that leave other possibilities intact and those that begin to close them down.

What does a restriction do to the other possibilities of the place?

Some restrictions make their temporary nature obvious. A barrier or diversion does not only say what cannot happen now; it also suggests that the present condition is incomplete. Other forms of occupation are less legible. Tables remain arranged for customers who are not there. A lane

stays reserved for vehicles that have not arrived. Objects intended for future use occupy ground in the present.

A space can therefore be empty and still be unavailable.

That is why emptiness is an unreliable measure of openness. An unused surface may retain many possibilities, or it may be so thoroughly assigned that the absence of users changes almost nothing. A crowded place, meanwhile, can allow a remarkable range of things to happen at once. People pass through, stop, withdraw from the dominant activity, encounter someone, perform, sell, wait, watch, rest, or simply remain without sharing the purpose of those around them.

The capacity of a space is revealed not by how little happens there, but by whether one thing happening prevents everything else from happening later.

Sometimes the distinction becomes clearest when a function almost completely disappears.

Snow covers a bench. For the moment, sitting there is no longer a realistic possibility. The interruption is physical and nearly absolute, yet it has very little authority over the future. Nobody assumes that the bench has permanently lost its function. The snow will melt.

A strong restriction in the present can therefore have remarkably little effect on what remains possible afterwards.

Cities are not always comfortable with this kind of dormant capacity. An unused facility can look inefficient. An empty surface appears to invite programming. A place without continuous activity is easily understood as something unfinished, underused, or waiting to be improved.

But a possibility that is not currently being exercised is not necessarily wasted.

A bench does not need to be occupied all day to matter. A square does not cease to function when nobody is gathered there. A route may be valuable precisely because it remains available for a movement that has not yet begun.

There is a form of reserve in this, and reserve is difficult to see because nothing announces it. Its value often becomes apparent only after it has disappeared.

Nor does it have to disappear through a dramatic act of closure. A commercial use extends a little farther into a shared surface. Furniture gradually turns circulation into an extension of consumption. Infrastructure introduced for convenience begins to store private objects in common space. Temporary arrangements become familiar, then expected, until other uses start to feel out of place.

Public possibility can be consumed incrementally.

This is also why physical reversibility is not enough. Tables can be removed, barriers lifted, signs changed. But repeated use produces habits, expectations and dependencies. A terrace may be easy to dismantle while the permit, business model and surrounding routines that sustain it become increasingly difficult to undo. A camera can be taken down while the expectation of observation remains. A delivery system can be changed, but shops, workers and customers may already have adapted themselves to it.

Reversibility has its own conditions.

Eventually something can remain legally possible while becoming socially improbable. A person does not need to be forbidden from staying somewhere in order to understand that staying is not what the place expects.

The future of a public space is therefore not only physical. It is also social and institutional.

This becomes visible in many pedestrian areas, which can look entirely open while being densely organised by systems less obvious than a fence. A delivery truck occupies part of the ground. A courier waits between movements. Shoppers, children, cyclists and pedestrians pass around them. Cameras observe the same field.

None of these things necessarily ends the public use of the place. Several may be necessary to its present functioning. What matters is how the claims overlap and how much power each of them has to determine what can follow.

Commerce can reserve ground. Logistics can interrupt it. Security systems can observe it. Public authorities can close it. Individuals can use it in ways for which it was never specifically designed. These claims are not equivalent. Some people or institutions can shape the future of a place far more decisively than others.

Public capacity is therefore not only a spatial quality. It is also a question of who gets to spend it.

A market can occupy almost an entire square and still leave substantial public capacity because its claim ends. A smaller intervention may alter a place more deeply if it makes its own presence permanent and other forms of use increasingly exceptional.

Intensity is not the same as exhaustion.

A strongly used public space may retain enormous capacity. A lightly occupied one may have almost none.

Nor should unplanned use be romanticised. One person's freedom can eliminate someone else's. Noise, speed, storage, commerce or prolonged occupation can become dominant enough to narrow the range of people able to use the same place. Public capacity cannot mean that everything must remain possible at all times. A space organised on that principle would scarcely be usable.

The harder proposition is that a public space has to survive its own necessary decisions.

It needs forms, rules and temporary priorities. It will sometimes have to choose between incompatible uses. It may be repaired, secured, occupied, programmed or closed. The problem begins when these decisions become so complete that the present starts determining the future in advance.

This is also where the word *return* becomes more complicated.

Return does not have to mean restoring a place to an original or neutral condition. There may never have been one. A square after a market is not identical to the square before it. A repaired pavement, a changed traffic arrangement or a newly tolerated activity may alter what becomes possible next.

Return is less a restoration than a reopening of possibility.

Sometimes this is visible in very small gestures. Chairs are folded against a wall. Equipment is removed. A temporary use contracts towards the edge from which it came. Ground that had belonged to one activity begins to lose that assignment.

What returns is not emptiness.

What returns is uncertainty.

The place no longer knows exactly what will happen there next.

That uncertainty is not the absence of structure. It is the part of a shared place that structure has not yet exhausted.

This is also why public capacity cannot really be counted in advance. The point is not to maximise the number of possible uses or to design a space capable of accommodating an endless list of activities. Part of what public capacity preserves is precisely the possibility of uses that are not yet known.

We usually discuss common space in relation to people who are already present: what they need, what they may do, how their competing claims should be resolved. But every decision about a shared place also acts on people who are not there yet. Their uses cannot be listed because they have not happened. Their relationships to the place cannot be designed because they do not yet exist.

The present cannot protect every future possibility. Every decision removes some of them.

What it can decide is how much room not to consume.

Perhaps this is one of the quieter obligations of public space: not to remain neutral, empty or indefinitely flexible, but to avoid becoming so perfectly adapted to its present use that nothing substantially different can follow it.

A city needs places that can be used strongly. It also needs places capable of surviving that use.

The distinction may only become visible afterwards, when the crowd has gone, the barrier is removed, the snow melts, the truck leaves, the chairs are folded, and the same piece of ground is asked a simple question again:

What can happen here now?