1. Public space: the case for rethinking

Two significant global phenomena since 2020 have shown the necessity of critical engagement with public space. First, the Covid-19 pandemic emptied public spaces around the globe, turned them into potentially dangerous places to avoid, and replaced social presence with social distance and technologically mediated relations. The places of normal social life were transformed into places of desire and fear, beyond reach, subject to severe laws, and controlled by explicit force. When something as essential as everyday sociability is banned, its hidden value comes to the surface, no longer taken for granted. The spread of mental health problems has demonstrated how these mediated relations cannot satisfy the deep desire for in-person proximity and embodied conviviality that public spaces facilitate.

The pandemic drastically shook the foundations of service-based, globalized urban economies, in which consumption, as an engine of the economy, had been hitherto buttressed by public space. Competition from online and suburban shopping had already shifted many activities away from urban centres, and the global health crisis seemed to deliver the final stroke. While the pandemic accelerated the spread of communication technologies, which had been hailed by some as a new global public sphere, it also revealed how far this sphere depends on the materiality of presence, blurs the distinctions between public and private realms, is framed by commercial interests, and controlled by global private corporations. It was no longer sufficient to focus on the historical spaces of co-presence, but it was necessary to rethink public space in its entire range of direct and mediated forms, including physical, institutional, and technological spaces.

Second, a series of social movements has occupied public spaces around the world, demanding action on a range of issues from climate crisis to women’s safety, global inequality, democratic rights, and racism. Climate emergency campaigners have repeatedly taken over public streets to emphasize the urgent need for preventing an impending disaster. Anti-racist protests and women’s safety movements, both triggered by brutal murders, have turned public spaces into places of dissent and resistance, displaying a deep-seated anger and anxiety about inequality and injustice in society. For vulnerable groups, public space has not been a place of harmony and tranquillity, but a place of exposure to prejudice and violence. The idea of peaceful spaces of everyday life with their harmless ornamental objects that offer aesthetic pleasure and a sense
of cultural enrichment has turned into the idea of a battleground for justice, in which forgotten objects in public spaces could come back to life as controversial and hurtful. These protests have questioned the symbolic meaning of public spaces, their monuments, and their claims to historical continuity and cultural identity. They have shown the significance of public space, but also shed light on the limits and presuppositions that are inherent in thinking about public space in particular, and about society in general. As a place of power and resistance, public space has mirrored society with all its inherent challenges and conflicts.

These events are directly related to structural concerns, unresolved tensions, and shifting attitudes about public space. From a longer historical perspective, public space has always been an integral element of urban life, but a generation ago it became a major topic of debate after the rise of neoliberalism, which gave an upper hand to private interests in public affairs. Privatization of public space, as a serious threat to social life and to the democratic demands of society, became a topic of critique, around which many actors were mobilized. Within a generation, however, the significance of public space appears to have been accepted by almost all the stakeholders in urban transformation and management, to the extent that the necessity of public space is now taken for granted. It is thought that digital technologies are providing open access for all to a universal public space, more and more countries are becoming open democracies, and urban development processes all incorporate public space.

In the phenomenal spread of the discourses and activities around the subject of public space, the critical element gradually disappears or becomes part of a politics of performance. A shift appears to have occurred from critique to orthodoxy, which may be the sign of a successful campaign by social critics and activists. However, in the context of widening and deepening social inequality, and the rise of populist and anti-democratic politics, the practices of public space have metamorphosed, being co-opted in processes such as gentrification, and at odds with the ongoing rhetoric about public space and with the aims and hopes of the earlier social critics. This shift from critique to co-option, from resistance to orthodoxy, from concern to complacency, necessitates an investigation into what may have gone wrong in thinking about public space.

In this book I have engaged with these questions, with the aim of rethinking public space through a critical analysis of its concepts and practices. This has involved examining public space at several interfaces: the interface between common meanings, philosophical concepts, and social practices; between the concepts of space and public; between physical, institutional, and technological forms of public space; between universality, particularity, and singularity of public space; between economic, political, and cultural processes; between normative models and everyday experiences; and between claims, actions, and
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consequences. The investigation has been organized in two stages, which have structured the book accordingly.

In the first stage, corresponding to Part I, I have started from a search for some meanings of public space, examining the relevant concepts in their constitution and application. In the second stage, which corresponds to Part II, the concepts of public space that have been identified in the first stage are run past the test of social practice, especially through the criteria of social exclusion and inclusion. The two-stage process of critique brings together two discourses: the discourse on public space (Madanipour, 2003a, 2010; Madanipour et al., 2014) and on social inclusion (Madanipour, 2003b, 2020a; Madanipour and Weck, 2015). These discourses have often been unrelated, developed separately, in different research processes and through differing approaches and frameworks. It is argued that bringing together the discourses of public space and social inclusion, each with its own multiplicity of dimensions and meanings, would help in generating new insights, setting up new platforms, adopting different perspectives, and offering the possibility of a critical rethinking of the subject (Madanipour, 2019, 2020b, 2021).

In Part I, I have first attempted at developing a theoretical articulation of public space, and then in Part II I have used the criteria of social inclusion for examining it. I have searched for a concept of public space that links its common meanings with theoretical concepts, linking philosophical ideas with political, economic, and social theories and everyday practices of life in public space. This search has engaged with the early modern thinkers who have contributed to developing the concepts of public that are in use today (Hobbes, 1985; Hume, 1896; Locke, 1821; Rousseau, 1923), with the concepts of space (Descartes, 1973; Kant, 1993; Leibniz, 1979; Newton, 1845), and the role and value of public space (Arendt, 1998; Dewey, 1946; Habermas, 1989). It has also engaged with those who have critically responded to these concepts and practices (Adorno, 2004; Agamben, 2009; Badiou, 2005; Foucault, 2008; Fraser, 1990; Hegel, 1991; Heidegger, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991; Marx, 1975; Rancière, 2004). While this investigation engages with concepts in a process of rethinking about public space, it is important to emphasize that abstract concepts are not considered as being divorced from empirical realities, as noted in Chapter 5 and are discussed through the notions of universality, particularity, and singularity. Concepts are derived from particular circumstances, and they always return to particular circumstances, as they can only make sense when, explicitly or implicitly, they are applied to some concrete aspects of the world.

The analysis has gone beyond physical public space to include both direct and mediated spaces, ranging from physical to institutional and technological public spaces. The theoretical development is based on an analysis of the constituent concepts of public space, searching for ways of accounting for its relationality, materiality, and temporality, and for its connotations of totality,
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In Part II, this theoretical articulation of the concept of public space is then examined through the practices of social exclusion and inclusion, through their economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Social inclusion is not adopted as a closed utopian destination, but as processes that struggle against exclusion, negating the negation.

After this introductory chapter, Part I starts with Chapter 2, which is a search for a strategy of finding common meanings that would be applicable to the wide range of spaces that are called public, which span different periods, locations, and forms. The chapter critically reviews the inductive, deductive, and analogical approaches that look for functions, patterns, types, examples, and paradigms. It puts forward a conceptual analytical approach, which is characterized as being non-essentialist, socio-spatial, historical, contextual, experiential, theoretical–empirical, and critical. It is devised as a two-stage process, starting with the analysis of public space through its constituent parts, followed by a critique of this analysis according to the criteria of social inclusion.

Chapter 3 examines the concepts of space through the common meanings of the term, from which three key characteristics of space emerge: relationality, materiality, and temporality. Relationality reflects embeddedness through three sets of relations: between objects, between observers and objects, and between observers. Materiality reflects embodiment, and temporality indicates time and change. The chapter questions some misconceptions about space: that the concepts of absolute and relational space are irreconcilable; that spatiality corresponds to static simultaneity; that space only refers to physical objects and their relations; that space is disembodied social relations; that cyberspace is immaterial; and that materiality is epiphenomenal in a relational theorization of space.

Chapter 4 examines the commonly used meanings of public, leading to three groups of concepts: totality, authority, and openness, providing a framework for understanding public space. These concepts are then examined through the overlapping concepts of society, nation, and state, and the processes of association, territorialization, and institutionalization. The notion of public, it is argued, is not a pre-existing and permanent essence, but continually made of differentiated and unequal fragments, always with blurred edges and contingent linkages. The question is about the power that attempts to create this unification, to what purpose, and for whom; it means asking who is included and who is excluded from this totality.

Chapter 5 completes Part I, bringing together the concepts of public (totality, authority, openness) and space (relationality, materiality, temporality) to explore the meanings of public space. First, general concepts such as the...
spaces of nation, society, and state are problematized to show their inherent multiplicities and fragmentations. This is followed by an analysis of the particular forms that public spaces can take, which include physical, institutional, and technological spaces. Beyond these general and particular levels lies the singularity of each public space as a unique place and a series of unique experiences. Each public space is shown to be simultaneously a unique place and experience, a particular type of public space, and a contribution to the general concept of public space as an inclusive space.

Part II starts with Chapter 6, which examines public space through the economic dimensions of social inclusion, as public space can be both a resource and a medium of access to resources. It corresponds to the first notion of public as totality, structured into four sections: public space as the negation of the exclusionary forces of private control, its relationship with economic exchange, the implications of conflict and difference perspectives, and the entanglement, transgression, and negation between public and private spaces. It shows how public space can emerge from, and become a condition of possibility for, private transactions, but also be in danger of being used as an instrument, or ultimately taken over as an asset, by these forces.

Chapter 7 examines the role of public space in political inclusion, corresponding to the second notion of public as authority. It analyses the concepts of demos, public interest, and public opinion as the possible pathways to influence the decisions that affect our lives. This is first discussed through participation in the public authority of the state, and second, through involvement in civil society activities. In the context of the metamorphosis of the welfare state into a neoliberal, entrepreneurial state, and with the numerous challenges of public participation, the questions of political inclusion interrogate the openness, effectiveness, and reach of these groups, and the nature of the spaces which they make and in which they operate.

Chapter 8 analyses the contribution of public space to cultural inclusion, through the possibility of supporting shared experiences, corresponding to the third meaning of public as openness. The chapter is organized into three sections: presence, exposure, and interaction, and their potentials and limitations for social inclusion. Presence in public space is both an everyday necessity, as well as a possibility for emancipation from restrictions, but it is not equally available to vulnerable parts of society. Exposure includes revelation as well as expression, which discloses something and engages in a performance, both empowering and revealing vulnerabilities. Interaction and communication, meanwhile, can facilitate shared narratives and experiences, but not when communication is blocked, and recognition is denied.

To conclude, Chapter 9 brings together some of the key threads of the book and identifies some of the gaps in ideas and practices of public space. On the basis of Part I’s investigations, it discusses public space as inclusive space and,
drawing on Part II, it analyses the practices of social exclusion and inclusion and their implications for public space. This is followed by an examination of the gaps between the image of active relationality and agency with the reality of fragmentation, passivity, and misapplication of abstract concepts. These gaps show different temporalities, and how far the idea of public space may remain an ideal normative concept, or can put forward practical democratic demands to economic, political, and cultural processes.