INTRODUCTION

Bounded Cities: Public Space, the Built Environment, and the Limits of American Democracy

ANKE ORTLEPP and BRYANT SIMON

“It’s the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.”

Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) in Crash

On a Thursday afternoon in April 2017, two African American men walked into a Philadelphia Starbucks. They could see through the tall, clear glass windows that there were open tables inside the café. They had a meeting scheduled with a White business associate. They took a seat and decided to wait for him before they ordered. One of the men asked to use the bathroom. “No,” the manager told him, “You have to buy something.” The men refused to purchase anything. A few words were passed and the manager called the police. Within minutes, seven Philadelphia police officers descended on the store and put the two African American men in handcuffs. Several patrons filmed the arrest; one uploaded the video to a social media site.¹

The arrest of the two men set off a wave of protests in Philadelphia and around the United States. Starbucks officials took to the airwaves to apologize for the manager’s over-reaction and eventually closed all of the company’s stores for an afternoon of sensitivity training for employees. In the larger public, the incident launched extended conversations about implicit and explicit racism and racial profiling. Questions were raised about who had access to public (or quasi-public) spaces and what these spaces meant to cities and to the day-to-day practice of democracy. For years, Starbucks has been marketing its stores as a “third place,” a term “borrowed” from the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who used it to describe a place defined as neither home nor work, a place where people from different social backgrounds, income brackets, and races could meet over a cup of coffee or a beer and start a conversation, and a place that as a result of these interactions was critical to

¹ Not surprisingly, there was a slew of articles about this incident; perhaps the best comes from the “toilet scholar,” Harvey Molotch: “All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go: America’s Public Bathroom Crisis.” See also Simon.
form multicultur al communities (for an update on Oldenburg, see Anderson). Clearly, Starbucks had fallen short on this front. Too often, latte and Frappuccino drinking happens in bounded spaces. From the outside, the company’s stores looked open to all, but, evidently, only some customers were welcomed, while others were kept out. Does that mean that Starbucks is not a public space? Why does this matter? What is the larger importance of the public and of public spaces to understanding American history and the practice of American democracy? Why are human interactions so important to the idea of the public, as Oldenburg suggested they are with his idea of third place? What is the relationship between the built environment and human interaction, between Starbucks and the police, between the windows of the café and access to the bathrooms? What moves have planners and architects in the past made to bring people together? What were the wrong moves? Can a public space be built by a private company, like Starbucks, or only by the state? And what happens when a place—either by design or intention or human action—brings people together or divides them? How do these outcomes affect democracy?

These questions represent the themes and concerns that run through the five essays in this special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies*. The articles explore the intersection between the built environment and the making (or unmaking) of a democratic and inclusive public by looking at cities in the United States from a historical perspective. The notions of the public and of making are crucial to these essays. In many ways, they show that the public was and is a material reality, a physical and bounded space. Moreover, by investigating empirical case studies, the essays show that the public was a critical point of intersection, a juncture where built space (the windows and café tables at the Starbucks), ideology and practice (ideas about race, access, and consumer habits), the state (the role of the police and the refusal of cities or other communities to fund public bathrooms), and the actions of individual actors (the Starbucks employee and the store designers) came together. It is this mix at the point of the public that stands at the center of each essay. But the essays also carefully uncover the centrality of agency in the making and unmaking of the public. In other words, each essay probes the operation of agency, of who mattered and what mattered, how the state and individuals made a difference. In thinking about urbanity and agency, the essays explore the physical and ideological making, unmaking, and remaking of public space. Moreover, they examine how urban planning, architecture, streets, and roads, as well as laws, ideas about race, and popular culture, have created and continue to create real and imagined links and dividing lines between people and communities, some of them easier to see than others. That too, is part of the project of this special issue. The essays here are interested in the relationship between design and practice, when and how elaborate facades and intricate interiors influence human interaction. They investigate how spaces

---

2 On the limits of the public and built space, see Low; Kohn.
and boundaries were deliberately and repeatedly made to bring (some) people together and more often, especially when profit was involved, to keep certain groups away for legal, social, ideological, and business purposes. Sometimes, as the Starbucks story shows, the built environment did not determine everything. There were moments when people triumphed over poorly designed and intentionally divisive spaces and managed to create enduring forms of community and diverse political coalitions. And there were other moments when actions in design and enforcement narrowed access to the public and the notion of democracy.

With these concerns in mind, this special issue contributes to the larger literatures on public space, urban studies, and the history of American democracy. In particular, it makes an innovative contribution to scholarship on United States cities by focusing on architecture, architects, urban planners, residents, and the built environment as historical agents in the debates over the meanings of American citizenship. Whereas past scholarship has concentrated on access to government and government offices, to key sites like markets, taverns, and other places where people gathered (or were kept away from) like movie houses, sporting events, parades, and amusement parks, the essays here explore how buildings, infrastructure, city planning, design, and people on the ground (like that Starbucks manager in Philadelphia) created, enabled, framed, and destroyed public spaces and the practices of the public. While the essays insist on the essential importance of the builders and overseers of public space, they do not assume—as some planning literature does—that buildings and design alone make history, that people are the direct products of built environments, or that the only viable solution to inequality and broken democracies is better design. Space matters, but so do organizing, community making, and coalition building. The essays gathered here therefore examine historical struggles over spaces both in the abstract (as architectural ideas and concepts) and in practice (as the end result of everyday actions, movements around the city, and agency).

The contributions to this issue pull together urban studies, the histories of architecture and urban planning, and theories of democracy to explore who had the power in twentieth-century America to make and unmake—in terms of ideology, but also in terms of design and regulation—public spaces. To do this, the scholars look at urban spaces as manifestations of history and conflict, as physical spaces and ideological spaces. They show how conceptions of the (built) public and democracy overlap; how people interact not just at the ballot box, but on the streets; and how these things change over time and from region to region. The essays by Patricia Morton, Rob Gioielli, and Anke Ortlepp explore how some spaces, like public housing and municipal service buildings, failed to live up to the promises of democracy. Lizabeth Cohen and Jan Hansen write about what some people did to try to change things, and why they did so. In other words, as the title of this special issue suggests,
these essays examine how the built environment defined the possibilities of democracy. With an emphasis on agency, they look at who built and financed the construction and maintenance of boundaries, and at what these boundaries looked like and how they operated on a day-to-day basis. They examine physical boundaries, but also the carefully cultivated ideological boundaries created to maintain built material structures and places. And, finally, they look at the role of law and politics, and how commerce, well-placed individuals, and activists built particular urban environments that shaped and limited the public and public spaces.

In the end, these are all stories of failure, the failure to achieve an ideal. Public spaces, the kind that Ray Oldenburg celebrates, to which almost everyone had equal access, were the rarest of places in the United States. But that absence did not kill the idea, really the notion, that a thriving democracy depended on having these kinds of open and unfettered sites as much as it depended on elections, voting, and a free press. To survive and flourish, it needed places for people to gather, to talk, to debate, and to disagree. It needed unbounded public spaces. And cities, most theorists and planners believed, were the United States’ and most countries’ absolute best hope for creating a diverse and vibrant public. Central cities and downtowns, as Alison Isenberg writes, have often served as “idealized public place(s),” places of “negotiation of difference,” of “community gathering,” and of “democratic ideal(s)” (10-11). Yet, the city has also been a place where exclusivity, inequality, and the fear of the other are constants, and even sources of profit-making.5

Finally, the essays in this special issue make clear that one cannot talk about agency, built environments, and the public without talking about the private. The street and the living room are connected, and the idea and practice of the (free) market is also linked to the ideas and practices of government intervention and neglect. The scholars here see constant entanglements between the public and the private not as exceptions but as the absolute rule, as exemplified in the Philadelphia Starbucks case, where private needs and ideas about public exchange and access to space cannot be separated. City building, to quote Lizabeth Cohen’s essay, “has always been a shared enterprise between public and private sectors.” And as she notes, the balance between these forces has changed again and again over time in the cities of the United States. What was private before the Progressive Era—like the water and the toilets in Jan Hansen’s essay—became public as more people moved to the cities and demanded equal access to basic necessities. Then what was public—again, like water and toilets—became private as public funding dried up and public entities faded from the scene and austerity regimes commanded center stage, as they did across the United States from the 1970s forward. Now, as the twenty-first century staggers forward, cities increasingly depend on private investment and profit-making to deliver public bathrooms and public transit, public schools and public health, public libraries and public housing. The end results are clear: the priva-

5 On the centrality of public space, see Mitchell. See also Low and Smith, especially the chapter by David Harvey. On ideas of fear, see M. Davis; Muhammad; Hannigan; Phillips-Fein.
tization of the public in American cities has led to historic levels of unequal access to basic services and of crippling inequality.

As they have for so many scholars of the public and of the city, Jürgen Habermas’s paradigm-making reflections on the public sphere (see also Calhoun) serve as an almost unstated starting point for this special issue. Habermas’s insights provided urban historians with a new set of ideas about the formation of the public and the built environment, and gave historians a narrative arc to grapple with, one that associated the collapse of the public—and by implication democracy—with the advent of bourgeois privacy and the spread of consumer society. With Habermas in mind and perhaps a copy of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) in hand, urban historians—at least some of them—began to move away from urban biographies. They wrote less often about downtown politics and personalities, city councils and mayors, boosters and trade officials. They began to focus on everyday interactions on the streets, the shape of buildings, and the formal and informal organization of parks, playgrounds, and amusement parks. In their narratives, they fused together ideas about space with research into the physical places where people met, interacted, debated, touched, and learned from one another. For many, studying cities from the 1970s onward meant looking to see if these kinds of spaces—often more the Habermasian ideal than a reality—took shape in specific spaces and in specific moments. Studying cities meant looking at why the urban promise of density and democracy, embodied in Oldenburg’s faith in third place, was not automatically realized, and how the physical spaces of the city kept people apart, created a festering and toxic sense of alienation, and squelched the Habermasian dream of contact, interaction, and democracy. Again, the emphasis on the American side tended to be more on practice than on the deadening impact of consumer culture.6

This special issue is fundamentally interested in urbanism and democracy, the questions Habermas suggested, which were later adopted by Jacobs and then by democratic theorists like Robert Putnam and Eric Klinenberg and their ideas about the city, loneliness, and connectivity. But unlike these big-picture works, each of the essays in this issue is tightly focused on inclusion and on space in a particular place and at a particular time. Each revives a very localist tradition in urban studies, a tradition based on the faith and the idea that there are a million stories in any city and that these stories matter. To put this another way, the essays here are less theoretical than they are practical in their scope and outlook (with an eye toward detail and the nitty-gritty). They are very much about how people, individuals like the Starbucks manager in Philadelphia, make and unmake place, erect or take down walls, and why they do exactly what they do when they do it.

This special issue thus presents an agency-based approach to the city. The essays look—and look very closely—at who does what to whom. If Habermas gave voice to an ideal of democracy, the everyday prac-
The practice of urbanism as outlined in the following accounts gave shape and form to prejudice, fear, and narrow and relentless economic self-interest, often couched as the common good. The people in what follows, the actors, are planners, architects, designers, city leaders, boosters, urban residents, and homeowners; they push, prod, and press, leaving a deep imprint on the design and layout of the city. Some start out imagining place and space with big ideas, but just as often they have something distinctly smaller and more defensive in mind. However, the essays in this issue do not stop with imagining. They look at how imagination is realized and how it manifests in government policy, building designs and codes, public architecture, highways, high-rise construction and removal, and water lines and power grids. It was the stuff of the everyday, as Habermas makes clear, that created and limited democracy—not least in the built environment.

Lizabeth Cohen (Harvard University) explores the benefits and costs of rebuilding American cities through the life and career of urban planner Edward J. Logue in her essay “Place, People, and Power in City Building in Postwar America.” Her contribution, which was delivered as the keynote address at the workshop “Bounded Democracy: Global Workshop on American Urbanism,” in which all contributors participated, is an ideal opening piece for this special issue due to its bold argument and broad agenda. Cohen reflects on the meanings of cities in the age of suburbanization and dwells on ideas of community and the public. At the same time, she traces the ideas and activities of one of the most powerful urban planners, a government administrator whose top-down mandate to “renew” cities like New Haven and Boston in the 1960s transformed the built environment that tens of thousands of ordinary residents inhabited. She investigates specific places, how local historical actors—both powerful and powerless—interacted, and how, in the process, new ideas about the city emerged. Through her carefully rendered case study, Cohen delivers a reinterpretation of modernist urban planning and its consequences for urban public space and American democracy.

In “Excavating Urban Democracy: Water Infrastructure and the Public Realm in Los Angeles, circa 1870-1890,” Jan Hansen (Humboldt University) examines the underground portions of Progressive-Era Los Angeles. Investigating the water use practices of local residents and the pioneer policies of what was still mostly a frontier city, he finds something unexpected. Water infrastructure, he observes, was never neutral. It wrote class and ethnicity across the maps of the emerging metropolis. Moreover, it created a new regime of the private. Before the pipes and water lines, people came to the town square to get their water. Afterwards, they remained at home. This would seem like the conventional narrative of modernity and the erosion of the public sphere in a Habermasian sense, but Hansen finds a surprising element to the story. The drive for private water created a vibrant public, a public demanding the

The workshop was held at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 2018. In the fall of 2019, Cohen’s monograph Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in New York.
right to water, the right to investment in their neighborhoods, and the
right to the privacy of sinks and in-house toilets.

Patricia Morton’s essay “Territoriality and Surveillance: Defensible
Space and Low-Rise Public Housing Design, 1966-1976” deals with
questions of architecture and design in public housing projects. Morton
(University of California, Riverside), who looks at case studies in New
Haven and Brooklyn, examines how architects and planners deliberately
experimented with innovative designs and spatial layouts to invite social
interaction between future residents. She is especially interested in Os-
car Newman’s defensible space theory, which links built form to social
behavior in public places. Investigating how Newman hoped to build
a public that was beautiful and invited social interaction, she also ex-
amines how his ideas translated into actual buildings and how another
set of historical actors, the local residents, responded to his architec-
tural designs. Her essay links theory to building practice and points to
race and class as complicating factors. Studying the significance of real
and symbolic boundaries, she explains the role of design and why these
housing projects ultimately failed as public places.

Anke Ortlepp (University of Cologne) also looks at the power of
architecture and its role in building the public. She investigates the uses
and meanings of New Brutalist philosophies of building design and ur-
ban planning and applies a transnational perspective in “Building Con-
crete Democracies: New Brutalism in Great Britain, the United States,
and Brazil from the 1950s to the 1980s.” Situating the history of the
built environment in an Atlantic context, she traces how New Brutalist
aesthetics and ethics found resonance among architects and urban plan-
ners in parts of the Americas after their invention and application by
the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson in the 1950s. Looking
at case studies in London, Hunstanton (Norfolk), Boston, Washington,
D.C., and São Paulo, she studies how architects and urban planners, the
main historical players in her essay, applied the stylistic idiom in differ-
cent cultural, social, political, and economic contexts in an effort to shape
and reshape urban spaces in the postwar decades. She shows that al-
though many New Brutalist buildings shared features, they functioned
differently as a means for the public articulation of hierarchies of power
and belonging in Britain, the United States, and Brazil. Ultimately, she
argues, they gave built expression to very different understandings of
community, the public, and democracy.

Robert Gioielli (University of Cincinnati) shifts the focus to the
American Midwest. He explores the connections between metropolitan
inequality and energy-intensive suburban lifestyles in his essay “Pruitt-
Igoe in the Suburbs: Connecting White Flight, Sprawl and Climate
Change in Metropolitan America.” Looking at the St. Louis suburb
Black Jack, he investigates how the struggle between planners and local
stakeholders over the construction and design of a publicly subsidized
housing complex reflected the contested nature of public space and its
imagined purpose in suburban America. Gioielli ponders the meanings of the public in suburbia, which is often considered the most privatized space in the nation. His interest is in members of the local community, their activities, and their vision of agency and democracy, rather than in planners and architects. He looks at both their repertoire of actions and the discourses they used to keep Black Jack to themselves. Here, as in New Haven and Brooklyn, race and class complicated the fight over the redefinition of residential boundaries.

Together, the essays in this special issue point toward the deeper meaning of the incident at that Starbucks in Philadelphia. As this troubling moment showed, the Starbucks manager had an issue with race, but the United States has a larger problem that Starbucks and its bathrooms symbolize. It is a problem of public space, of who builds and maintains public space and who has access to it. In the United States (and to some extent in other countries in the Americas and Europe), public space in recent years has been outsourced to private companies. This has created new builders, new boundaries, and new architectures that influence the daily practices of democracy. Starbucks might look like a new and shiny third place from the outside, but its failure to deliver on its third-place promises ties it to a longer history in the United States, a history of the fractured public replete with contradictions, apparent openings, and hidden obstacles. The protests at Starbucks point to something else that is essential. Better buildings alone cannot bring people together, as the essays that follow make clear. Again and again, the promise of democracy in the cities of the United States has been undercut by the individuals, institutions, and government agencies who use and design these places. Only these same individuals, institutions, and agencies can save these places and render American democracy unbound.

Works Cited


