The production of private space and its implications for urban social relations

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Abstract

The paper focuses on what has been termed the privatization of urban public space and the negative consequences attributed to this transformation. The first part examines this dichotomy between public and private space and finds it to be more apparent than real, insofar as it is difficult to claim a sharp conceptual distinction between the two; moreover, the social benefits of public space are shown to be overdrawn, while those of private space are shown to be commonly overlooked. Having begun to dismantle the dichotomy, the second part of the paper discusses the public–private spaces in a rapidly growing metropolitan area in the Southwestern US and explores their implications for social relations. Given that these newer spaces are less different than is sometimes claimed, it is not surprising that they display some familiar forms of social interaction.
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Introduction

This paper deals with one of the more important changes to occur in the contemporary American city, one that has been identified in the literature as the 'privatization of public space' (Kohn, 2004). This restructuring of the urban landscape has been facilitated by the interlocking components of the real estate, finance, construction and design sectors, and reflects the influence of the latter at the expense of municipal oversight. In conceptual terms, this may be of only limited importance, insofar as cities in the US have been both shaped and produced by corporate interests for a very long time. What is changing is the apparent fragmentation of

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the city, as urban space 'splinters' into more complex entities (Graham & Marvin, 2001). This is a function of corporations producing larger and more clearly delineated spaces—shopping malls, private places of entertainment, residential developments and office parks—that can only be entered and used by invitation (Low & Smith, 2006).

The result of these changes is that what were once apparently open spaces—for instance parks, or streets adjoining individual stores and businesses—may turn into controlled spaces. As we shall see, there are various reasons why this may be a negative development. One that is strongly asserted within the literature is that the loss of undifferentiated public spaces leads to a diminution of the ability of individuals to meet and interact freely with others. In turn, increased "concentrations of poverty and clustering [have] left many cities divided in ways that commentators believe hinders political empathy" (Atkinson & Blandy, 2005, p. 179). Those whose appearance is different in some manner—due to poverty, gender, age, ethnicity or religious observance—may be singled out for scrutiny and may be denied entry. What may change, then, in the restructuring city is a surrender of one's rights to move freely and to choose one's destinations, or as Mitchell puts it more succinctly, one's 'rights to the city' (Mitchell, 2003).

This is an interconnected set of arguments with complex implications. The loss of public space can be seen as something with important social outcomes—part of what Atkinson and Blandy (2005, p. 179) conjecture may be a "downward spiral of urban social relations". There may be important impacts on citizenship, insofar as the existence of public space can be linked to the operation of the public sphere (Low, 2000; Smith & Low, 2006). On one hand, then, we are invited to see the contemporary city as one that is devolving, retreating from the Progressive experiment, and losing its civil attributes (Nelson, 2005). Given what we have observed since the millennium with regard to a loss of individual and group liberties, examples of this are not hard to find (D'Arcus, 2004).[1] On the other hand, we are also seeing a different kind of city emerging, especially in those parts of the US where urban growth is a relatively recent phenomenon. These are cities in which public space has a diminished importance, for a number of reasons, and where private space has a normalcy that is absent in older metropolitan areas. We are challenged therefore to understand what these new urban forms have in store for us, both as urban residents and as members of civil society, for if these are indeed places of corporate conformity and minimal social interaction, then we are creating a bleak urban future for ourselves.[2]

An evaluation of current debates

A number of significant changes have occurred in American cities in recent years and these have been linked to the rapid evolution of a globally competitive economic environment (e.g. Keil, 2003). These changes include the production of new downtown areas, the creation of lofts and similar high profile residential developments, and the displacement of low-income residents from neighborhoods. In some cities, this occurs as part of the evolution of new industrial spaces (Hutton, 2004); in others, it is linked to the creation of entertainment complexes, associated

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[1] Personal and group freedoms have been under attack since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 led to the first sweeping anti-terror legislation; see Kirby (1997). However, the breadth and depth of current practice is reminiscent of the vengeful wartime hysteria seen in 1942 and before that, in 1917.

[2] The reader should not infer that these cities are restricted to the Southwestern US; as Shatkin (2007) points out, privatization has been imposed on nations and their cities throughout the world by entities such as the World Bank and the IMF.