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PUBLIC SPACE. THE REAL AND THE IDEAL. EDITORIAL

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While the importance of public space seems mostly undisputed, much disagreement continues to emerge concerning its purposes, its boundaries, its characteristics, its use, and most importantly the extent of the threats it faces.

Different visions of public space have taken form in the works of such diverse architectural and urban practitioners, historians and critics, as Camillo Sitte, Kenneth Frampton, Rem Koolhaas, Michael Sorkin, Margaret Crawford, and Jan Gehl, but also of urban sociologists like Setha Low and Lyn Lofland, activists such as Jane Jacobs and Mike Davis, as well as such influential philosophers and political theorists as Henri Lefebvre, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Chantal Mouffe. Many of them have read public space from a humanistic, pluralistic, democratic perspective, offering various descriptions of what it might mean in the broader context of a democratic society's organization. And while their ideals of social interaction and political debate do not necessarily constrain the definition of a public space to a physical location, historically these values frequently find tangible expression in the Greek agora, the coffee shop, the city square, the town hall, the parliament, and especially the street. The built environment therefore offers more than just functional areas or aesthetic experiences. It is a force that shapes a world-in-common, grounded on encounter and appearance, discussion and mediation, with all the tension and conflict that implies.

Today, this ideal of public space must address new challenges and renewed versions of the old, from recent developments in cities and societies

such as smart-cities, Big Data, and gentrification, to such well-established problems as segregation, commodification, and surveillance. The recent history of public spaces finds them increasingly privatized, controlled, monitored, and scripted. They are designed to accommodate leisure and tourism, shopping and sporting, transportation and traveling, often with little regard for the social and political ideal of encounter and exchange, thereby neglecting to make room for the struggles and disputes inherent to it. But, it has turned out, that even in highly controlled spaces social and political life can occur, as shown for example in the 2022 protests in Iran, where despite the risk of arrest and even death, people take to the streets to protest against the restrictions to women's participation in public life. This state of affairs presses the questions: How important is architecture and urban design for public life after all? Does design still draw concrete outlines for public life and its socio-political dimensions, or can these be catered for elsewhere? And how does philosophy help elucidate and tackle these problems?

These and many other topics concerning public space were discussed at the 5th Biennial Conference of the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture, organized by ETH Zürich and the EPFL. After a one-year postponement due to the outbreak of a pandemic and the public health restrictions that ensued – and added another topic of concern to the agenda – the conference met in 2021 at Monte Verità, a former utopian-like hub of alternative cooperative life in the Swiss canton of Ticino, standing in the beautiful landscape between the Alps and Lago Maggiore. What followed were four days of lively, varied, intense exchanges between more than eighty speakers, including philosophers, architectural theorists, architects, urban planners, urban designers, landscape architects, and scholars of many other fields. Ten contributions, including all four keynote lectures, have been published in this special double issue of *Architecture Philosophy*.

To prepare the ground for such a sprawling topic, the first article briefly surveys pivotal moments in the history of public space and the ways it has been read, touching upon several of its key themes and recurring philosophical figures. Sven-Olov Wallenstein's 'Public Space: Conflicts and Antinomies' moves from the fabricated idea of an ideal Greek polis to Kant's constitution of one in the spirit of the Enlightenment, a foundational moment for the modern notion of a public political space. The accounts that followed, until this day, have often stressed the rise and looming fall of public space, perceived as perpetually and increasingly under threat. However, public space has also been described as inherently conflictual, not anomalously (divergences to be reconciled) but constitutively (the

clashes of those divergences are what characterizes public space). These versions do not converge, nor does one exclude the other. As Wallenstein states, they “[...] can neither be fused into a common story, nor can we simply choose between them; perhaps they can be said to constitute something like the antinomy of public space.”¹

A leading proponent of the conflictual view is Chantal Mouffe, who made her case in the lecture published here under the title ‘On the Political: Public Space and the Possibility of a Critical Architecture.’ Liberal philosophical discourses, Mouffe claims, react to the antagonist dimension of the political as a problem to be resolved, either through a rational compromise between different interests or a consensus grounded on free discussion. However, “[...] despite what many liberals want us to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not to overcome this ‘we/them’ opposition, but how to construct this opposition, compatible with the recognition of pluralism.”² Mouffe proposes agonism as an alternative, one which embraces the existence of conflicting interests not by regarding the other as an enemy, as in an antagonistic relation, but as a legitimate adversary. Public spaces, therefore, function at their best not as places of accord but of dispute. The construction or challenge to hegemonic political identities also unfolds outside of political institutions, importantly through artistic practices – in which Mouffe includes architecture.

How do these philosophical ideas play out in the built environment? In ‘The Space of Appearance within the Megalopolis: Architectural Culture-Politics of São Paulo 1957-2017’, Kenneth Frampton calls attention to the contemporary challenges that arise for public spaces – in their political and constructive senses – with the recent transformation of the polis into the megalopolis. In São Paulo, the most populated city in Brasil and one of the biggest in the world, he discovers numerous works that open a space of appearance in the Arendtian

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sense, such as the *SESC Pompeia* by Lina Bo Bardi and Marcelo Ferraz, the *Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo* by João Vilanova Artigas, and the *SESC 2017* by Paulo Mendes da Rocha. In these examples, Frampton says, one can admire a distinctive Paulista-school “[...] accommodation of socio-cultural and politically progressive programs within the fabric of tectonically articulated, monumental form.”³

Many different agents participate in the design and use of public urban spaces besides – though by no means excluding – architects and urbanists. Hans Teerds’ interview with Margaret Crawford, ‘A Site of Struggle,’ explores more contemporary case-studies in the United States, particularly in California. The shopping mall, once the target of Crawford’s ineludible critiques on the privatization of public space, reappears in a more favorable light. As she points out, “[...] many people now go to malls more for public interaction rather than to actually buy something. Physical shopping can be understood as a positive force shaping public space, as compared to online shopping from home.”⁴ Crawford also commented on recent examples where the use of public spaces turned contentious – antagonistic, even – involving, for example, migrant workers waiting for a ride in front of private stores, street-vendors in Los Angeles, barbecuers at a public park in Oakland, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which Crawford labels as “[...] the most important public space development in the last 10 years.”⁵ Each of these particular instances illustrates and reasserts the recurring idea throughout all the keynote speakers of public space as a place of struggle.

An influential claim from within this struggle issued decades ago by Henri Lefebvre – another well-known author in the discussion of public space – was a focal point of Saul Fisher’s ‘Architectural Responsibilities and the Right to a City.’ He revisits Lefebvre’s notion of “the right to the city” so as to render it “feasible, generic, and so broadly amenable to many of its adherents,” while illustrating the effects of its denial through several hypothetical scenarios of contemporary life.⁶ Fisher’s crucial question goes even further though: if we are to accept such a right, then what responsibilities does it entail for architects?

The question may also be asked of the right to refuge from public space. Erika Brandl speaks of adequate housing as a basic need in ‘Property, Necessity, and Housing: Reconsidering the Situated Right to a Place to Be.’ She stresses that the question “‘Why must something be done inside and not outside the house?’ is another way of asking ‘Why are dwellings so necessary to us?’”⁷ Through the works of Jeremy Waldron, Richard Epstein, and Alejandra Mancilla, Brandl demonstrates how political philosophy not only sheds light on architectural problems of domesticity, but also on what architectural practice can do to address them.

Beyond the framework of a dichotomy between the private and the public lays the Chinese notion of *jianghu*, as explained by Esther Lorenz in ‘Anonymity in *Jianghu*: Hong Kong’s Urban Space in Times of Crisis.’ *Jianghu* has come to define a realm deliberately apart from societal and political order. Lorenz uses this word, which literally translates into “rivers and lakes,” to better understand a description of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, a movement inspired by the Bruce Lee quote “be like water.” Through uncontrollable anonymous digital means, protesters coalesced like flash-floods to turn unexpected places like roads and roofs into ephemeral political public spaces. According to Lorenz, “[w]hat we witnessed in 2019 in Hong Kong was the emergence of a contemporary form of *jianghu*, as a hybridization of digital space, material space, and spatial practices.”⁸

Conversely, even the most stereotypical typology of public space does not guarantee a site for social and political aggregation. Stella Evangelidou analyzes the design strategy behind an intervention on southern Nicosia’s main square, in ‘Parametric Design in the Historic Urban Domain: The Case of Eleftheria Square by Zaha Hadid Architects.’ Parametricism, she argues, operated not simply as a design tool but as an architectural ideology; polemical from the project’s conception and selection to its use after construction. As Evangelidou sees it, “[t]he hyper-aestheticized and non-functional forms have displaced political actions from the site. Eleftheria Square has lost its quality as a *topos politikos*.”⁹

The powerful potential of architecture, whether positive or negative, intended or not, upon the social and political dimensions of public space is at the center of Margit van Schaik’s study of its most symbolic sites. ‘What Architecture Does – An Embodied Approach towards the Impact of the Built Environment’ considers how the architectural properties of the Dutch Parliament Building affect the manner in which politics is conducted in the

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country, but keeps some distance from deterministic claims. As she says, “[...] a window does not determine you look through it, but it does influence what you will see if you do.”¹⁰ Van Schaik grounds her outlook on input from philosophy of mind, psychology and neuroscience, brought together in the theories of embodiment advanced by Francisco Varela and Evan Thomson.

A different approach to one’s embodied experience of place adopts Bernard Rudolsky’s sandals as a medium. ‘On Foot: Embodied Atmospheres,’ by Andreea Mihalache, suggests that “[m]ore than footwear, the sandals are a design manifesto expressing the connection between feet and floors, always in touch through the intimacy of the sole [...]”¹¹ Against the long-standing dominant formal and sight-centered attitudes in both philosophy and architecture, Mihalache urges for the embrace of subjective experience of atmospheres as a design criteria, which has precedent in the two disciplines’ history nonetheless. Roaming around houses, strolling down streets, the tactile experience of walking partakes in the finding of one’s ground – literally and figuratively.

All ten contributions offer deeply informative, intellectually stimulating, thought-provoking insights. They tackle plenty of topics, engaged from diverse research frameworks, and look at distinct case-studies from multiple times and places, to reach a variety of significant claims which may overlap or conflict, but all contribute to an understanding of the real and ideal characteristics of public space. These results emerge from a historically productive dialogue between two disciplines while thinking together. That long and fruitful tradition continues in this special issue of *Architecture Philosophy*.

ENDNOTES

1. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, ‘Public Space. Conflicts and Antinomies’, in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 13.
2. Chantal Mouffe, ‘On the Political, Public Space and the Possibility of a Critical Architecture’, in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 29.
3. Kenneth Frampton, ‘The Space of Appearance within the Megalopolis. Architectural Culture-Politics of São Paulo 1957-2017’, in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 45.
4. Hans Teerds, ‘A Site of Struggle. An Interview with Margaret Crawford’, in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 51-52.
5. Ibid., 58.
6. Saul Fisher, ‘Architectural Responsibilities and the Right to a City’, in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 63.

7. Erika Brandl, 'Property, Necessity and Housing. Reconsidering the Situated Right to a Place to Be', in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 85.
8. Esther Lorenz, 'Anonymity in *Jianghu*. Hong Kong's Urban Space in Times of Crisis'. in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 113.
9. Stella Evangelidou, 'Parametric Design in the Historic Urban Domain. The Case of Eleftheria Square by Zaha Hadid Architects', in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 135.
10. Margit van Schaik, 'What Architecture Does. An Embodied Approach Towards the Impact of the Built Environment', in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 149.
11. Andreea Mihalache, 'On Foot. Embodied Atmospheres', in: *Architecture Philosophy*, Vol 6, no.1/2 (2023), 165.