EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Public Space Beyond The City Centre: Suburban and Periurban Dynamics

Roza Tchoukaleyska
Department of Geography
Memorial University

Theresa Enright
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

Ute Lehrer
Faculty of Environmental Studies
York University

Questions on the meaning and function of public space are at the heart of vibrant debates across the social sciences, and geography and urban studies in particular. In an era when sites viewed as 'public' are undermined by processes of neoliberal restructuring and increasing privatization, academic work has traced the contested nature of public space by engaging with questions on political representation, belonging, and the commercialization of public life, amongst others (Mitchell, 2003; Low and Smith, 2006; Kohn, 2004; Springer, 2011; Ye, 2019). Much of this research has examined dense city centres and their plazas, parks, streets, gardens, festivals and markets, giving public space work a distinct 'urban' focus. What happens in public space beyond these nodes of intense aleatory encounters? Through this special issue, we bring together papers interested in public space beyond the city centre. That is, public space in suburban and periurban locations, including high-rise neighbourhoods and new exurban divisions, and in communities located at the interstices of the city-region. We are interested in how the values associated with public space—as an accessible site open to a range of uses, and a place of collective engagement and interaction—map out as we step away from downtown. Additionally, we are concerned with how struggles over and within public space proceed in non-central places.

Through our approach, we define public space as both a physical site and a set of socio-cultural relations. Drawing on Houssay-Holzschuch and Thébault's (2017) typology, public space can be understood as: a political site, where debate can take place; a legal space, where questions of ownership are negotiated; and a place of sociability that enables interaction and engagement. Following Staeheli and Mitchell (2007), it is a site where notions of who comprises 'the public' are shaped, and one where relationships between private and public spheres are delineated. Noting that while a singular definition of public space is rarely possible, Staeheli and Mitchell (2007) argue that it is precisely this ambiguity that makes this a potent issue: civic inclusions depends,

in part, on how 'the public' is framed and where it is situated, while the capacity of users to appropriate and occupy sites viewed as 'public' is emblematic of wider social, political, and economic processes (cf. Blomley, 2005; Spocter, 2007; Chiodelli and Moroni, 2015; Qian, 2018). At the same time, Banerjee (2001) has argued that it is public life—rather than public space—which is of importance, thereby recognizing the role of semi-public and private sites to urban vitality. Built largely on urban case studies, the growing body of work has considered the complexity of public space as both a site of cultural value and a location where civic citizenship and belonging are negotiated (Watson, 2009; Gehl, 2011; Koch and Latham, 2012) as well as a place for political struggles (Shiffman et al. 2012).

Beyond the city centre, the meaning and function of public space has been most frequently considered in relation to suburban malls and their neighbourhoods. Often in the debates on privatization of public spaces, suburban shopping malls emerge as arenas where the democratic facet of public life is replaced with a carefully managed consumer ethos (Voyce, 2006), with detrimental effects on wider engagement and accessibility (Lestrade, 2007). Yet in other cases, the suburban mall is viewed as a key community space and site of resistance to globalization (Southworth, 2005; Parlette and Cowan, 2011) and place of identity making (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009; Kato, 2009). The role of public space in suburban and peri-urban neighbourhoods is equally complex, with Kopits, McConnell and Walls (2007) indicating that open space in a subdivision increases the resale value of private property, making public space a marketable commodity. At the same time, Kimpton, Wickes, and Corcoran (2014) note that access to suburban green space is linked to health benefits, echoing findings in urban areas, while Gibson et al. (2012) identify the suburbs as sites of creativity with a network of 'hot spots' that draw in visitors. Alongside this, Valentine et al. (2008) have argued that urban moral panics about youth and public intoxication do not translate to rural areas, in part because of a reliance on private homes and semi-public sites to fulfil social functions, rendering young people less visible in public locations. For Most (2011) rural libraries are especially important as meeting places—and locations where public life evolves (Banerjee, 2001)—while Veitch et al. (2013) note that rural parks lack the range of amenities and safety features of urban parks. This literature suggests that rural and suburban sites share many similarities with urban location, not least the social importance of public space, tensions between private and public ownership, and the economic value of semi-public and open sites. It also identifies some divergences: while urban public spaces are used for protests and demonstrations, overt political action may be more uncommon in less urbanized locations; equally, the reliance on private homes and indoor places for community functions may suggest a different rhythm of encounter, engagement, and community vitality.

The papers in this special issue engage with these topics, and draw on Canadian case studies to examine public space in newly designed suburban developments, peri-urban gated communities, and centre-adjacent high-rise neighbourhoods. They raise questions about how public space is produced and defined beyond the city centre, and how resistance and political action takes place once we step away from the busy, pedestrian routes of downtown areas. In instances where urban pressure can result in suburban growth and exurban expansion, the authors of this special issue also consider public space dynamics emerging from these relations.

In their contribution, Annika Arias and Peter V. Hall consider how public space and public life is being reconfigured within the vast exurban waterfronts of Vancouver's metropolitan hinterland. Waterfront developments are now a hallmark of post-industrial urban planning all over the world, yet Arias and Hall note that there has been surprisingly little academic attention to non-central waterfront dynamics. With a focus on the suburban community of Squamish, they argue that these non-central locations can be key "sites of experimentation where new forms of public space are being generated." Arias and Hall trace heterogeneous historical discourses and narratives of public-ness and collectivity that cohere in Squamish's waterfront developments. Nevertheless, they note that a constrained form of urbanism dominates today. An elite consumption-residential strategy of redevelopment imported from the central city erases local diversity and character and places limits on for whom and for what purposes the waterfront is planned.

The imagined user of public space is also central to Cara Chellew's incisive analysis of defensive design. Chellew argues that suburban public spaces are key sites of articulation for the fortification and securitization of space. For Chellew, analyses of defensive design which focus on central urban areas miss the diverse and geographically specific ways that public spaces are governed and the variety of ways that they regulate and discipline users and uses. Through attention to two parks in North York, Toronto, she clarifies the tensions

between inclusive and exclusive principles of public space design, as well as the unevenness of Toronto's regional planning practices. In so doing, she illuminates the often-ignored hostility and violence of public space.

Theresa Enright and Christina McIntyre look beyond the city centre to the East End of Toronto to ask how art is involved in neighbourhood change around a high-rise apartment complex. Through their in-depth analysis of the Main Squared arts and cultural festival, they question conventional narratives of gentrification which tend to assume central city districts and urban renewal processes. They argue that because of its use of community as opposed to elite arts as well as its unsettled position within regional growth patterns, culture-led placemaking outside of the urban core may provide greater potentials for social development. In so doing, they highlight the contested nature of public space creation, as well as the geographic specificity of these dynamics.

Loren March and Ute Lehrer are also interested in the role that public space plays in high-rise apartment buildings that were built on the outskirts of cities two to three generations ago and that face redevelopment pressures. The authors analyze the potential role of public participation in defining the outcome of tower redevelopment projects and how to engage residents in the reimagination of public space in a meaningful way. By looking at two two cases in Hamilton, one where inhabitants were the drivers in redefining public space and the other one where inhabitants were absent in remodeling of amenities and the integration of the building into the newly evolving landscape of upgrading an entire neighborhood, the authors argue that it might help to engage with the hybrid nature of public space in the context of high-rise buildings.

Lucy Lynch casts her glance even further afield from the urban core, to the Friday Harbour Resort development in Innisfil, one hour north of Toronto. It is in this "cottage-condo" community, a blurry urban-rural-suburban entanglement, that Lynch identifies a new kind of growth coalition. Lynch analyzes the unique regulatory and design pathways behind Friday Harbour to question how the resort has privatized governance, circumvented regional growth policies, and reduced access to collective amenities. She also uses this luxury leisure site where town and resort intermix to call into question the complex configuration of public land and space.

Taken together, these contributions provide new empirical analyses on the dynamics of regional transformation in Canada. Through their extroverted perspective, they also usefully extend and reframe conventional theories and concepts of urban public space. Without reifying a strict division between core and periphery, they make a compelling case for public space researchers to look beyond the city centre and to the complex and varied dynamics of extensive urbanization.

References

Banerjee, T. (2001). The future of public space: Beyond invented streets and reinvented places. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 67 (1), 9-24.

Blomley, N. (2005). Flowers in the bathtub: Boundary crossing at the public private divide. *Geoforum* 36(3): 281-296.

Chiodelli, F. and Moroni, S. (2015). Do malls contribute to the privatization of public space and erosion of the public sphere? Reconsidering the role of shopping centres. *City, Culture and Society*, 6, 35-42.

Gehl, J. (2011). *Life between buildings: using public space*. Translated by J. Koch. Washington: Island Press.

Gibson, C., Brennan-Horley, C., Laurenson, B., Riggs, N., Warren, A., Gallan, B. and Brown, H. (2012). Cool places, creative places? Community perceptions of cultural vitality in the suburbs. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(3), 287-302.

Houssay-Holzschuch, M. and Teppo, A. (2009). A mall for all? Race and public space in post-apartheid Cape Town. *Cultural Geographies*, 16 (3), 351-379.

Houssay-Holzschuch, M. and Thébault, E. (2015). Dis-locating public space: Occupy Rondebosch Common, Cape Town. *Environment and Planning A*, 49 (3), 555-571.

Kato, Y. (2009). Doing consumption and sitting cars: Adolescent bodies in suburban commercial spaces. *Children's Geographies*, 7(1), 51-66.

Kimpton, A., Wickes, R. and Corcoran, J. (2014). Greenspace and place attachment: Do greener suburbs lead to greater residential place attachment? *Urban Policy and Research*, 32(4), 477-497.

Koch, R and Latham, A. (2012). Rethinking urban public space: accounts from a junction in West London. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(4), 515-529.

Kohn, M. (2004). *Brave new neighborhoods: The privatization of public space*. New York: Routledge.

Kopits, E., McConnell, V. and Walls, M. (2007). The trade-off between private lots and public open space in subdivisions at the urban-rural fringe. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 89(5), 1191-1197.

Lestrade, S. (2007). Des usines aux centres commerciaux : reconversion économique et développement durable en proche banlieue parisienne. *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français*, 84(4), 373-385.

Low, S.M and Smith, N. (2006). *The politics of public space*. New York, Routledge.

Mitchell, D. (2003). *The right to the city: social justice and the fight for public space*. New York, Guilford Press.

Most, L. (2011). The rural public library as place: A theoretical analysis. In: D. Williams and J. Golden (Eds.), *Advances in Library Administration and Organization,* Volume 30. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 51-149. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0732-0671(2011)0000030005

Parlette, V. and Cowen, D. (2011). Dead malls: suburban activism, local space, global logistics. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(4), 794-811.

Qian, J. (2018). Geographies of public space: Variegated publicness, variegated epistemologies. *Progress in Human Geography*. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518817824

Shiffman, R., Bell, B., Brown, L.J., and Elisabeth, L. (2012). *Beyond Zuccotti Park: Freedom of assembly and the occupation of public space.* New York: New Village Press.

Southworth, M. (2005). Reinventing Main Street: from mall to townscape mall. *Journal of Urban Design*, 10(2), 151-170.

Spocter, M. (2007). The 'silent' closure of urban public space in Cape Town: 1975 to 2004. *Urban Forum,* 18, 153-170.

Springer, S. (2011). Public space as emancipation: meditations on anarchism, radical democracy, neoliberalism and violence. *Antipode*, 43(2), 525-562.

Staeheli, L. and Mitchell, D. (2007). Locating the public in research and practice. *Progress in Human Geography*, 31(6), 792-811.

Valentine, G., Holloway, S., Knell, C. and Jayne, M. (2008). Drinking places: Young people and cultures of alcohol consumption in rural environments. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 24, 28-40.

Veitch, J., Salmon, J., Ball, K., Crawford, D. and Timperio, A. (2013). Do features of public open space vary between urban and rural areas? *Preventive Medicine,* 56, 107-111.

Voyce, M. (2006). Shopping malls in Australia: the end of public space and the rise of 'consumerist citizenship'?. *Journal of Sociology*, 42(3), 269-286.

Watson, S. (2009). The magic of the marketplace: sociability in a neglected public space. *Urban Studies*, 46(8), 1577-1591.

Ye, J. (2019). Re-orienting geographies of urban diversity and coexistence: Analyzing inclusion and difference in public space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(3), 478-495.