Towards a framework of public space governance

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Public spaces are the loci of complex interactions among multiple stakeholders whose decisions and activities affect places' qualities. The paper builds upon governance theory to provide a holistic in-depth approach in understanding the complexity and quality of the place-shaping processes in public spaces. In the absence of adequate conception of governance in urban design and public spaces, the paper introduces a framework for analysing governance capacity of public spaces and applies the framework to a flagship but highly contested public space in Brisbane, Australia namely South Bank Parklands. The proposed framework encompasses four major components of 1) actors and stakeholders, 2) governance structure, 3) governing tools, and 4) governing tasks. The framework puts special emphasis on the contextual factors, the way public spaces are shaped and governed, and political economy of the space. The case study application showcases the applicability of the PSGF which helps holistically analyse the trends in public space governance structure accounting for the diversity and complexity of all elements involved. The findings reveal that South Bank Parklands governance is mix-structured, hierarchical, and highly political. It is, however, a likeable public space for which civic engagement in the decision-making processes is notably limited.

1. Introduction

Many influential urban thinkers have lamented the decline in qualities of public spaces particularly over their publicness, meaningfulness, social diversity, and authenticity (Lefebvre, 1991; Sennett, 1992; Sorkin, 1992; Tibbalds, 1992). Whether criticisms of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century public spaces are founded on idealised conceptions (Brill, 1989; Carmona, 2010; Francis, 1989) or are realistic evaluations, public spaces have certainly changed in many aspects compared with their precedents in pre second World War eras (Banerjee, 2001). The broader societal, technological, political, and economic transformations have caused or triggered changes in public spaces including production, reproduction, and management of public spaces.

Today, many urban public spaces around the world are shaped through contributions of numerous stakeholders and actors such as public organisations and private entities in interrelated ways and complex arrangements (Banerjee, 2001; Madanipour, 2010). Public space provision is not a sole responsibility of governments. Indeed, almost all of the added public spaces in the post-war American downtowns have been provided by the private sector (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1993). In Australia, UK, New Zealand, and many European countries private enterprises are involved in public space delivery or management. This takes place through a number of ways ranging from partnership with the government to having full responsibility for the development, regulation, and management of the space (such as privately-owned public spaces). Regardless of the reasons, it signals the growing interest of the private sector in urban public spaces contesting the public interest in public spaces. The motivations and agendas of the three main groups of stakeholders of public spaces, the state, the public, and the private are distinctive and more often contradictory. There are also intra-group conflicts between these stakeholders (such as gender or inter-generational conflicts among public users of a space or competition among businesses on the use of space). As a result of these contests, the functions and meanings attached to public spaces change from time to time and across distinctive contexts (Carmona, De Magalhães, & Hammond, 2008; Pospech, 2013).

Hence, these changes have divided scholars on the basic definitions and expected functions of public space. Dissenting from the private sector involvement and labelling it as privatisation, some have argued that such spaces are not truly public or at best are pseudo public spaces that cannot replace genuine public spaces (Boyer, 1993; Kohn, 2004; Sennett, 1992; Sorkin, 1992). Whereas others argue that the private sector involvement in public space provision should not be seen as a

threat to the publicness of space rather as an opportunity for place quality enhancement and better management (Banerjee, 2001; Carmona & Wunderlich, 2012; De Magalhães, 2010). It is also argued that privatisation would be a simplified conception that does not explain the complexity and nuances of the new redistribution of responsibilities and rights in public space (De Magalhães, 2010). In the absence of adequate empirical research and innovative theories to address the complex and contested nature of public spaces, the conundrum continues to exist.

Studies of public spaces tend to focus on the substantive dimensions of public spaces such as normative theories of *good* public spaces or positivist stances to the outcomes insulated from shaping processes (Carmona, 2014b; Inam, 2002; Zamanifard, Alizadeh, Coiacetto, & Sipe, 2016). Studies of the procedural dimensions are limited and mostly fall under what is broadly discussed as 'public space management'. Here, public space management is defined as "the set of processes and practices that ensure public space can fulfil all its legitimate roles, while managing the interactions among, and impacts of, those multiple functions in a way that is acceptable to its users" (De Magalhães & Carmona, 2009, p. 112). Nevertheless, even this line of inquiry falls short of addressing the complexity and multiplicity of stakeholders, their motivations and interests, and their relationship. Concerns on who decides about the legitimate roles of public space, how acceptability is defined and by whom, who are the users and whether they can participate in decision-making processes cannot be effectively argued from the public space management approach (Rakodi, 2003; Ruhanen, Scott, Ritchie, & Tkaczynski, 2010).

This shortcoming shows the need for the public space literature to adopt more holistic approaches, perhaps through public space governance discourse. Public space governance is not a new concept (see De Magalhães, 2010; De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017), but its potential for studying public space has not been fully realised. This paper attempts to take a step forward by proposing a public space governance framework (PSGF). The concept of governance, this paper argues, provides a good lens to studying the dynamics of context and power in public place-shaping as a collective activity which engages a wide range of stakeholders. The proposed public space framework contributes to understanding the place-shaping processes of public spaces of different types; and sheds light on fundamental aspects of decision-making and power in a holistic manner.

The paper is structured in three sections. First, a review of public space literature is offered. Second, building on the learnings of the literature review, a holistic public space governance framework (PSGF) is proposed and elaborated. In the third section, the proposed framework is applied to a case study public space. The case study application showcases the applicability of the PSGF which helps holistically analyse the trends in public space governance structure accounting for the diversity and complexity of all elements involved. More specifically, the case study findings warn against the trend in which public voice may be further restricted in the decision-making process.

2. Literature review

Much of the literature on public space until two decades ago had been focusing on substantive contents such as use, access, and physical attributes; and little work was done on the procedural dimensions of how public spaces were shaped and managed. A reason might be that, in the past, the border between public and private realms were defined in a way that public space provision and management was largely a responsibility of the public entities such as the city councils or governments (Madanipour, 2003). Moreover, public spaces had been considered as a stage or container where certain activities or the spillovers from the adjacent buildings had taken place and those activities had been the focus of procedural studies rather than the space itself (De Magalhães & Carmona, 2009).

However, the rapidly-growing engagement of for-profit enterprises in shaping publicly-accessible spaces brought more complexity to the public space debates shifting the focus from substantive and mostly physical attributes to the procedural and mostly managerial aspects. Various forms of partnership between the private and public sectors have been taking place especially in urban settings.

This substantial change in public space provision and its implications for the meanings and functions of the spaces have dividend scholars. In the literature, two distinctive major strands towards private-public partnership in public space shaping can be identified. One bemoans the loss or shrinkage of publicness and public realm and urges for an end to the private sector involvement (Lefebvre & Enders, 1976; Mitchell, 2003; Sorkin, 1992). The other strand, however, embraces the quality and the quantity that the public-private partnership can add to public spaces (Carmona & Wunderlich, 2012; Langstraat & Melik, 2013; Worpole & Knox, 2008). Below sections elaborate some of the main points made in these two competing strands:

2.1. The 'public space privatisation and decline in publicness' debate

Privatisation conventionally means selling the state property to the individuals or corporations (Kohn, 2004). However, privatised public spaces take multiple forms and degrees and can be defined as publicly accessible spaces majorly owned, developed, and/or managed by private enterprises (Carmona, 2014a; Carmona & Wunderlich, 2012). Privately-owned public spaces such as clubs and shopping malls are the purest form of public space privatisation whereas urban plazas or parks managed by corporations fall at the looser end of privatisation spectrum. The most common kind of privatised urban public spaces in western developed countries are corporation plazas or office parks shaped through some sort of incentive arrangements. That is, the private business frees up part of its land and builds, furnishes, and/or maintains the space that is, by the agreement, accessible to general public and in return receives incentives in forms of special zoning arrangements, larger floor area ratio, rate concession and so on (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1993). Nonetheless, other types of public space privatisation happen through gentrification, urban redevelopment, and global capital demands (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2009).The use of and access to the space is generally controlled and regulated by the private body (Minton, 2006).

The mainstream literature on public space from human geography perspective argues that privatisation of a public space undermines its publicness (Kayden, & Dept. of City Planning, The Municipal Art Society of New York, 2000; Lefebvre, 1991; Lofland, 1989; Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1993; Low & Smith, 2006; Madanipour, 2003; Mitchell, 1995; Sennett, 1992). Differentiating between a social space and a public space, Kohn (2004) asserts that private enterprises may be able to create the former but cannot create the latter. She maintains that in a truly public space dissenting people have the chance to meet and so-called undesirables can be seen and their voice can be heard, something that is hardly tolerated by economically-motivated management regimes. Private control exacerbates exclusion, discrimination, and segregation based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, and age through tangible and intangible policies, semiotic codes, or by structuring people's perceptions and interactions (Goldsteen & Elliott, 1994; Kohn, 2004). Mitchell (1995, p. 120) argues that privatised public spaces have the tendency to narrow the 'list of eligibles for the public' and exclude homeless people or political activists. Smith and Low (2006) discuss that too much control over public spaces in the US is a consequence of dominant neoliberal discourse on planning that has had negative impacts on democratic politics.

2.2. The 'public space privatisation and loss of authenticity' debate

Sorkin (1992) points out that since the private sector's motivation in shaping public spaces is profit accumulation, there is little room for innovation based on locality and instead similar tested standards and