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# The Civitas of Seeing

## Richard Sennett

I want to talk about one problem in particular—probably the most vexing issue now in urban studies—which is how to see socially and morally. First, I will try to define what we mean by “public,” as a social and moral term; second, I’d like to share with you some worries I have about the way in which the term “public space” is abused so that it doesn’t convey a social or moral dimension; and finally, I will talk about the public realm as a social and moral dimension of city life.

“Public” meant to the Greeks *synoikismos*, which is also the word for “making a city.” The first part, *syn*, is a coming together; and the second, *oikos*, was a household unit in Greece, something between a family and a village—maybe the word “tribe” captures it, with its slaves, services, and so on. Greek cities were formed when these *oiki* migrated into a central place. They did so for two obvious reasons—as long as they were exposed out there on the Greek hills, they could be annihilated; and their economies never grew, unless they grew together.

What *synoikismos* denotes, however, is a peculiar problem; it isn’t just putting people together functionally. The term literally means to bring together in the same place people who need each other but worship different household gods. The public problem for the Greeks was how people who needed each other functionally, but didn’t share the same values, who didn’t worship the same gods, could live in the same place. That’s a public

problem that persists in all Western cities: How can we let people live together who worship different household gods? How do differing people find a means of using the word “we”?

The meaning of the word “public” has been pretty debased. Most practical use of the terms “public” and “public spaces” in cities connotes spaces where people go to buy things. We think about shopping malls, downtowns, and so on, in terms of consumption, pleasure. What’s missing is any sense of the Greek notion of *polis*, which is that there’s something more consequent, more political, about different people being concentrated together in the same place.

How will people learn from each other’s differences? Most shopping malls depend on constant circulation of traffic. If people sit down for two or three hours, as they might in a Parisian cafe, and just discuss, they’re using the space, but they’re not using it economically. One of the tricks of the people who design malls is not to provide many places to sit very long. Also, laws against loitering are enforced in malls. These are ways of preventing the kind of social action, interaction, in a public place that gets beyond the circulating and consuming.

The second thing *synoikismos* connotes is how people know they’re in the center of some place. For the Greeks that came out of the problem of having to be with people who are unlike yourself; that is, the center is the place where all of you feel that the moment for

confronting difference occurs. For them, it was the *agora*, a place of talk, discussion, and shopping. (The market function was intermittent—the markets had closed by nine in the morning—but the *agoras* were still used.) To put it another way, the center is turf that people have fought for and in some way suffered for. It’s the sense of belonging that people in London had after the Second World War—turf that mattered because something important had been lived there. To have a meaningful city center, something has to happen there politically. That’s what the Greeks discovered, and it’s a very simple and profound principle.

But we don’t know how to make this work in the modern world. We have two reflex actions, which are each self-defeating. One is to simulate past models of what “public” looks like, and the other is, oddly enough, to privatize the public realm. The plan of Williamsburg, for instance, came out of a whole sense of establishing a colony in the midst of an alien and very threatening wilderness. That play of right angles in its spaces has to do with the expression of protection; you’ve created a center by being in a hostile place. You’ll find people who will tell you, “We’ll do a Williamsburg, this is a time-tested morphology, right?” It’s what cities used to look like, but we can’t recreate the social and economic circumstances that made those models—they were lived experiences.

We copy the morphologies, but we could never go back and copy the political and social circumstances



that gave birth to them. In other words, it's DisneyWorld as public space, and it's no accident that DisneyWorld is the most apparently successful simulated public space created in the 1970s in the United States. It's a place where nothing painful happens, a place that completely depoliticizes your experience of all you see.

Alternative to that is a privatization of public space. If you want to put together where people work, where they live, and where their schools are, so that, for instance, workers can have day care for their children, you go outside the city, find a piece of land, and build a campus. There's some housing, a school, medical facilities, and one factory. But that's not public, that's a company town; it doesn't confront the fact of difference. You must have something in it that's dissonant, that requires people to say, "This is one way to live, but that's another"—then you've created a public realm. We're in trouble intellectually in urban studies because we can't really think of forms of the public realm that are, as it were, appropriate to the pains of our society.

Three specific problems emerge as a way to think out these issues. They're all problems that result in different kinds of space. The first, and most elemental, is how to use public space so that people who are unlike actually get to talk to one another; how to use space as a forum for discourse. The kinds of places that aren't public are those that you look at in silence. Things that seem to us to be the minutiae

of planning, that parks departments delegate to some junior person, turn out to be incredibly important when you begin thinking about the city as a place where people have to learn to talk to others. How do you design things that seem trivial, such as street architecture, benches, and planters: how do you get to a design where the benches don't face out, but face each other? This issue has all sorts of implications for how police, for instance, deal with loitering. Police, today, and this is not their fault, are trained to think that when somebody gets up and starts talking to a crowd of people, they've got a crazy on their hands. Rethinking the practices of urbanism is involved in creating a place in which people can talk to each other, and this is a huge issue. You can't have a public realm, you can't have *synoikismos*, if people don't exchange with one another, and the element of exchange is talk.

The second issue is the geography of justice; that is, how we study the ecology of the city in terms of questions of justice. David Harvey, in his wonderful book *Justice and the City*, puts forward the notion that at the seams of cities, where areas join, is where all the action takes place publicly. Where unlikes join is where *synoikismos* should happen. But we have found a whole language for sealing off the edges, the social edges of cities, because we're afraid of what might happen at those seams. What's the best way to deal with a potentially explosive situation? Segregate the people by fast-moving traffic, right? That depoliticizes the city, and everybody loses because it means that

*You move into an area that all of us had an agreement on: until you get housing downtown, rich people living downtown, as well as poor people, you won't have a downtown. Housing is absolutely a sine qua non to cities.*

*Master plans are political documents as well as physical documents—who gets rewarded, who is disenfranchised, whose interests are represented and protected?*

Jaquelin Robertson  
Dean, School of Architecture  
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differences don't interact. We need a way to reconceive the city so that we can locate the geography of justice and injustice. How about capitalizing on *synoikismos* by manipulating the edges where poor and rich people are, where business and commerce meet? How about finding ways of making the city what it actually is, a place where those who are unlike find some sense of mattering to each other?

The third issue we're bedeviled by—and this is most philosophical, and that means most practical—is how space can serve the community's moral purposes. Space is subject to the moral constraints of community. The problem is we don't know how to translate the ways in which we think ethically into any kind of visual equivalents.

An example is the question of drugs, which becomes a spatial problem in cities. Drug dealers essentially require a territory that only they occupy; in New York, parks such as Washington Square or Union Square are territories that drug dealers colonize, gradually moving the other people out; they become homogenized spaces. How does one regain such a space by getting rid of the people who have colonized it? How can the space become a place where there are lots of different people?

It takes one in some odd directions. I, who was born left-wing and will die left-wing, have become a proponent of police harassment. I now understand the logic of daily arrests. The dealer who is arrested, even if he's out on the street the

next day, hasn't been doing business for eight hours, and eventually the people who buy from him may move on as they find their supplies disrupted. But the issue of how you create a space that operates morally is visual as well. In New York one of the best park designs is Union Square. It was essentially a podium park, up three feet seven inches from the ground, and ringed with a very nice fringe of boxwood—which meant that from the ground you couldn't see very much inside. For many years it was a happy haven for cocaine dealers. But the city cut the box hedges down, ripped out trees, and cut into the podium. They opened it up so that now the sight line from any part of the park is clear across. That gave old people, of whom there are many in that area of the city, the confidence that they could get in without being subjected to the dealers.

Now that's a kind of terrible example of the way in which moral values can be visually enacted; that is to say, you create visibility so you can displace the population that had colonized the space. There are many more positive ways of looking at this issue. For instance, how do we create ways of protecting, not just poor people, but lower middle class people, and middle class people, in and near the centers of cities, so that they are not subjected to pressures to leave where they've lived—turf they've dedicated their lives to—for two, even three generations. Suddenly all this cash is coming into their neighborhoods—the dollar amounts look incredible—and their communities

fall apart. How, through zoning, moral zoning, do you protect a community from gentrification? It's the people who, in the 1940s and 1950s, were left behind to tough it out in the urban core who are now the ones subject to these processes.

There are then a whole host of political, economic, and zoning questions that all come back to looking at the city as a moral community. Not moralizing, but moral: a city in which people have the feeling that something really important, something that's absolutely critical in their lives, is happening because they're in a certain place.

It's very hard for Americans to have a sense of place in that way. The difficulty we've had with our cities is making place matter in this political sense. A city isn't just a place to live, to shop, to go out and have kids play. It's a place that implicates how one derives one's ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, and most of all how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human.

The problem of public space in this country is a really difficult one, because we are so placeless; but it's the kind of problem that urbanists are trying to put their hands on in a way that is neither a simulation of past models nor a withdrawal into an ideal little community where everything is controlled, a campus where at last one does one's work in private. What I want to see is public work done in cities, and in public.