What Makes Public Space Public?

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The question I will be addressing in the presentation is what makes public space public? Focusing on how city inhabitants themselves make this distinction (rather than political-economic criteria), I will present the concept of “public legitimation”, which I define as a process by which particular urban spaces become recognized as legitimately representing the collective interest and/or identity of a local public. I will then discuss ways in which the material features of a space impact whether or not it will gain legitimacy, and conclude with a discussion of how established legitimacy impacts the social actions of different groups within the urban environment. My presentation will draw on examples from a wide variety of urban sociological studies, as well as from my own dissertation work.

My interest in developing a new approach to public space comes from my dissertation work in the area of culture-led urbanization. This subfield of urban studies investigates the causes and consequences of cultural strategies for stimulating post-industrial urban economies. Often these strategies include building places within cities that facilitate the consumption of unique cultural amenities aimed at attracting outside investment into the local economy (Miles and Paddison 2005). Some of the best known examples of culture-led urbanization include the development of the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and the work of Richard Florida (2002) in promoting the “creative city”. My own research investigates two iconic architectural

Within the existing literature, scholars have often categorized and evaluated culture-led developments according to a series of dichotomies. In general, these developments have been classified as cosmopolitan or globally-focused rather than locally-focused (Sklair 2006, 2005; McNeill 2005), designed for the production of exchange-value rather than use-value (Logan and Molotch 1987; Harvey 1989), serving exclusive private use rather than inclusive public use (Lees 2003; Peck 2005; Zukin 1995, 1991), alienating to local residents rather than embodying a sense of local ownership (Ho 2006; Friedmann 2007), and representing an expression of power and domination of elites rather than consensus within civil society (Kaika and Thielen 2006).

What these dichotomies are often implicitly referring to is the broader question of whether or not culture-led developments constitute public space – which is an important question considering that these developments often rely on public concessions (Hannigan 1998: 137-143). The literature is generally sceptical on this question, since public space is conventionally defined as being inclusive and administered by and for the local public. However, before we can fully reach a conclusion on the ‘public-ness’ of culture-led developments, we must have a clear idea of what makes public space ‘public’ in the first place. Conventionally we define public space based on its political-economic characteristics – ownership and administration, economic function, and physical design. While they are important, political-economic factors are not on their own sufficient for determining what makes public space public. To argue this point, I’ll consider two main
political-economic conceptions of public space: as an economic resource that is universally accessible, and as a publicly-owned and administered service.

If we approach public space as an economic resource, then it should be considered a “public good”. Kingwell (2008) explains that “in classical economics, a good is public when access to it is not gated by ownership, so that its benefits—what make it a good—are available to everyone, and one person’s use of the good does not diminish another’s ability to use it”. However, while this might be the ideal of public space, it has very little resonance with the history of cities. As Listerborn (2005) argues, we cannot identify any historical urban spaces that have not been exclusionary to some groups. While in principle one person’s use of public space should not “diminish another’s ability to use it”, in practice the use of space is often a zero-sum game (Kingwell 2008). In other words, space that is occupied by one group or used for one purpose may disqualify its use by another group or for another purpose. Thus, universal access is not sufficient criteria for explaining public space.

Another popular political-economic approach to public space focuses on ownership and economic function. In this approach, public space is seen as being owned and administered by a publicly accountable agency, and providing space for free public expression (Stillerman 2006:296). However, this distinction is threatened by the rise of what Zukin (1991) refers to as “liminal space”. She describes liminal space as zones that stand “betwixt and between’ major social institutions”, such as between private commerce and public service provision (p.28). With the rise of shopping malls, gated-communities, and public-private partnerships, spaces are increasingly falling somewhere in between traditional notions of public and private (Sandercock and Dovey 2002; Joyce
Indeed, it is doubtful that the institutional division between the private and public sectors has ever been sharp enough in modern society to serve as a sufficient explanation for the difference between public and private space.

Thus while these political-economic distinctions offer us important dimensions for understanding space, they are insufficient on their own for fully explaining what makes public space public. This is because there is nothing intrinsic in the materiality of space that determines whether or not it is public. Rather, I argue that public spaces become public because of the meanings that have become attached to these spaces. It is the inattention to meaning that has limited the ability of urban political-economy to explain public space. These limitations are evident in the frequency by which urban political-economy has been stretched beyond its explanatory range in order to make statements about the meaning of space. For instance, Kaika and Thielen (2006) interpret iconic architecture as sometimes celebrating individualism, and other times acting as a capitalist “temptress”. Ho (2006) argues that state control over buildings weakens “collective sense of ownership” within communities. Friedman (2007) dismisses iconic architecture as not being “lived space” or “humanized”. These claims may be correct, but they cannot be convincing until they specify the mechanism whereby the political-economic characteristics of these spaces lead people to impose certain meanings upon them. In order to establish this missing link, we must take the production of meaning seriously by treating it as an autonomous force rather than being derivative of political-economic conditions.

From Durkheim’s (1912) study of totemic objects to DiMaggio’s (1982) study of high art, sociology has a long history of attempting to explain how societies symbolically
divide up the world around them and award special status and authority to certain people or things. I argue that we can draw on this rich theoretical tradition in order to better conceptualize public space. In particular, I would assert that public space is public because it has gained meaningful *legitimacy*. Public space is public because we, as a public, have accepted that the space legitimately represents our collective interests and/or identity.

A common term in sociology, legitimacy refers to either a status of acceptability or a process by which something becomes acceptable (Baumann 2007a; Zelditch 2001), and it is probably best known from Max Weber’s (1968) discussion of “legitimate domination”. For Weber, legitimation was closely tied with the idea of political “interest”. Legitimation requires convincing people that their interests are being served by accepting domination. This political formulation of legitimacy has been extended in a variety of ways. In some instances legitimacy is characterized as a conservative social force that reinforces domination and inequality (Della Fave 1986; Zelditch 2001; Tarifa 1997; Althusser 2001; and the Frankfurt School), but it has also been seen as a force for change through the legitimation of social movements and new political regimes (Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener 1999; Ferree and Merrill 2000). It should also be noted that the interest associated with political legitimation is not necessarily personal or private interest, but rather a collective *public* interest (Habermas 1976, 1991).

Recently legitimation has also been extended beyond the issue of political interest in order to explain modes of classification or status attainment. Sociologists of culture, for instance, have used legitimation to explain how some cultural products become classified as “art” and are subsequently awarded the cultural status and institutional
rewards associated with this classification (Baumann 2007a, 2007b; Peterson 2003; Bourdieu 1983; Becker 1982). Several scholars have also extended this form of analysis to the study of architecture (Guillén 2006; Molnár 2005; Gartman 2000; Larson 1993), and in doing so have provided an important precedent for the application of legitimacy to space – although these studies have focused more on particular architectural styles rather than actual spaces.

In order to sufficiently explain how public space becomes legitimated as public, we must acknowledge both the political interest and cultural status applications of the concept. Urban development is both a political act that involves one party realizing their will (even against the opposition of others), and it is a cultural act in that it produces an object that can be evaluated according to existing cultural values and aesthetic predispositions. Drawing on both of these dimensions, I define public legitimation as the process by which an urban space or development becomes accepted as a representation of the general interest and/or collective identity of the local public, rather than representing the narrow private interests of those who produced the development. Following from the two approaches to legitimation discussed above, we can specify two dimensions of public legitimacy in urban development:

1. **Practical legitimation** is achieved if the space is seen as facilitating some valued public service as its primary purpose. In this case the function of the building is the focus of legitimation. Many government buildings would fall into this category. National museums and galleries, for instance, house and display valued cultural artefacts out of a mandate of public service, as opposed to producing private profit.
2. Symbolic legitimation is achieved if the development project is understood to embody the collective identity of a particular locality (neighbourhood or city). Here, the specific form of the building is considered valuable and worthy of high status. There is special monumental status awarded to structures that we feel express our collective identity in some way. Heritage protection, for instance, is awarded to buildings that achieve this symbolic status.

   Analytically, I treat public legitimacy as the property of a material space, but it is a property that is immaterial and socially constructed. Legitimacy refers to the subjective meanings that become attached to a space by social actors or groups. These meanings can range anywhere from full legitimacy (when the actors or groups fully accept that the space represents public interest and/or collective identity), to full delegitimacy (where the space is rejected as being a threat to public interest and/or collective identity). The acceptance of legitimacy can also range in scope. Some public spaces are seen as legitimate through a broad consensus that spans many social boundaries, while other public spaces are highly contested and are interpreted quite differently according to different populations.

   Following Blumer (1969), meanings arise out of social interaction. Because legitimation refers to a process of meaning construction, social interaction must be the central focus of empirical analysis. Social actors and groups develop their understanding of which spaces represent public interest and/or collective identity through their ongoing social life within the urban environment. Often the legitimation of a particular space will not become visible until the space is threatened by another group – prompting some form of reaction. In studying legitimation empirically, we can approach the concept as either
an explanadum (dependent variable), or explanada (independent variable). In other
words, we can ask how legitimation emerges out of social interaction within the urban
environment, and we can also ask how established legitimation influences how people act
toward each other and toward the urban environment. In the reminder of this paper I will
be examining these two questions by drawing on existing urban studies research and
presenting initial hypotheses that connect public legitimation back to the political-
economy of space.

What Causes Legitimation?

As an explanadum, we are required to explain how people come to see certain
spaces as representing the public interest and collective identity. While I have
emphasized the role of meaning as being the defining feature of public space, we cannot
explain the construction of meaning without relating it back to its material context.
Below I provide a brief explanations and preliminary hypotheses for how different
material characteristics of a space influence the process of public legitimation.

1. Access and Appropriation

It has been mentioned earlier that public space is often conceptualized as a public
good with universal access. While this ideal may be unachievable in real life, the issue of
access is still consequential for public legitimation. It seems reasonable to hypothesize
that people will develop a stronger meaningful attachment to space that is more
accessible to them. Thus, the more universally accessible a space, the more widespread
legitimacy it will achieve. This connection works through practical legitimacy since
inaccessible spaces will probably not be seen as serving one’s interests. It also works through symbolic legitimacy, since one may not identify with a space that is inaccessible and therefore unfamiliar.

Nonetheless, we cannot overestimate the role of access to space in public legitimation. Consider a comparison between a publicly-owned art gallery and a privately-owned shopping mall. While we may agree that the art gallery is more public than the shopping mall, it may be the mall that is more inclusive. In addition to charging admission fees, the art gallery may only appeal to a limited group of people who possess the right cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983). By comparison, shopping malls are relatively easy to enter and navigate. Therefore, in this case, the most accessible space may not be the most public.

2. Ownership, Administration, and Rules

In addition to access, ownership is another central dimension to existing political-economic approaches to public space. It should be noted, however, that ownership is not necessarily the same thing as administration. Owners do not have total control over the rules that govern their property. Administration may be diffused between multiple sources of authority, including the State which has the power to impose rules on space through legislation. It is common for private property to be subject to various publicly-imposed bylaws which may, for instance, dictate the activities that can occur on the property, or restrict the physical appearance of the property. As well, with the rise of liminality (Zukin 1991) and the public-private partnership (Harvey 1989), the
administration of publicly-owned space is often shared by private groups in exchange for financial contributions or other forms of support.

One of the main influences of ownership and administration on the process of public legitimation is through the rules and regulations over space that owners or administrators can impose. This is because the activities that are allowed to occur within a space are important to the way we understand it. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that established codes of “civility” or conduct are essential for spaces to be considered public, as long as they are enforced equally (Ghorra-Gobin 2009). Indeed, if spaces are to represent public interest and/or collective identity, it may be necessary to impose rules on those spaces in order ensure that they fulfill this function. Commercial activities and advertising, for instance, are banned in many public spaces because they are seen to threaten public legitimacy. Lloyd (2005) provides a good example of how commercial activities can challenge the symbolic legitimacy of space by documenting local resistance to the use of the “Urbis Orbis” building in Wicker Park for the filming of MTV’s Real World: Chicago. By staging a national television show in a building that some saw as a local “institution” (Lloyd 2004: 354), MTV conducted commercial activity that seemed to violate the symbolic association many locals made between the Urbis Orbis building and the collective identity of Wicker Park as a distinct bohemian neighbourhood. Of course, because they lacked any administrative power, the local opposition was unable to prevent MTV from hosting its show.

The types of regulations that are enforced within a space also relate closely to the issue of inclusion and exclusion. This is because regulations often work to exclude those groups that are either unable or unwilling to follow the rules. There has been a great deal
of work examining this form of exclusion. Street vending (Anjaria 2009, Duneier 1999, Orum et al. 2009), skateboarding (Lees 2003), political debate (Orum et al. 2009), and public sleeping (Duneier 1999) are just a few examples of activities that have been subject to bans or crackdowns resulting in the exclusion of certain disadvantaged populations (the homeless, the poor, youth, etc.). Furthermore, many scholars have argued that the rules governing public space have become increasingly restrictive and more intensively enforced within the past few decades. It has been suggested that as cities have adopted neo-liberal governing policies, public spaces have become subject to increased surveillance and tighter enforcement in order to protect their utility for capitalist activities (Peck and Adam 2002). The role of private security forces assigned to particular public spaces – as opposed to public police assigned to entire neighbourhoods – has also been identified as a sign of increased regulation and enforcement within public spaces (Zukin 1995; Shearing and Stenning 1983). The conventional neo-liberal argument suggests that increased regulation makes public space less public by restricting access. However, if we focus on legitimation, we can hypothesize that increased regulation may decrease public legitimacy among those groups who get excluded, and increase legitimacy among those groups who benefit from regulation.  

3. Material Form and Design

As I have explained above, legitimation relates both to the function and form or a particular space. We can examine the impact of the physical design of a space on  

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1 It should be noted that sometimes a lack of regulation can serve to exclude particular groups. Women, for instance, have traditionally been excluded from public spaces that are seen as being too dangerous to enter (Listerborn 2005).
legitimation through both of these paths. First consider function. In his famous article “Do Artefacts Have Politics?” Winner (1980) argued that Robert Moses purposely designed the bridges on his Long Island Parkway to be too low for buses to pass under. Winner reasoned that Moses made this design decision in order prevent Jones Beach in Long Island from being accessible to New York City’s low-income and Black populations, who relied on buses for transportation. Therefore, the argument goes, the Long Island Parkway continues to function according to Moses’ discriminatory and racist politics long after Moses himself was out of the picture.

Although the accuracy of Winner’s historical facts have been called into question (Joerges 1999), the basic premise of his argument – that urban design can serve political ends – should be taken seriously. As with the story of the Long Island Expressways, the design of a space has a real impact on accessibility. In a more recent example, Duneier (1999) documents how Pennsylvania Station was redesigned so that it would no longer function as a hospitable space to New York City’s homeless population. These redesigns included eliminating the “nooks and corners” that the homeless could use to sleep or panhandle out of sight from police and security cameras (p. 131). What we see from both of these examples is that spaces can be designed in order to prevent certain activities and thereby discourage certain populations from entering. Thus, design relates back to my earlier hypothesis that restricted access to space will also restrict public legitimation (at least among the groups that are excluded).

In addition to providing actual physical barriers to the access of a space (function) design also has a symbolic or aesthetic quality (form). The aesthetics of a space can invoke a variety of meaningful responses: excitement, offence, anger, boredom,
admiration, etc. Furthermore, aesthetic tastes often reflect social differences and serve as markers for social boundaries (Bourdieu 1983; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Therefore spaces can be designed to be more aesthetically appealing to some groups rather than others. Zukin (2008) provides a relevant example by demonstrating how Fulton Street in New York City – a popular shopping destination for the local African American population – has been criticized by local Whites who see it as rundown and aesthetically unappealing. Molnár (2005) demonstrates a similar aesthetic disagreement over the architecture of housing projects in Hungary. These cases suggest that the design of space can often be incorporated into “boundary” work that enables groups to symbolically identify areas of the city that belong to them, and then either colonize or isolate the areas they associate with outsiders (Lamont and Molnár 2002). I hypothesize is that a space will gain more legitimacy when its design resonates with the aesthetic tastes of a particular group – especially when the form is symbolically associated with the collective identity of the group.

4. Age

The relationship between the public legitimacy of a building and its age has been an important issue arising out of my own research on the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, because both projects involve adding 21st century expansions to early 20th century historic buildings. However, this relationship has been largely unexamined in the existing literature. Do spaces ‘naturally’ become legitimated as they age? Or, alternatively, do spaces need to be purposely and socially constructed as legitimate by tastemakers? Research in the sociology of culture seems to support the
latter hypothesis. The rise of new aesthetic trends and art forms has been shown to be
caused by purposeful action resembling a social movement (Bauman 2007a; Peterson
2003). In the case of buildings, it may be naïve to assume that old buildings are
intrinsically more aesthetically appealing and symbolically legitimate. What is perhaps
more likely is that the artists and intellectuals who have historically appropriated old
buildings in neighbourhoods such as Soho (Zukin 1982) and Wicker Park (Lloyd 2005)
have (intentionally or not) used their position as tastemakers to construct these buildings
as aesthetically valuable. The role of Jane Jacobs and her book *The Life and Death of
Great American Cities* (1961) in legitimating the historic districts of New York City
exemplifies this hypothesis.

Also related to age is the difference between legitimating existing urban spaces,
and proposed urban developments. Both existing and proposed spaces can gain
legitimacy. For existing spaces, legitimacy can be rooted in the “lived” experience of
these spaces (Lefebvre 1991): how they have been used, who has access to them, etc.
However, for proposed spaces, legitimacy is based on projected or imagined experiences
of the space. Building new spaces in crowded cities often requires developers to
convince outside groups that their projects will serve the public interest – or at least not
threaten the public interest. Proposed developments that gain legitimacy may, for
instance, be eligible for public subsidies. Those developments that do not gain
legitimacy may be subject to political opposition. I would argue that in the absence of
concrete lived experiences, legitimacy is built on *trust*. Outside parties must be willing to
trust that major changes to the local built environment will be positive. There are many
strategies that developers use to establish trust including hiring well-known celebrity
architects, engaging in elaborate marketing campaigns, and setting up community consultation sessions.

**What are the Consequences of Legitimation?**

While identifying the causes of legitimation is important, the concept would have little value if legitimation had no consequences for social life. Thus, my final goal of this paper is to briefly outline the consequences of social legitimacy. I begin with the basic assertion that people will act differently toward those spaces that they accept as representing public interest and/or collective identity than they will toward other spaces. They will also act differently toward spaces they see as a threat to public interest and collective identity. Therefore, I argue that the existence of public legitimacy or delegitimacy helps us to explain urban social life and the production of the urban landscape.

Studies of legitimacy have demonstrated that processes of legitimation vary according to a variety of social factors including class position (Peterson 2003; Gartman 2000; Bourdieu 1983), pre-existing values (Zelditch 2001), and institutional settings (Bauman 2007a; DiMaggio 1982; Becker 1982). We should also presume that responses to legitimacy will also differ according to social structural factors. More specifically, the social actions inspired by the acceptance or rejection of legitimacy are influenced by the characteristics of the particular group or institution under consideration. The following chart offers some preliminary hypotheses about how different groups and institutions within the urban political realm respond to spaces that they see as publicly legitimate or publicly delegitimate.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group/Institution</th>
<th>Legitimation</th>
<th>Delegitimation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The State/Civic Government</td>
<td>• Legislated Protection (e.g. heritage designations)</td>
<td>• Withdrawal or decline in service provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Investment of public funds for maintenance and revitalization</td>
<td>• Revitalization through demolition (e.g. slum clearance)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Other legislated disincentives (e.g. zoning laws aimed at discouraging big box stores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Media/Architectural Tastemakers</td>
<td>• Production of aesthetic discourse which justifies the value of the space (e.g. Becker 1982:131-164)</td>
<td>• Criticizing or ignoring the space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Residents/Activists</td>
<td>• Co-option (donations, voluntary work to maintain or promote the space)</td>
<td>• Protesting the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Protecting the space through activism</td>
<td>• Taking legal steps to prevent the space from being built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Sector/Individuals</td>
<td>• Co-option (donations, advertising, or other forms of investment that connect private identity/brand with the public legitimation)</td>
<td>• Withdraw capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Target for redevelopment through demolition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourists/Visiting Outsiders</td>
<td>• Tourism</td>
<td>• Ignoring the space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table #1: How different groups and institutions act in response to the legitimation or delegitimation of a space.

I propose that the way a group or institution reacts to legitimation depends on a variety of social structural factors including institutional and material resources and rules (Giddens 1984), as well as cultural schema or tools (Swidler 1986; Sewell 1992). In my study of the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, the middle class residential groups who live nearby had the cultural tools available to understand and use zoning laws and legal procedures in order to press their interests. These options may not
be available to working class residents who do not possess the same cultural tools. Furthermore, upper-class residents may have even more options made available through their comparatively large economic resources. Indeed, members of Toronto’s upper-class had considerable influence over the Royal Ontario Museum and Art Gallery of Ontario because their multi-million dollar donations were needed to fund the expansions in the first place. Thus, while understandings of legitimation motivate social action within the urban political sphere, this social action manifests itself within social structures that make some resources and cultural tools more available than others.

**Conclusion**

As can be seen from the various examples I have referenced in this paper, the phenomenon I refer to as “public legitimation” has been observed several times in the existing urban studies literature. However, these observations have not yet been formulated into a cohesive theory that relates the establishment public legitimacy to the political-economy of space. My hope is that this preliminary theory of public legitimation and its constituent hypotheses will form the basis for a new approach to studying public space and urban development in general – one that takes into account how the city’s inhabitants socially construct the built environment around them and come to see certain spaces are legitimately representing them as a public both practically and symbolically.
Bibliography


