

Concentrating minds: how the Greeks designed spaces for public debate

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*What can we learn from ancient Greece when it comes to designing spaces for political debate? In an article for *Theatrum Mundi*, **Richard Sennett** describes how ancient Athenians used amphitheatres and the agora to debate, take decisions and participate in public life. He recalls Aristotle's notion of how a complex urban society could reconcile differences. Modern societies – where concentrating on a political question has become ever more difficult – need public spaces conducive to focus and deliberation.*



A drawing of the remains of the Pnyx in Athens, 1887, from *Griechenland in Wort und Bild* by Heinrich Schmidt and Carl Gunther, via [Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation](#). Public domain

I am not going to speak about the present, but about the past: about the foundations on which our democracy is based. These foundations were rooted in cities, in their civic spaces. We need to remember this history to think about how democratic cities should be made today.

A democracy supposes people can consider views other than their own. This was Aristotle's notion in the *Politics*. He thought the awareness of difference occurs only in cities, since the every city is formed by *synoikismos*, a drawing together of different families and tribes, of competing economic interests, of natives with foreigners.

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"Difference" today seems about identity – we think of race, gender, or class. Aristotle's meant something more by difference; he included also the experience of doing different things, of acting in divergent ways which do not neatly fit together. The mixture in a city of action as well as identity is the foundation of its distinctive politics. Aristotle's hope was that when a person becomes accustomed to a diverse, complex milieu he or she will cease reacting violently when challenged by something strange or contrary. Instead, this environment should create an outlook favourable to discussion of differing views or conflicting interests. Almost all modern urban planners subscribe to this Aristotelian principle. But if in the same space different persons or activities are merely concentrated, but each remains isolated and segregated, diversity loses its force. Differences have to interact.

Classical urbanism imagines two kinds of spaces in which this interaction could occur. One was the pnyx, an amphitheatre in which citizens listened to debates and took collective decisions; the other was the agora, the town square in which people were exposed to difference in a more raw, unmediated form.

The Pnyx was a bowl-shaped, open-air theatre about ten minutes' walk from the central square of Athens. Chiselled out of a hill, the Pnyx in form resembled other Greek theatres, and like them originally provided space for dancing and plays. In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Athenians put this ordinary theatre to a different use, in seeking for order in their politics. Speakers stood in the open, round space on a stone platform called a bema, so that they could be seen by everyone in the theatre; behind the speaker the land dropped away, so that words seemed to hover in the air between the mass of five to six thousand bodies gathered together and the empty sky; the sun from morning to late afternoon struck the speaker's face so that nothing in his expression or gestures was obscured by shadow. The audience for this political theatre sat around the bowl in assigned places, men sitting with others who belonged to the same local tribe. The citizens watched each other's reactions as intently as the orator at the bema.

People sat or stood in this relation for a long time – as long as the sunlight lasted. The theatrical space thus functioned as a detection mechanism, its focus and duration meant to get beneath the surface of momentary impressions. And such a disciplinary space of eye, voice, and body had one great virtue: through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient political theatre sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.

In the Pnyx, two visual rules thus organised the often raucous meetings at which people took decisions: exposure, both of the speaker and of the audience to one another, and fixity of place, in where the speaker stood and the audience sat. These two visual rules supported a verbal order: a single voice speaking at any one time.

The other space of democracy was the Athenian agora. The town square consisted of a large open space crossed diagonally by the main street of Athens; at the sides of the agora were temples and buildings called stoas, the latter sheds with an open side onto the agora. A number of activities occurred simultaneously in the agora – commerce, religious rituals, casual hanging out. In the open space lay also a rectangular law court, surrounded by a low wall, so that citizens banking or making an offering to the gods, could also follow the progress of justice. The stoa helped resolve this confusion; as one moved inside the building out of the open space, one moved from a public realm in which citizens freely intermingled into more private spaces. The rooms at the back of the stoas were used for dinner parties and private meetings. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the stoa was the transition space just under the shelter of the roof on the open side; here one could retreat yet keep in touch with the square.

The Athenian agora made differences among male citizens interact in two ways. First, in the open space of the agora there were few visual barriers between events occurring at the same time, so that men did not experience physical compartmentalisation. As a result, in coming to the town square to deal with a banker, you might be suddenly caught up in a trial occurring in the law court, shouting out your own opinion or simply taking in an unexpected problem. Secondly, the agora established a space for stepping back from engagement. This occurred at the edge, just under the roof of the stoa on its open side; here was a fluid, liminal zone of transition between private and public.

These two principles of visual design, lack of visual barriers but a well-defined zone of transition between public and private, shaped people's experience of language. The flow of speech was less continuous and singular than in the Pnyx; in the agora, communication through words became more fragmentary, as people moved from one scene to another. The operations of the eye were correspondingly more active and varied in the agora than in the Pnyx; a person standing under the stoa roof looked out, his eye searching, scanning. In the Pnyx the eye was fixed on a single scene, that of the orator standing at the bema; at most, the observer scanned the reactions of people sitting elsewhere, fixed in their seats.

This ancient example illustrates how the making of theatres and town squares can be put to democratic use. The theatre organises the sustained attention required for decision-making; the square is a school for the often

fragmentary, confusing experience of diversity. The square prepares people for debate; the theatre visually disciplines their debating.

The most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate rather than ‘surf’ social reality

This is, of course, in principle. Throughout their long history, these two urban forms have been put to many divergent or contrary uses. We need only think of the Nazi spectacles in Germany to summon an image of theatrically-focused attention dedicated to totalitarian ends.

Yet the most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate rather than “surf” social reality. It is for this reason that I’ve come to believe that designers need to pay attention to the architecture of theatres as possible political spaces. Live theatre aims at concentrating the attention of those within it. To achieve sustained attention, to commit people to one another even when the going gets rough or becomes boring, to unpack the meaning of arguments, all require a disciplinary space for the eye and the voice.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It was first published by [Theatrum Mundi](#).

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What are the limits of design in addressing the political and/or when has design not been enough? *This question lies at the heart of [Designing Politics](#), an ongoing project at [Theatrum Mundi](#). Now in its third year of organising ideas challenges in cities around the world, Theatrum Mundi gathered a group of architects, academics, artists and activists in May 2016 to reflect on the questions it asks, and the fundamental relationship between design and politics.*

