How does the privatisation of public space affect social interaction?
Abstract

In the modern metropolis, there is a growing trend of public spaces being privatised. The focus of this essay is the social interaction barriers imposed by the privatisation of public space. The quality of interaction between social groups is suppressed due to the nature of privatised public space. A public space and a privatised public space will be observed and evaluated to pinpoint the different kinds of barriers that compromise social interaction.

We will evaluate the value of public space and social sustainability. Simmel and Wirth’s theoretic ideas about individualisation and integration through division will also be discussed to set the stage for the main discussion.

Cabot square is a privatised public square in Canary Wharf, a financial district in the borough of Tower Hamlets that emerged with the aim of regenerating West India docks. Leather Lane market is a 400-year-old medieval weekday market based in the borough of Camden. According to Tonnelat (2010) “public space is measured according to its accessibility” Both spaces are analysed according to the circulation and connectivity with their context. Unsurprisingly, the more successful public space, Leather Lane market is the better connected of the two.

Analysis of the different nature of social stratification in both comparative spaces will be made, Leather Lane inhabitants forms social strata based on their intentions within the space, we will refer to these as “social entities” whereas Cabot square inhabitants display the dictionary meaning of social stratification, where the social strata is distinguished according to status or “class”

Observations during some fieldwork to the two comparative spaces reveal that there are barriers to the formation of “social entities”, which is mainly the case with Cabot square. Physical barriers such as metal grilles is explained using the Cuttleslowe walls situation in Oxford where two communities were consciously segregated. Psychological barriers are compared with the fieldwork and Pat’s experience of the Docklands, from Minton (2009) “Ground control”

The nature of a regulated environment, as the year long research in Aylesbury revealed in “Findings, informing change” (2007) are “not conducive to vibrancy and integration”. We look at the elements of regulation such as CCTV, Security personnel and analyse their impact on the nature of social interactions.

The compounded effect of barriers, where one barrier triggers a chainreaction of other barriers. e.g a physical barrier has the potential to create segregation and psychological barriers is presented as a summary on social barriers

Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist Philosopher’s ideas of the right to the city. The fair participation of all inhabitants is explored by discussing the “ouvre”. Tonnelat’s overview of cafes and squares are applied to both our comparative spaces inorder to question their purposes.

Refering to the work of popular urban philosophers, theorists and architects, we speculate on how these barriers of social interaction can be solved. We draw upon their recommendations and successes and apply some ideas in tranforming Cabot square in an animated public space. This will be done in a sequencial order that addresses the “compounding” nature of barriers. Finally the evaluation of the possibilities Cabot square might have, using the squares in Copenhagen as a benchmark.

1 Tonnelat, Stephane. 2010. The Sociology of urban public spaces. Atlantis press pg 1

1. Social sustainability and the importance of public spaces.

There have been several attempts at describing the word “sustainable” It is a commonly misused term, generally the term implies something positive. According to Davidson (2010):

“We must consider sustainability’s everyday usage not simply in terms of maintenance or status quo, but rather in a more nebulous normative sense. Sustainability, in its everyday meaning, signifies a sense of change.”

Tonnelat (2010) explains how the growing problem of privatising public spaces:

“Briefly put, the general opinion is that public spaces are an essential ingredient to the sustainability of cities for political, social, economic, public health and biodiversity reasons (Banerjee, 2001). However, the dominating trend observed by many is one of shrinkage rather than expansion of the public realm. Diverse processes of privatization have given rise in the last half century to an array of city forms less and less amenable to the daily copresence of a diversity of urbanites.”
2. Theoretic concepts of social separation and integration

Simmel, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology describes how the quest for individuality brings problems in the metropolis:

“The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life”

We can draw some parallels with the nature of space in both Leatherlane market and Cabot square. Urban processes in both locations portray the individuality of the inhabitants through the division of labour. The specialisation of tasks creates separate social groups whose interaction is based on economic interests.

The market vendors, passersby, shoppers, office workers all become separate social groups. monetary interests forms the basis of social interaction between them. In Cabot square however, the separate social groups of the financial workers, visitors, maintenance workers don’t have any economic interests amongst themselves, which further suppresses social interaction.

Louis Wirth brought forth ideas originating from Simmel. Haubermann (1997) quotes Wirth’s idea of social contact: “different elements of population ...will... be segregated from each other, by which their individual ways of living and needs are incompatible and their attitude to each other is hostile” These ideas portray the urban environment of conflict and separation.

Haubermann then presents Wirth’s unexpected outlook “The confrontation among diverging personalities and ways of living causes generally, a relative view and a feeling of tolerance in respect to differences” Haubermann criticizes Wirth for not elaborating his latter ideas, But perhaps these ideas of conflict paradoxically explain tolerance?
3. Mobility in public spaces

Circulation and connectivity with the context are important as to how well public space functions. A successful public space is a democratic space. Tonnelat (2010) mentions that “Public space is measured according to its accessibility”.

The spatial circulation in Cabot square is defined by its physical features. It sits in isolation from its context, separated by a ring road and a metal grilled fence that run around the perimeter of the square. The occupants of Leather lane have a very organic circulation pattern. The market acts as a spine of dense activity and branching off are pockets of spaces which are extensions of the market that serve as seating/social spaces during weekday lunches.

Image 1: Aerial view of leatherlane market

“Accessibility is what guarantees the free circulation of persons and goods”
4. Social stratification

The dictionary defines social stratification as “the hierarchical structures of class and status in any society”. If the dictionary meaning is applied to the two comparative spaces, the meaning becomes more evident in Cabot square than in Leather lane market.

In public spaces, social stratification can be loosely defined as the separation of social groups according to their intentions within the public space. Individual with the same intentions belong to the same “social group”. They form “social entities” which unconsciously reconcile their spatial boundaries.

According to the Aylesbury town centre research report “Social interactions in public spaces” (2007) describe individuals undertaking the same activity collectively. For instance:

“A group of 5 children and an adult sit in the shade eating”

“There are 2 boys on skateboards and 3 boys on rollerblades”

“The boys on roller blades have now found a big piece of polystyrene from a skip and they are hitting each other over the head with it”

Regardless of class or status these individuals are bound together by a common goal in the negotiated space. In leather lane market, The stall keepers and vendors negotiate their presence using their merchandise. Long queues negotiate their presence by extending onto the footpaths or roads and the passers - by and shoppers filter through the other “social entities” present within the same space. It is unlikely to observe unconscious negotiation within Cabot square.

The social nature of Leather lane market is that of tolerance, whereas Cabot square tends to have a hostile/conflictive social nature. There is spontaneous formation of “social entities” in Leatherlane market, which display signs of a cohesive community. The social patterns in Cabot square struggle to create “social entities”. Individuals carrying out the same activities, such as sitting on plinths to have lunch maintain a “safe” distance from each other, an indifferent attitude.

Could it be that due to the density of the inhabitants of Leatherlane market, they are forced to close proximity which results in the creation of “social entities” and encounters? Mitchell (2003) pg18. “Publicity demands heterogeneity and the space of the city - with its density and constant attraction of new immigrants - assured a thick fabric of heterogeneity, one in which encounters with difference were guaranteed”.

“Just because different social groups co-exist in the same space does not mean that social cohesion has been achieved. Nonetheless, being able to be seen in public – and to be able to see different types of social groups – may go some way to enabling everyone, and children and young people in particular, to observe difference, and thereby perhaps, promote tolerance for social diversity.”
5. Physical barriers

Nottridge explains social differences and segregation by referring to the 2 metre high Cutteslowe walls in Oxford that were built to separate Clive Saxton’s private estate from the city council’s estate. Saxton feared that the neighbouring “slum dwellers” would make it difficult to sell his development. The private estate owners consciously caused segregation between the council estate and their property. The council made several attempts to knock down this wall, on one occasion the council had to rebuild the wall after being sued. The issue was finally resolved after the council purchased the land on which the wall was built, and finally demolished to allow social interaction from both sides.

“While the children mixed well, their elders may have thought otherwise.”

The nature of social interaction in this neighbourhood as described by Nottridge indicates that the interaction of children from the two estates was causing concern. Apart from compromising the sale of the development, it seems that the elders were concerned about their children picking up “undesired” behaviour from the neighbouring children.

It is possible to catch a glimpse of this conscious physical division of space within the docklands. Cabot square has a metal grilled fence along the perimeter of the square, not to prevent entry, but to monitor and filter the “unacceptable” members out. Just as the elders influenced their social companions, does the canary wharf management have similar motives for their employees? perhaps it’s about maintaining an “image”. Would a public space with diversity be bad for business?

The poem by Spender (1955) gives a sense of the social tensions at the time.

“My parents kept me from children who were rough
Who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams”
6. Psychological barriers

Minton (2009) pg 174 gives the example of how Pat feels intimidated of going to shopping at canary wharf. The feeling of “not belonging” to a place. During some fieldwork carried out at Cabot square, it is possible to relate to Pat’s perception of canary wharf as being “intimidating”. There is an unwritten rule in the square: The normal acceptable thing to do is firstly to have a suit to blend in with the majority of the inhabitants coming from the financial offices and secondly to occupy the square for just enough time to finish your lunch. Straying away from this rule evokes feelings of fear and discomfort. Pat’s conscious awareness of social stratification led to a psychological barrier in the form of fear.

“A deep division is occurring in our cities, and paradoxically this division is especially deep where economic growth is particularly visible”14
7. Regulating public space

Whilst discussing the term regulate, we automatically think of some sort of control. According to the dictionary meaning regulate is to “control or maintain the rate or speed of (a machine or process) so that it operates properly.” 15 just like we applied the term social stratification to our two comparative spaces, the term “regulate” becomes apparent in Cabot square than in Leather lane market.

In Cabot square there are a number of “controls” which regulate urban processes within the square. The security personnel restore “order” by intervening with inhabitants who might be conducting “unacceptable” activities. CCTV cameras control the activities within the square by acting as a deterrent to “unacceptable” activities and finally the physicality of the square, plinths, benches and even gate act as elements of control. In Leather lane market control is observed through the market traders, who appropriate the space using their merchandise, however, since they are the “social entity” that define public space, wouldn’t it be correct to say that the space is not regulated, but self regulating?

According to the year old research project about public space use, conducted in Aylesbury, southeast England, the final results as published in “Findings, informing change” (2007)

“The researchers conclude that public spaces retain a democratic and civic function, alongside commercially driven uses. They suggest that policy-makers can support this by encouraging diversity and harnessing people’s tendency to ‘self-regulate’ to avoid conflict: over-regulated environments are not conducive to vibrancy and integration.” 16

Minton (2009) on the topic of “clean and safe” discusses the idea of how the perception of a clean place would be the one of safety, as an example we are presented with Manchester’s highest ASBOs (Anti Social Behaviour Order) rates and paradoxically the city possesses the most rigorous “clean and safe” policies. These “controls” as described in Cabot square begin to become physical and psychological barriers. Regulation thus becomes counter - productive to the normal operation of a public space.

“Issues are not solved by moving on people and activities that are deemed undesirable or out of place – this merely moves the perceived problem somewhere else and discourages integration.” 17
8. Compounding effect of social barriers

The social situation in Cabot square and most squares in canary wharf almost seem like the Cutteslowe walls situation we looked at earlier whilst discussing physical barriers. In this case however, the private developers: The canary wharf group is Consciously using a physical barrier to prevent “social entities” from forming in their privatised public squares, yet, this is the very process that defines a public space.

The physical presence of the security personnel at canary wharf and intervention of controlling the inhabitants of the public space creates a chain reaction of further problems. Their presence creates a conscious awareness of social stratification. Acting as a visual marker to warn the inhabitants of Cabot square that they are being monitored and expected to “obey” certain conduct within the square. Psychological barriers then spring out from the awareness of conscious social stratification. The end result is what we see today - an almost deserted square.
9. Social justice

According to Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist Philosopher all inhabitants of the metropolis deserve the right to the city. Mitchell describes how “the most important is Lefebvre’s normative argument that the city is an ouvre - a work in which all its citizens participate.”

Social stratification and regulation are some examples of how the democratic participation of the population is eliminated. According to Mitchell the ouvre is “alienated” from the actual city we live in. The reality is that there is an “expropriation by a dominant class that is not really interested in making the city a site for the cohabitation of differences.”

Paradoxically one would argue that economic interests would bring individuals together in the urban environment, but the irony is that isolated “social entities” are created. This, being a self created phenomenon due to the lack of an ouvre, the lack of say from all the inhabitants of the metropolis. It is true to say that Cabot square is a testament to Mitchell’s critique of urban spaces: “More and more the spaces in the city are being produced for us rather than by us.”

“The city is the place where difference lives. And finally, in the city, different people with different projects must necessarily struggle with one another over the shape of the city, the terms of access to the public realm, and even the rights of citizenship. Out of this struggle the city as a work - as an ouvre - as a collective if not singular project - emerges, and new modes of living, new modes of inhabiting, are invented.”
According to Tonnelat, cafes and squares have specific purposes, which we can correlate to Leatherlane and Cabot square respectively. A cafe is a place of “encounter, conversation and debate” whereas a square is said to be a place of “political gathering, rallies and demonstrations”.

The ideas behind the cafe are elaborated by Tonnelat by using (Sennett 1970) “A place of socialization freed from the constraints of the work place or tyrannies of home” and Oldenburg (1989) “where people can be in a familiar environment, open to the street and not regulated by social norms and not entirely dominated by the community”. These two references almost seem to describe the nature of Leatherlane market. Both cafes and squares have the a common purpose of bringing people together. But does the absence of a street make the square lifeless? Why is Cabot square lifeless despite having a street running along the perimeter?

Tonnelat argues that unlike the cafes purpose of discussion, “the main communicative tool is the spectacle either in the form of a formal actor/audience format, such as when a concert or a cultural event takes place, or in the form of a political demonstration for all to see in the city and sometimes in the nation”.

Based on these ideas, Has the canary wharf management abolished the very activity that these squares like Cabot square are meant to serve? demonstrations, political gatherings, rallies or even a small group gathering are perceived as a threat. The canary wharf security will intervene as soon as they spot a small congregation as we found out during a walk in the docklands area.
11. Is it possible to transform a privatised public space into a truly genuinely animated space?

We have now established some characteristics of a democratic public space observed in Leather lane market and also identified some barriers that hinder the formation of a public space, within Cabot square. Now the question remains, how can we reanimate privatised public spaces? “people make places”, the popular term used by Demos, who describe themselves as “a think tank for everyday democracy” might perhaps be the right approach for tackling the barriers to creating “social entities” as present in Leather lane market. It is not surprising that the comparison of the two contrasting spaces have not only revealed the nature of public space, but the nature of people within the spaces. Jan Gehl (2004) presents us with the idea of the city as an informal arena through the book “Public spaces public life”. The imagery used to describe the vibrant public spaces are saturated with people. The first thing one notices is the number of people present in these public spaces. The absence of people in a public space is the first sign that something is “not right”.

In order to tackle all these barriers to social presence and interaction, abolishing the regulation of the square will be a fundamental starting point. Taking on board Lefebvre’s ideas of the right to the city, the right of participation of every inhabitant of the metropolis. It is only possible for this to happen if every individual has a sense of duty or responsibility within the public space, Jane Jacob’s ideas of natural surveillance address this issue rather well.

“There must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind.”

It has to be noted, it is unlikely to recreate the vibrancy present in Leatherlane market, but just like an ecosystem, the provision of the right conditions could nurture public life. According to Jane Jacobs, the famous journalist, activist and author of several influential publication on urban planning, notably The Death and Life of Great American Cities, “there must be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Public and private spaces cannot ooze into each other as they do typically in suburban settings or in projects”. Cabot square, seems to have a conflicted identity. Whilst traversing through such privatised public spaces, one tends to feel like they are intruding a private space. This is where the clear definition of public and private is needed. Cabot square needs to acquire the identity of a public space if it has to function as such.

We now know the primary importance of people within the public realm, the physicality of public spaces becomes a secondary consideration. In Cabot square the physical fabric does not quite aid public interaction, Minton (2009) points out how Hans Monderman, a Dutch engineer’s idea of the removal of physical barriers, railings, traffic lights etc, gives more responsibility to the street users. Minton explains how this concept of “shared space” evolved from Monderman walking backwards onto oncoming traffic to prove the philosophy behind this idea: Minton quotes from Monderman’s interview with the Times magazine “to look each other in the eye, to judge body language and to learn to take responsibility - to function as normal human beings” These ideas of Monderman relate to Lefebvre’s ouvre and the right to the city and Jane Jacob’s idea of “natural surveillance”. In this idea of shared space, every inhabitant within the space becomes a participant and has an equal responsibility.
12. Transforming Cabot square into an animated public space

Drawing inspiration from the work of Lefebvre, Jacobs, Monderman, Tonnelat, Gehl and Minton, we are in a better position to answer the question “how can we reanimate privatised public spaces?” Focusing on Cabot square in particular, we would like to apply one of the strongest characteristics observed in a public space, Leatherlane market was its self organising nature and the unconscious phenomenon of forming “social entities”.

Currently conscious control present in Cabot square is a hindrance in achieving this. The removal of regulation and control within the square, notably, The Security personnel who physically stop the formation of “social entities” and The CCTV surveillance which undermines the trust and creates psychological barriers, is the primary step.

After regulation comes the physical barriers present in the square. The metal grilled fence surrounding the square physically filters and possibly prevents democratic access into the square. These physical barriers have the potential effect of compounding and generating psychological barriers. The street running circumferentially around the square in a sense becomes a physical barrier and it needs to be eliminated.

Earlier, we identified how the ease of arrival at a public space is crucial for its function as a democratic space, so the removal of the street wouldn’t be a beneficial step. This situation would be a perfect candidate to receive Monderman’s ideas of shared space. The removal of traffic lights and pavements should encourage the dialogue of the motorists and inhabitants of Cabot square.

After applying these measures, we can re-evaluate and question of how well it would function. So far we have learnt from the comparison of a contrasting space, Leatherlane market. but now comparison with a similar public space, a space that Cabot square would aspire to become is the next phase of our speculative transformation of Cabot square.

Wind rush square, is a large square in Brixton in the borough of Lambeth. The square successfully hosts a number of public events. Its physical features can be described quite simply as a focal point of a large tree. the ground conditions have a series of steps which are appropriated by people. There are no physical barriers around or within the square.
13. Reflecting on the speculative transformation of Cabot Square.

Having applied a systematical proposal for cabot square which has so far been about the removal of all the different kinds of social barriers identified earlier, would that really be enough to achieve our aim of re animating the square?

Assuming that our transformation has reached upto the level of windrush square, in terms of physicality (or the lack of it) we have to question the motive behind reanimating privatised public squares. we have to aim achieve the Lefebvre’s idea of the “ouvre”, a democratic space in which all inhabitants have a role, taking the city of copenhagen as a benchmark for successful public spaces, Tonnelat’s idea of the square as a “spectacle” is clearly noticed. Introducing the same principals to Cabot square could possibly have the potential in recreating a successful square. The high volume of financial workers in the surrounding highrise buildings could theoretically be able to animate the square. Introducing cafes or stalls to serve the people attending the spectacle. This could potentially be a means of creating diversity within the space.

Image 4: Public squares in copenhagen: they all have a “spectacle” animating the spaces
14. References

1. Davidson, Mark. 2010. *Social sustainability and the city*. Geography compass pg 1


3. Simmel, Georg. 1950. *The metropolis and mental life*


Images

Image 1 http://www.londonmarkets.co.uk/London%20Markets%20in%20East%20London.htm
Image 2 http://oxfordcockaigne.co.uk/cutteslowe/cutteslowewalls3.htm
Image 3 www.urban75.org
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