



DISNEYLAND PARIS (2021)

A SITE OF STRUGGLE.  
INTERVIEW WITH  
MARGARET CRAWFORD

HANS TEERDS

The world of the shopping mall has become a template for the whole world, Margaret Crawford, a Professor of Architecture and Urban Design and Director of the Department of Urban Design at Berkeley, concluded in her 1992 contribution to *Variations on a Theme Park*.<sup>1</sup> The book, edited by the architect Michael Sorkin, offers a collection of alarming articles, investigating how commercial interests, economic principles, and consumerist perspectives shape contemporary cities. Sorkin presents it apocalyptically: ‘the end of public space.’ As he announces in his introduction: this is an alarming perspective, as public space is directly related to the issue of democracy, the interaction, the possibility of protests, the proximity of otherness, the existence of fringes.<sup>2</sup> Crawford’s opening article examines the development and features of malls and mall life. Her concluding argument is made up out of the observation that also existing cities and their downtowns, even such classical and medieval cities as Florence and Rouen, as well as public or cultural venues, like museums, transform according to mall logics. The conclusion fits well in the book, as it underlines the narrative of loss. What if the whole world transforms along the lines of mall principles?

Crawford is amongst the rare thinkers that are able to publicly rethink and criticize the own conclusions. A few years after her contribution to *Variations on a Theme Park*, she published an article in the *Journal of Architectural Education* wherein she clearly distances herself from the narrative of loss which had influenced her work previously. In “Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles” she writes that this idea of

loss is “derived from extremely narrow and normative definitions of both public and space,” while, “the meaning of concepts such as public, space, democracy, and citizenship are continually being redefined in practice through lived experience.”<sup>3</sup> In the article she not only propels to approach consumerist spaces less pessimistically, but also writes about other practices of consumption less defined by the principles of capitalism, and closer to an everyday occupation of public life, such as street vending. This perspective she makes even more clear in the important book *Everyday Urbanism*, which she edited together with John Chase and John Kaliski.<sup>4</sup> Her own contribution to this book, the article “Blurring the Boundaries,” underlines how everyday spaces are still spaces of struggle, occupation, adaptation, and appropriation.<sup>5</sup> As such these spaces still raise important political questions about both citizenship and economic participation. This perspective thus is much more optimistic about the vitality of public space as stage of the political dimension of the world. From “Contesting the Public Realm” onwards, the work of Crawford is clearly based on new insight, a new perception of the world which is more hopeful and less pessimistic. In this the following interview, I questioned Crawford on this moment of change in her thinking: how does she look back on her contribution to *Variations on a Theme Park*, why did she change her mind, and how does she read the situation of public space today?

MC: The tone of my original article was hugely influenced by Michael Sorkin. When I was asked to contribute, the working title of the book was *Variations on a Theme Park: Scenes From the New American City*. This was a very non-judgmental title, a survey of what was happening in the American urban landscape. Later, the subtitle was changed to *The End of Public Space*, a title that did not sit well with me. However, Michael encouraged every contributor to have a pessimistic and even a slightly apocalyptic take on what we were investigating. There were two important philosophers who were influencing the debate at the time: Jean Baudrillard, with his concept of hyperreality, and Jürgen Habermas, with his idea of the loss of the public sphere.

In the article I contributed to the volume, public space does not play an important part. The real contribution of that article to contemporary discourse is the discussion of the financing and organization of mall development.

While preparing the article, I went to many shopping malls, pretty much nonstop, for several months. It was at the high point of shopping mall development in the United States and Canada, the early nineties were a prosperous decade of consumption in the US. Visiting all these

malls definitely shaped my perception, as well as my conclusion that the mall had conquered the entire world. Once you get engaged in this narrative of loss, you don't see signs that something else is happening. Lots of changes were lurking slightly under the surface, and I didn't see them. But what I recognized in that narrative is that the mall concept, in which scripting and theming played an important role, was also expanding beyond the mall, to other domains of commercial and cultural life. Scripting and theming, for instance, became part of the design of museums and airports too.

The concern about these mechanisms applied to public space and cultural venues is a concern about authenticity and authentic experiences. But once you start thinking about what is real and what is fantasy, the entire concept of authenticity vanishes. It is actually a moral response, an upper-middle-class concern that they used to differentiate themselves as informed and aware people who don't go to malls and spurn Disneyland, from the rest of the populace, who enjoy them. It is an apparently leftist critique that actually serves to maintain class distinctions. I now read my contribution to *Variations on a Theme Park* as a response to a particular moment in time, influenced by a particular kind of leftist alarm, a moral panic about what was going on in the built environment. It was written in an ambience linked to inexorable narratives of consumerism, exploding marketing and a constantly expanding capitalism. In this situation, it is assumed that there is nothing you can do, except write critical articles.

But soon after my article, the circumstances changed. Slowly but slightly, still continuing until today, many malls have become obsolete and have been demolished. New malls are rarely being built. Over the past decade, this change has certainly been propelled with the increase of online shopping. However, this trend also has led to a paradoxical new appreciation of the mall, because many people now go to malls more for public interaction rather

“THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSUMPTION AND PUBLIC LIFE SEEMS TO BE CHANGING DRAMATICALLY.”

than to actually buy something. Physical shopping can be understood as a positive force shaping public space, as compared to online shopping from home. So, the actual meaning of the relationship between consumption and public life seems to be changing dramatically. But this does not mean that I am less concerned about the privatization of public space. There are still urban spaces being developed and built where commerce dominates public space. Take for instance the Hudson Yards in New York, or in Los Angeles, The Americana at Brand, which are, I would argue, a new typology of shopping mall: open air shopping spaces with housing above the shops. It differs from historic downtown districts or the medieval centers of cities in Europe, where people also lived (and still live) above shops in shopping streets. But where these streets are part and parcel of a continuous urban public space, the urban fabric, these new spaces are detached from the surrounding urban spaces. As such, these spaces still follow the mall typology. The residents of the apartments thus are really living within the confines of the shopping mall. Their public space is totally commercialized. How do they experience these spaces, I wonder? Do they accept it as their own town square? This new typology does show that privatization has not stopped at all. In fact, Hudson Yards is an extreme example of privatization.

HT: This example of the new mall typology shows that the concern about the totalizing impact of commercialization on public space is still valid and urgent. Nevertheless, you also maintain that the mall can actually provide a public space, which is meaningful for particular groups in society. How did you change your view upon malls? And how did that also urge you to examine public life and commercial activities in actual streets, outside malls?

MC: There were several reasons. One was a critique of my mall article by philosopher Marshall Berman. He simply said: 'she's never been shopping.' That was not true at all! As I visited malls for professional reasons, I also enjoyed them as a shopper. Every time I went to a mall, I came out with a bag in my hand. Berman's critique showed me that my allegedly objective analysis actually discounted my own experience in malls. This led me to think more about different mall experiences. I also read feminist political philosophers, such as Nancy Fraser. Her critique of Habermas's idea of the public sphere emphasizes the existence of multiple publics and the impossibility of a single all-embracing 'public.'<sup>6</sup> This leads to the idea that there is no universal public space, but many publics and many spaces. I realized that malls are different for different groups. Some offer a safe space for mothers with children and others are great hangouts for teenagers.

Security and safety are issues of great concern to these groups. The universal, male-oriented concept of public space that is the dominant perspective in *Variations on a Theme Park*, overlooks and dismisses this important dimension of malls.

It also became clear to me that that mall-life cannot be reduced to just consuming. Malls offer many different types of publicness. I understood that part of the problem with my previous reading of mall life was the very modernist dichotomy or binary between public and private. But there are many gradations of publicness and privateness. If you accept this spectrum, you start to see how the mall provides a quasi-public space. It has dimensions of publicness, as well as of privateness. The moment you accept the mall as quasi-public space, you can also start to recognize similar quasi-public spaces in the city, outside the mall. Right across the street from my house in Hollywood at the time, there were people putting rugs on chain link fences and selling them to drivers passing by. This was a very different kind of commerce. It demonstrated very clearly that public space had not ended at all. The problem was too narrow definitions of both public and space.

In the meantime, I also started to read French philosophers and theorists, like Henri Lefebvre, with his formulation of ‘the right to the city’. He believed that ‘everyday life’ was a crucial lens for understanding society. My reading of his work was extremely selective, emphasizing only the positive part and ignoring the rest. But what I saw out there in the city of Los Angeles was an amazing array of everyday practices. Immigrants would take over an empty parking lot after people went home at night, set out tables with checkered tablecloths to serve food like it was their home. I saw how these practices were also political struggles. For example, the day laborers, who stand on the street outside *Home Depot* and *Brico* stores. These laborers, mostly Mexican and Central American immigrants, wait

“THERE ARE MANY GRADATIONS OF PUBLICNESS AND PRIVATENESS. IF YOU ACCEPT THIS SPECTRUM, YOU START TO SEE HOW THE MALL PROVIDES A QUASI-PUBLIC SPACE.”

there to be picked up for work. *Home Depot* tried to get rid of them, but due to an enormous organizing effort, the jornaleros acquired the right to be there. They carried signs stating ‘The right to work is a human right.’ The stores even had to provide bathrooms and other services for them. For me, this was extremely positive: it showed me that human agency is still possible, and that there are many different politics of public space.

At the same time, although there were street vendors everywhere, street vending was still illegal. For the vendors, this meant a constant threat that the police could easily shut them down and take their goods. Only two years ago, due to an enormous political effort and organization, which took 30 years, they finally acquired the right to street vending in Los Angeles!

HT: How do you understand this political struggle over the right to street vending with regard to the issue of public space?

MC: This, for me, is a clear example of what you can call ‘the right to public space’. This right must include, for me, the right to use public space as an economic space. This goes from the panhandler, who is conducting an economic transaction, to the day laborers standing on the street and selling their labor to vendors. I therefore would describe public space not as a static entity. It is a continuous struggle between different publics and



BLACK LIVES MATTER PLAZA, WASHINGTON DC (2020)

groups, different practices and occupations. This is not something to erase, but rather something to embrace.

Lately, I have been doing research in China on public space as well. In this totally different context, I recognize the same struggles as in the U.S. I focused on the unique condition of villages in the Pearl River Delta. These villages are very interesting because they are a bounded urban

type regulated by the government. This condition originates from land rights that Mao gave rural villages. As a result, the inhabitants of these villages are the only people in China who can elect their own village leaders and who can build their own houses. They are the only people who can create and control their physical space, although within certain limits. These residents thus have a surprising amount of agency.

As you can imagine, this situation results in a contested condition. In these villages, you see a continuous struggle between the government and the people. The government is trying to control the villages and their residents, and impose very stringent regulations on public space. But the people are endlessly inventive in trying to get around those regulations. The kind of interaction between control and evasion of control is fascinating.

HT: What are the important struggles over public space today in the United States?

MC: Most important is the struggle to be different in public. A concentrated group of African Americans or Latinos in public space is perceived as a threat, while a gathering of white people is celebrated. Take for instance the case of a park in Oakland around Lake Merritt. It has become very controversial because numbers of African Americans assembled there to barbecue. In a notorious case, a white woman called in to complain that black people were barbecuing. It became a very heated environment, as more and more African Americans purposefully came there to claim the space. The situation went on for several months until the city shut it down. Such struggles are going on everywhere, all the time.

But this particular struggle has changed in an even more dramatic way in the past decade. Some groups in our society are denied the right to be in public space, as the killing of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd and many other Black people demonstrates. To be in the street as an African American means

“ THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE MUST INCLUDE THE RIGHT TO USE PUBLIC SPACE AS AN ECONOMIC SPACE.”



risking your life. That is the largest challenge to public space in the United States. It is literally a life-or-death issue. African American men, but also women, have not achieved the right to public space, even though the state guarantees it legally. Therefore, I consider the Black Lives Matter movement, to be the most important public space developments in the last 10 years.

HT: How do these struggles over public space and societal injustices relate to other pressing urban developments, the change of cities through suburbanization, gentrification and segregation?

MC: Many of these struggles and killings take place in suburban environments or on the highway. Trayvon Martin was killed in Stanford, Florida, in a suburban gated community. Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, also a suburb. Many central cities have been emptied out of African Americans and Latinos, from places that we might call ghettos, to better housing conditions in suburban locations. Simultaneously, central cities have become largely places for wealthier white people. The central city is no longer the central site of struggle over public space. It has become a more exclusive, controlled, and surveilled space. Instead, struggles over public space can happen anywhere, in any part of the city or outside it.



LAFAYETTE SQUARE PARK, OAKLAND CA, WALTER HOOD, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT (1999)

HT: Architecture is often understood as an instrument to mediate between different, conflicting and opposing interests. But if public space is, essentially, a space characterized by struggle, mediating seems not to be

the proper intervention. How do you understand the agency of architecture with respect to public space?

MC: That is an interesting question. One of the goals of *Everyday Urbanism* was to point out the physical qualities of public space, and ways of understanding time and space that could actually be useful for designers. My two co-editors, John Cage and John Kaliski, were both professional urban designers, and they really wanted to link our findings to practice. We formulated what was later borrowed by “tactical urbanism”—the idea that time is as important as space. Things can happen in one place at a certain time. But this does not mean that it recurs. My own contribution to the book focused on the physical and experiential qualities of domesticity found in many everyday spaces in Los Angeles. The qualities of ordinary materials, their softness, ornamentation, and human scale can all contribute to a sense of domesticity in public. This often happens as vendors offer food in homelike settings. In such moments the quality of materials and creative practices support one another, all ideas that designers can use to design public spaces. This is obviously a completely different approach than the designs and theories of someone like Jan Gehl, who, to me, represents what I would call ‘feel good white person urbanism.’

HT: What do you mean by ‘white person urbanism’?

MC: Gehl designs the same Copenhagen public spaces all over the world, with the same bicycle paths, sidewalk cafes, and pedestrianized streets. He never takes on the issues that are really at stake, such as rights, exclusion or street livelihoods. Instead, his designs deal with highly conventional notions of public space as simply pleasurable, satisfying a universal public. Along with organizations such as the *Project for Public Space*, who are also allegedly devoted to public space, he neglects the most serious issues of public space. They approach public

“AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN, BUT ALSO WOMEN, HAVE NOT ACHIEVED THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE, EVEN THOUGH THE STATE GUARANTEES IT LEGALLY.”

space from a highly generic professional perspective. Another professional approach might be architects working for a municipality. These designers face other difficulties, with competing demands from different groups of citizens. However, since the municipal architects are very familiar with the places and the publics where they work, they can potentially create new



LAFAYETTE SQUARE PARK, OAKLAND CA, WALTER HOOD, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT (1999)

and distinctive public spaces in diverse circumstances. This depends on the designer avoiding already codified ideas and principles, and understanding the users and their concerns.

My colleague at Berkeley, Walter Hood, who is a landscape architect, only starts designing parks after carefully observing the neighborhood, aiming to understand what is going on. For an assignment redesigning a park in Oakland, he observed that the existing park was used by older men, who stayed during the day and drank together. He decided not to edit that out in his park design. Architects, I would argue, necessarily need a similar attentiveness to existing use, to the publics that are already there. But at the same time, you also have to understand that these uses and publics change over time. Time is a very important dimension of space. Designers also need to pay attention to circumstances. Their designs need to be conditional and circumstantial, and to leave room for occupation and improvisation. Most parks in the United States usually have an incredible list of the things you can't do there, and drinking is usually at the top of it. Such lists question the very publicness of these spaces. Is this space really public? No! But ultimate publicness does not exist. There are always different kinds of exclusions and restrictions. Paradoxically, some private

spaces are more public than are formal public (in the sense of being owned by the state) spaces. But is this what we mean when we discuss public space? Should it be ‘state-owned’? Or does ‘public’ mean: accommodating groups of publics? I would argue that to pin the idea of public space down to particular circumstances is a slippery idea. A fixed definition would deny the various struggles over public space, the changing publics, and the assertion of different kinds of rights over the space. All these instances are related to the specificity of the location of a park or square, and what publics make use of it. Who owns the space, who can appropriate it, and who has a say? These are the questions to be understood and addressed.

However, coming back to your question on what architecture can do, it is hard for designers to mediate between the claims of different publics. I would argue that they should not aim to please everybody. For me, that means acknowledging the issue of struggle. Public space is an incredibly complicated issue, since it is constantly changing and contested. My goal in teaching has been to sensitize architects to these challenges, to observe, to understand who is using these spaces, and what they are doing. Public spaces are meant for particular publics. Nevertheless, we cannot choreograph how and if this public adopts the space. That is up to the public itself. But one of the problems we have in the United States is that architecture is largely a very un-diverse profession. Walter Hood and many other designers are starting to rethink what public space design can be. Their projects, in the era of Black Lives Matter, are reshaping the design profession’s approach to designed public space. So public space has not ended at all! It is always renewing itself, and will continue to do so in the future.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Margaret Crawford, ‘The World in a Shopping Mall’, in: Michael Sorkin (ed.), *Variations on a*

- Theme Park. The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).
2. Michael Sorkin, 'Introduction', in: Michael Sorkin (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park. The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), XV.
  3. Margaret Crawford, 'Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles', in: *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Sep., 1995), 4.
  4. John Chase, Margeret Crawford, John Kaliski (eds.), *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999).
  5. A clear instance of the political dimension was shown in the Rodney King Riots in Los Angeles, which happened shortly after the publication of *Variations of a Theme Park* in 1992. Margaret Crawford, 'Blurring the Boundaries. Public Space and Private Life', in: John Chase, Margeret Crawford, John Kaliski (eds.), *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 28.
  6. See for instance Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in: Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).