

POLITICS OF OCCUPATION: PERVASIVE AND TRANSGRESSIVE URBANIZATION

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The physical occupation of space, staking claim and proliferating collective voice has the power to illicit significant change by bringing issues into public consciousness. New York City is a prime example of how urban environments transform into platforms for political, social and economic critique through the occupation of urban space as an act of defiance, political outcry and consciousness raising. New York City has a long history of activism and protests from the Draft Riots of 1863, Silent Parade for civil rights 1917, Peace Marchs in 1967 protesting the Vietnam War draft 1970, Anti-Nuclear March in 1982, Anti-Iraq War Protests 2003 to Occupy Wall Street in 2011.

Careful consideration of the quality an access of public space for all people are critical components of vibrant, diverse, equitable urbanization. New York City provides a context for understanding how the occupation of space as a political act can provide understanding and a platform for critiquing underlying forces of urbanization and the rights and regulation of public and private spaces. Protest has the power to democratize space, highlight issues of rights in the public realm and raise consciousness of problematic forces that historically influenced and continue to define urbanization.

Access to public space for the enactment of free speech, assembly, recreational enjoyment and social interaction are critical conditions for democratic and equitable urban spaces. Good public space should be

clearly defined, open to all, well designed and make efforts to mitigate unequal policing and surveillance of the 'othered' body. Evaluating the context of urban space in New York requires an understanding of the regulations that have facilitated privatization and commercialization as drivers of urbanization, and resulting development and dependence of POPS system.

OWS transformed Zuccotti Park from a place of consumption and leisure into a platform for public outcry through inhabitation. Despite the Parks POPS status, the space temporarily took on a more public quality through the physical occupation of space. Contextualizing the politics of occupation and transformation of this POPS requires understanding the history of urbanization in New York City.

The proliferation of POPS are symptomatic of a trend of urbanization that encourage high density development that prioritizes privatization and commercialism and failed to regulate the design of genuinely public spaces open to all users. In 1961 New York City's zoning code underwent major revisions that influenced how the city would be planned and developed. The POPS provision was developed and outlined in this revision to incentivize developers of high density commercial and residential properties to incorporate spaces for the benefit of public use and access to light, air and green space. The 1961 Zoning Code changes altered the course of urbanization

by incentivizing privatization, commercialization and high density development of the urban environment.

The ramifications of the POPS system and other public-private partnerships continue to be used as substitutes for genuine public space. Substantial decrease in government spending in the past decade continue to result in reductions to public goods provisions and the disinvestment in public space. Regulations perpetuate urbanization trends that rely on privatization and commercialization through developer incentives.

The occupation of urban space for the purpose of political protest and consciousness raising has the ability to spark public awareness of social issues, but also uncovers forces and catalyzes changes in the trajectory of urbanization. Occupy Wall Street was a two-month occupation of Zuccotti Park for the purpose of protesting corporate influence in government, social and economic inequality and demanding “real democracy”.

The Occupy Wall Street Protest provides a lens through which to contextualize broader forces of urbanization and reveal shortcomings of Zoning Code regulations for POPS. The public response to the occupation also demonstrated neoliberal beliefs that champion the right to quality public space for some while rejecting and blaming ‘undesirable’ occupants for broader social

and political shortcomings/issues of urbanization.

The occupation of space temporarily transformed Zuccotti Park, a POPS, into what functioned more as a genuinely public space that allowed typically ‘undesired’ people to engage in their right to public space. The occupation and ensuing backlash underscored privatization, commercialization as drivers of urban development and revealed neoliberal ideals about the value of desirable and ‘othered’ users of urban space.

In the case of OWS the Occupiers Otherness was seen as a threat to privatization and commercialization that has defined a trend of urbanization that fostered a largely gentrified, tourist-friendly Lower Manhattan. The 1961 Zoning Code allowed developers of POPS to profit from both the height bonus incentive as well as commercialization of the POPS area itself. Privatization of these urban spaces’ results ambiguity in the rights to free speech and assemble in the urban environment because of their privately ownership. The nature of privatized space highlights charged questions about the right to surveillance and policing on the property.

OWS exemplified the issues of surveillance and control in the urban environment especially in POPS. These forces can often perpetuate existing social inequalities and disparate access to public space for persons who are not seen as ‘desirable’ in public

space. Surveillance and policing of people of color, mentally handicap, youth, and the homeless occur in both public and POPS. These forces perpetuate existing social inequality and equitable access to public space. However, there is not an easy solution to these wicked problems that fundamentally require consider issues of equity around policing and surveillance across all urbanized environments.

The news coverage of OWS demonstrates underlying forces of neoliberalist ideology as it is mapped on the urban build environment. A number of articles covering the event framed Occupiers as unproductive, filthy and out of place in Zuccotti Park which should be cleansed, regentrified and made safe for "hardworking" Americans. The neoliberal response to the physical occupation of Zuccotti Park demonstrates the fact that POPS are not genuinely public. It also demonstrates a belief that those who engage in commercial economy 'belong' in well-designed spaces while those who are unable are 'undesirable' and underserving.

Media coverage engaged in a neoliberal stance that occupiers were unwelcome and unwanted users of public space. The coverage framed Occupiers as dirty and dangerous which exemplifies a longstanding association of marginalized people as othered, transgressive, unwanted and dangerous. The Occupiers were framed as 'dirty' for their inability to sufficiently manage sanitation, waste removal and

public health as opposed to raising attention to the underlying need for efforts to improve public health and sanitation by the government and private owners of Zuccotti Park. Occupiers were seen as parasites to the clean orderly private space and the high density gentrified are of Lower Manhattan. OWS actually highlights the issues of inequity entrenched in forces of urbanization that can arise when the government is reliant on Private-Public partnerships to fulfill the need for public spaces in the urban environment.

A major flaw in the 1961 New York City Zoning Code regulations for POPS were ambiguous not only in the expectations of private owners, but also the design of spaces. At their origin POPS were often designed as hostile concrete expanses. POPS take many spatial forms such as "concrete plazas that separate a building from the sidewalk; glass-windowed atriums in downtown office buildings; rooftop terraces and gardens; and grass-covered spaces that appear to be traditional parks". However, thoughtless design poorly designed spaces whether public or private will result in poorly functioning spaces. At their origin POPS were intended to benefit the public access to light, air and well designed green space. However, not all developers designed these open spaces to be thriving public spaces because there was little economic benefit and no stipulated design requirements.

Establishing design standards for POPS is a strategy to resist a trend of urbanization that benefits developers' private interests above the public benefit. Some municipalities like New York have adopted more specific design standards for POPS development as a response to events like OWS. New regulations include design requirements for seating for movable seating, walls, steps and benches that foster engaging open spaces. Historically open spaces have been located internally to restrict the access of the larger public. Good public spaces, POPS or otherwise, should be located in exterior spaces on the ground level and have clear signage denoting public access.

OWS in Zuccotti Park exemplified how forces of urbanization have resulted in the development of ambiguous rights and regulations of public space. The response to OWS exposed privatization and commercialization trends of urbanization and neoliberal perspective on rights in public space. The occupation also brought attention to fundamental issues regarding the regulations and rights to the urban environment in privately owned public spaces. OWS and other occupations political acts of occupation in the urban realm have the power to uncover insight into problematic underpinnings of urbanization and beyond, and have the unique ability to transform the use of space temporarily and effect the trajectory of urbanization through shifts in regulations.

Although there have been significant improvements in the design standards and regulation of POPS, OWS demonstrates that underlying issues of privatization and commercialization continue to drive urbanization and fail to address disparities in access to public space. Some of the issues with POPS have been mitigated through clarification of regulations and improved design standards, however, the backlash after OWS resulted in regulations that limited the freedom to assemble and protest in POPS. Updated regulations have clarified some of the ambiguity in the rights and regulations of these liminal public spaces. However, they are by no means substitutes for genuine public space because they still are forces of privatization, commercialization and neoliberal values.

It is important to note that scale and duration of the occupation of Zuccotti Park had a fundamental impact on the degree of public awareness it elicited. The act of occupying space as an 'othered' body in public space is a political act in itself. On any given day an individual who is deemed threatening or unwanted in POPS or public spaces like parks are routinely hyper policed, asked to leave or are hyper surveilled as a function of broader social inequities. Although individual acts of occupying space as an 'othered' body is inherently political, larger scale visible displays of occupation like OWS are often necessary to fundamentally alter the public consciousness or transform the function of the urban space.

There needs to be a greater investment into genuinely public spaces and improve equitable access to the urban environment in order to sustain vibrant, diverse, sustainable communities improve equitable access to the urban environment. However, it is not to say that public parks in urban environments do not also face issues of poor design, discriminatory policing, surveillance of 'othered' bodies and control over program and hours of use. Urbanization is inherently entrenched in the social conditions it is situated within whether that be privatization, commercialization,

neoliberalism, and discrimination. These pervasive forces are not easily overthrown, therefore a shift in focus, power and funding of urban space may be the key to lessen some of the negative effects of urbanization in the future. Efforts must be made to mitigate the pervasive forces of urbanization through controlled regulation of POPS and Public-Private partnerships, critical reconsideration and training on equitable surveillance and policing of space, and government reinvestment additional genuinely public spaces.

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