



The Central Alameda Park, created in the late sixteenth century, is Latin America's oldest park.

Public Space In Mexico City

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From the spheres of academe and professional practice, the authors talk about public space in Mexico City, exchanging thoughts about issues such as whether public space is the same as common space; whether public space is the property of everyone or of no one; and whether the people who use the space are the ones who make it public.

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William Brinkman-Clark: I've always been interested in the way the notion of chaos is used as a category when talking about Mexico City; and I think it would be a good starting point for this conversation. This notion harks back to the idea of complexity without any kind of order. And, from my point of view, there are two ways in which this unfolds in the urban sphere: as *the* factor that impedes the city from jettisoning barbarism and becoming civilized, or as an almost idyllic quality that can only be found in romanticized imaginaries of the past in which the community ruled. The way in which the public space has changed over the last 30 years is clear evidence of how we relate to our notions of chaos and the different forms that have emerged from that. I'm concerned about those who make a fetish of intervention in that space as a way of ordering or domesticating the chaos, and I'm even more concerned when those forms seem



to increasingly take a permanent place in the imaginary not only of the political class, which seems to have the power of decision on how the public space is transformed, but also of the majority of the citizenry. I'm concerned about this because building a consensus around this discourse is achieved through the "creative" destruction of those singular public spaces that, precisely because of their singularity, strengthen the possibility of an aesthetic experience.

Alejandro Hernández Gálvez: The only things that exist are good public space, bad public space, and chaos. Even though it's just an easy paraphrase of T. S. Eliot's phrase that Monsiváis uses as an epigraph in *Los rituales del caos* (The Rituals of Chaos), I think it helps us imagine that on *the other side* of that chaos with two faces that you mention (chaos as disaster and chaos as promise), we also have

two variations on the public space. Creative chaos is the vitality of a culture and therefore of a city. In Mexico City it is *the street*, what we “authentically” mean to say by that term when we say somebody has “street smarts,” and the good public space would be the one that allows the most street life in the best possible way. But that description only works for defining opposites: chaos as destruction and bad public space. Based on our own day-to-day practice, we should ask ourselves what we consider vital or productive in the city and, therefore, which spaces we think serve it best. It seems obvious that for someone whose productive life in the city depends on the speed with which he or she

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can move in it, marches and street markets, or processions and neighborhood pick-up games seem like obstacles or hindrances. From their point of view they are chaos, undoubtedly, and the best public space would be the one that would limit or contain everything that is an obstacle. In that sense, the difficulty with consensus is that, instead of achieving the possibility of differences and dissent (productive chaos), it imposes a single possibility: consensus homogenizes. With regard to this, we should ask ourselves what we call an *aesthetic experience*. If we reduce “the aesthetic” to the relationship between an object and a viewer, we might forget the fundamental, almost etymological, aspect of “the aesthetic,” in which *sensibility* and *meaning* converge. How can we seek or strengthen the construction of *meaning* even when not only what I see but what I experience is, in some or many ways, foreign to my *sensibility*?



The central part of University City, known as “the Islands,” is an oasis for students and non-students alike, where everyone can be at home.

WBC: I like that you used *Los rituales del caos* as a reference because I think Monsiváis contributes the one thing lacking to complete this kind of framework that we're drawing for this discussion: consumption. Undoubtedly, we should define what the aesthetic experience is. You have brought in the idea of dissent; and if we agree that efficiently constructing contemporary consensus depends to a great extent on the homogenization of consumption, then the aesthetic strength of dissent lies in its resistance to that relationship. And I believe that the "public" in the public space is precisely the possibility it offers as an emplacement for dissent. Now, if that's the case, are there remaining public spaces in Mexico City? Monsiváis is careful to note that all the emplacements in his text (the street markets, the university stadium, the subway, the Basilica of Guadalupe) have lost something in the face of the overwhelming advance of consumption. Do you think there are truly public spaces in Mexico City?

AHG: In 1965, Charles Moore published an article in *Perspecta* magazine: "You Have to Pay for the Public Life." Moore compares the civic centers of California cities, particularly Los Angeles, with Disneyland, and finds that the latter surpasses the former in the number of people who seem to take part in different activities in the space, or simply enjoy it. "Disneyland, it appears, is enormously important and successful just because it recreates all the chances to respond to a public environment, which Los Angeles particularly no longer has."¹ Moore says that he wrote that article in Guanajuato, using it as an example of a city that has been able to



Patricia Pérez Ramírez

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Thousands of capital residents eat at street food stands every day.

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grow and add "a whole new layer of twentieth-century visual delights" without losing its "picturesque eighteenth-century delights."² Of course, Moore's ideas are problematic, especially because we cannot think of Los Angeles as a "normal" city, without the "public space" that Disneyland, its "artificial" counterpart, offers at a cost: you have to pay for the public space! But I also don't believe we can think of Guanajuato as a "normal" city, and not just from the point of view of Moore, as a tourist. Guanajuato is a clear example of a city that makes its history a representation that it offers the visitor as an "aesthetic experience." What's interesting about this is that, beyond the admittance fee in one case, both "cities" (Guanajuato and Los Angeles/Disneyland) offer the visitor —more than their inhabitants— experiences to be consumed regardless of whether we're talking about the "vulgarity" of the parade of

movie characters or the "sophistication" of Cervantino Festival medieval theatrical interludes performed in every alleyway. These cases may seem extreme, but they lead me to suppose that it's hard to think about the "authenticity" of certain public spaces beyond a certain ideology of "consumption."

In Mexico City, what is more public: the Central Alameda Park, recently renovated as a place where doing practically anything that isn't just looking has been banned; Chapultepec —and which Chapultepec? that of the theatrical Anthropology Museum with its esplanade with the Papantla Flyers, or the Chapultepec of children's parties with balloons and piñatas in the shape of . . . Disney characters!—; or the streets around the Tacubaya subway station, overrun by "informal" commerce and —they say— drug dealers? Perhaps all of these are truly public spaces with regard to the par-

ticular public that they construct and their expectations about how to use it. In other words —and here it's impossible to avoid citing Manuel Delgado—, the public space may not exist at all; what may exist is only the ideology and perception of certain types and uses of public space.

In this conversation, I think we should add another kind of space, particularly in Mexico City, that was still visible at least in my long-ago childhood: the common space, the space that isn't private but that also doesn't obey the rules —necessarily (and inevitably?) of the state— with regard to the public. The space of pilgrimages and *quinceañera* fiestas in the street, of the gang that controls its territory, and the little boys and girls who play kick-the-can. What do you think of that space? Or rather, do we still see it?

WBC: The relationship between what we understand as common and public is very important, and these spaces you mention are just the kind that I like to think of as public. That place, between private and public, that is the central patio of the tenement, the street temporarily closed that becomes a playing field, or a battlefield, the park that hasn't been "fixed up" like the Alameda . . . all these spaces are public because, for one moment, they belong to no one. I'm always very emphatic in underlining that a public space, in the purest sense of the word, is not a space that is everyone's, but a space



Street sales have taken over a large part of public space.

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that is no one's. In Mexico City, I think a lot of these kinds of spaces survive. For example, the "Islands" in University City, or the spaces between the Tlatelolco towers immediately come to mind. . .

AHG: I would say that the experience of the common space is always a common experience, an experience of being part of the community. The common space would be prior to the division that splits it or distributes it in two, the public and the private. And the common space may well survive beneath these two. I agree that the public space must be thought of not as everyone's but as no one's, precisely because it's a space that cannot be appropriated. That is what makes it eminently political and not economic. But my doubt is about the common space, which I insist on thinking of as prior to and necessary for understanding the public and the private. Who does it belong to? I don't think the answer can simply be "to the community" if we don't first think about what that might be. But if the public

space and the private space play in two registers that are almost symmetrical, the political and the economic, *polis* and *oikos*, the common space plays out in both spheres: a tenement party uses the central patio (a private space, with owners and economic value) and at the same time the street (a public space, owned by no one and with a political meaning). Stavros Stavrides's book *Common Space (in Common)* offers us a useful definition:

Understood as distinct from public as well as from private spaces, 'common spaces' emerge in the contemporary metropolis as sites open to public use in which, however, rules and forms of use do not depend upon and are not controlled by a prevailing authority.

He later adds, "Common space is a set of spatial relations produced by communing practices."³ In an attempt to give a day-to-day ordinary example of the superimposition but simultaneous independence of these spaces, I suppose that some of today's misunderstandings in



At main intersections, young people try their luck and show off their talent.



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our city about issues like street sales arise when people think that the corner street-seller “privatizes” the public space when he or she uses it for commercial purposes while, perhaps —or at the same time?— what he/she is doing is to transform public space, with its fixed, written, prescriptive rules, into a common space.

WBC: I was recently reading David Harvey, who is constantly fighting for the creation of urban commons. The idea is one of striking force, and I undoubtedly think it describes those spaces that allow for —or even favor— the unfolding of autonomous sensibilities and experiences. The fact that our discussion has led us to street sales is a clear symptom of the malaise of our culture, not only because it’s an activity that is easily pointed to as illegal or contrary to a certain work ethic, and therefore an ideal scapegoat, but also because —it must be said— it is an activity easily domesticated and homogenized. However —and I think this is the important point—, the fact that an activity is domesticated does not mean that the space is, too. That commons continues to be the condition for the possibility of singular experiences and sensibilities. And that force is a threat to any order, so much so that the spaces and activities are criminalized to preserve that order: neighbors’ patios, alleyways, and parks are only made visible as spaces where drugs are sold and miscreants gather. And, “informal” sales are dubbed precisely an activity that attacks the common since it is the “everyone’s property.” . . . Are there spaces left in Mexico City that have that ability to foster communing?



Chapultepec Forest, whose name in Nahuatl means Grasshopper Hill, is capital residents' favorite recreational space.

These spaces of the commons can be the ones where not so much the place itself, but what happens there, resists being domesticated, mastered, and appropriated.

AHG: I would say —perhaps too rushed and optimistically— that all of them! First off, I like the fact that together with those “spheres of the common” —I recently read that translation into Spanish for “the commons” in Humberto Beck’s book about the thinking of Ivan Illich—, you talk about “domesticated” activities. It seems impossible to me not to jump from *domus* to *oikos* and suppose a relationship between the domesticated or “domesticatable” and the economic rationality of the *oikos*, or what has an owner: lord and master. So these spaces of the commons can be the ones where not so much

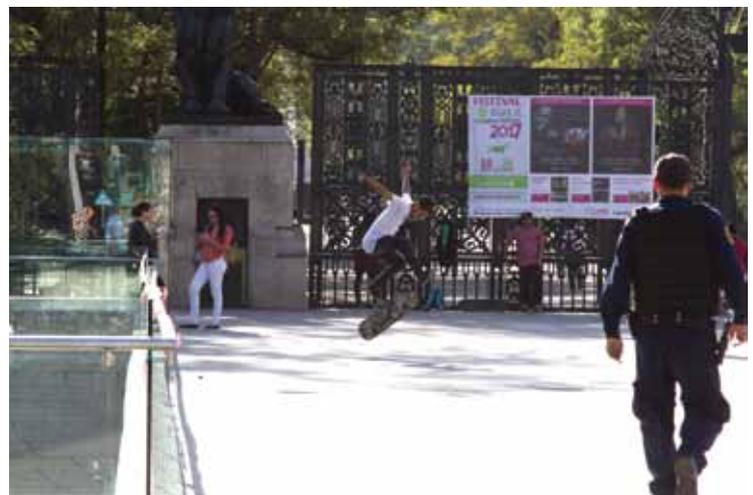
the place itself, but what happens there, resists being domesticated, mastered, and appropriated. This may be related to promoting the potential not only of the common and the community-related, but of the inappropriate; to not allowing the ambiguity of those two extremes of what happens in the city to be lost, according to Massimo Cacciari: leisure on the one hand, and business on the other. This doesn’t imply that the dividing line is clean, stark, and that the street pick-up game —almost non-existent nowadays— is purely leisure and the hipster sidewalk café is only business. It also means that the distinction between formal and informal in terms of occupying the space is not definitive either. The vision that the informal unduly appropriates the common space isn’t always completely wrong, but the formal appropriation of the common space is also not unquestionable. Given the power of capital —perhaps abusing the term— to transform everything into



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Every year, thousands of pilgrims gather on the Basilica's huge esplanade to present their supplications to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

business, we should look for a way to contaminate it with leisure, to “informalize” even the most formal of the formal. People who read or chat for hours in a sidewalk café do it almost effortlessly. In contrast, anyone who sells juice or tamales on a corner doesn't always have an easy time of it in occupying the space. But the *danzón* music and dancing in the park across from Mexico City's Ciudadela shows that at certain moments the public space and the population at large coincide in a common place. Perhaps that's what it's all about: moments, not spaces. **MM**



NOTES

¹ Charles Moore, “You Have to Pay for the Public Life,” 97.14. 51.10:81/pmb/ARCHITECTURE/You%20Have%20to%20Pay%20for%20the%20Public%20Life%20-%20Selected%20Esays%20of%20Charles%20W%20Moore.pdf, p. 126.

² Ibid., p. 139

³ Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016).