

The Occupy movements have dramatised questions about public space: Who owns it? And who can use it?

One year on, [Richard Sennett](#) reflects on the Occupy movements and the nature of public space. He argues that the Occupiers not only changed the terms of debate about the current economic crisis, they also challenged urbanists to think about the city in new ways.



We are a year on from the Occupy movements of 2011, and like other participants I've been thinking about their legacy. In Spain, Greece, Britain and America relatively small numbers of protesters made a big noise about the evils of capitalism; to me, though, the movement's lasting gift was embodied in the very word "occupy." The protests occurred in spaces where people did not belong, taking place in plazas (New York), church steps (London), or shopping malls (Madrid) where protesters had no right to assemble. The Occupy movements dramatised questions about public space — who owns it? who can use it? — and provided some surprising answers.

In America, in principle, there should be no public problem. The First Amendment to the American Constitution reads in part "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech ... or the right of the people peaceably to assemble ..." Over the centuries, this right has been refined and hedged but still hews to the opinion of the Supreme Court in 1875 (*United States vs. Cruickshank*) that freedom of speech is "an attribute of national citizenship." This guarantee is broader than that in the unwritten British constitution, which accords freedom of speech mainly to those speaking in Parliament, and more precise than the vaguely-worded right to assemble accorded to citizens in Spain or Greece. Across the board, though, freedom of speech and assembly is defined in terms of the relation between citizen and national government.

The rights nations give, cities easily take away. In New York City, for instance, you need permission from the local authorities if more than 20 people gather in a park, if more than 50 bicycles parade on a street, if the speakers use amplified sound; Washington, D.C. requires permits for 25 people to assemble on the National Mall; a march along the streets can be permit-free only if it involves fewer than 100 people and keeps to a single lane. Today, London is more Draconian than either New York or Washington, due to the anarchic riots which occurred six months before St. Paul's was occupied; political protesters are now lumped together with looters as threats to public order. Local freedom has been more ambiguous in Madrid and Greece, since many police themselves have spontaneously demonstrated against austerity cuts; still, crowd control by using tear gas or water-cannon is a decision for local authorities to make.

Tents and sleeping bags were the "weapons" with which the Occupy movements tested the city's limits on freedom of assembly. When allowed, legitimate protest is usually framed by the idea that protesters will pass through public space, not dwell in it — the march rather than the camp. The occupation of Tiananmen in Beijing in 1989 violated this norm on a much larger and infinitely more tragic scale than the camps set up last year. However, the Occupy settlements were clever in exploiting two ambiguities in the meaning of public space.

The first is an urban ambiguity in the distinction of public and private. Since the Second World War, most



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cities will allow a new building to become very tall if the developers make space at the building's base open to the public; in New York City, this planning principle is embodied in its 1961 Zoning Resolution. Which has meant that Zuccotti Park, in the very belly of the Wall Street capitalist beast, must be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to the public, though it's still privately maintained. By camping in this park (which is really a plaza, since it is tightly knit into the surrounding street fabric), the protesters raised the question of who controls such space, the police or the buildings' owners? While the authorities dithered, the occupiers occupied.

The second ambiguity is between secular and sacred space in the city. London Occupiers established themselves on the north flank outside St. Paul's Cathedral, crowding near but not blocking the main door to the west. At first the Church fathers were minded to call in the police; this violated, however, a tradition established in the Middle Ages that a church should provide sanctuary in the city, offering refuge in cloister gardens for the poor and outcast. Citing this tradition, the Dean of St. Paul's argued against his superiors, and resigned; they too dithered. Eventually the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, weighed in, arguing that sanctuary applied to political protesters. The ambiguity, though, was that the Occupiers were not seeking invisibility, as an outcast might; whenever a congregant went into church to pray, he or she passed next to an often noisy anti-capitalist gathering.

Both these smudges have played out in my mind and work during the last year. Shortly after the protests ended in New York, the architect Harry Cobb, the landscape designer Ken Smith, and I had a chance to compete for a re-design of the base of the National Mall in Washington, the pool and surrounding area nearest the Congress. The original brief was to design a space for free speech in the nation's capital, but the brief shifted when Congressional officials took charge of the project; they feared protest too close at hand. Still, it seemed to us we could design a space for people to occupy, informally, for just lounging about if not protesting; the lesson of Zuccotti Park for me was that ambiguous public/private space — which the Mall is in its own way — creates an opportunity for unscripted participation. We designed a place equally family-friendly and protester-friendly.

We lost the competition, which is perhaps not surprising, but the idea of unscripted space has stayed with me; the coming year I'll be working with the activist Stephen Duncombe on such spaces for free speech in New York City. Efforts like ours — a similar project is afoot in London — are paper exercises, but such images can, as it were, throw grit into the machinery of official planning. More generally, urbanists now want to loosen the vise-like grip of regulation in order to enable urbanites to bring public space to life; the Occupy movements have offered one razor-sharp lesson in where to do so.

But this impulse also opens up a big question, that of how to create truly public/private shared space. In the past half-century, cities around the world have privatised the public realm of the city, as in gated communities whose streets and amenities are no longer open to ordinary citizens; more insidiously, paid-for parking on streets is a daily privatising of public space, as though the immobile cars own the street. Sometimes forceful planners can countervail, like the New York City traffic commissioner, Jeanette Sadik-Khan, who has taken back much of the streetscape of midtown Manhattan, but these victories are tenuous as well as arduous. The structural trend is to take away from the public spaces it can call its own. Occupy in both New York and London had to be quite clever to find ambiguous sites to colonise, but it raised awareness that these places are today few and far between.

The other legacy is perhaps more subtle. Religious sanctuaries in the city have been all about offering protection to the vulnerable or spaces for meditation for the devout; when these sacred spaces are put to secular use, what do they offer instead?

I was struck at the Occupy sites in Zuccotti Park and outside St. Paul's how much "downtime" people who camped out for days together had, since you can't spend day and night chanting. The occupiers in both places were good self-organizers of such downtime; soon after Zuccotti Park was taken over on September 17, 2011, working groups were set up for food, sanitation, medical, and comfort; in London, the camp outside St. Paul's was nearly spotless.

These protected spaces did shelter the truly down-and-out, but also harbored middle-aged unemployed office workers or old-age pensioners, as well as the articulate Lefty students you would expect; in

London, the site even drew in off-duty policemen who faced shortly losing their jobs. During downtime the melange of people chatted, traded life stories, and cleaned.

Sanctuary provided an experience of temporary community. To be sure, the numbers of people who experienced this social bond were small. Though the statistics are imprecise, the most impartial estimates put about 200 people sleeping in Zuccotti Park before it was temporarily closed by the police on November 15, 2011, about 750 Occupiers after it re-opened; London harbored about 200 “residents.”

Still, social bonding during the experience may help explain why, when journalists asked, “what do you want? what’s your program, your policy?” the Occupiers often responded “you don’t get it.” The point in time became each other, by making a space where they didn’t belong into their own.

Though temporary intimacies of these sort are easy to romanticise, over the last year I’ve found the experience more and more provoking; it’s challenged a long-held belief. Jane Jacobs once famously declared that “if density and diversity give life” to public space, “the life they breed is disorderly.” In my planning work I’ve translated this idea into practice by seeking to make self-contained public spaces more porous, for instance by extending open-air markets into side-streets in Beirut or punching more doors into single-entrance buildings in London. Porosity has been a guiding principle for other urbanists inspired by Jane Jacobs, from Jan Gehl in Copenhagen to Charles Correa in Mumbai; following this guide, we know public spaces can more stimulate the bodily senses of smell, sound, sight and touch in an informal if not disorderly fashion.

Whereas the orderly, temporary communities of Occupy stimulated during downtime more verbal than visceral informal exchanges. Porous or protected public space? This abstract issue, which I’ve been turning over in my mind the last year, has a sharp political edge. The Occupy sanctuaries were, at best, semi-legal. You had to fight the authorities for it.

What will the legacy of the Occupy movements be? It’s become a commonplace to lump together the Occupy movements with the wave of protests in 2011 along the Mediterranean rim of Africa — which confuses the achievements of both groups. In Libya and Egypt masses of people were locked in mortal combat against tyrants, whereas the Occupiers were a relatively small group who changed the terms of debate about the current economic crisis. In the process, they also challenged urbanists like me to think about the city in new ways.

The post is linked to the joint conference ‘[Presence and Absence in the City](#)’, 12-13 October 2012 at Columbia University which will be live streamed.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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