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13

The Spaces of Democracy

RICHARD SENNETT

About 20 years ago, I went to Jerusalem as part of a planning group from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Although we knew better rationally, we were fired up by the belief that art might succeed in making a more democratic city in which politics had failed. My team explored how to transform a triangle of wasteland outside the Damascus Gate into a public space that Palestinians and Israelis might share. The team assigned me the task of meeting with Palestinian officials because I previously had done planning work in Jordan; specifically, I was asked to enlist the help of Anwar Nusseibeh, the doyen of an old and elite Palestinian family.

I first went to visit Nusseibeh at his office. He headed the East Jerusalem Electric Light Company, one of the few local businesses the Israelis allowed Palestinians to manage in the city. Nusseibeh was a courtly man who, I discovered, in a better life would have devoted himself to poetry rather than to electricity. By chance, we had slipped into speaking French at that first encounter, and he began to describe to me writers and artists he had known in Paris during the 1930s; these figures were more alive in his memory than were the immediate difficulties he faced.

I cannot say that a bond of trust developed between us because I could do nothing about being American and a good Jew or about the driver and guards provided by the mayor of Jerusalem. As the afternoon light faded in his office, while we spoke in a language foreign to the Israeli monitors, we began to understand one another. Our talks continued over the next few days in a cafe and finally in Nusseibeh's home, mostly about prewar Paris. France had been, for different reasons, a refuge for each of us; something about Paris arouses in its foreign

residents feelings of regret for the past. In any event, this shared bond prompted Nusseibeh, the most courteous of men, finally to challenge me about the present. Nusseibeh said (paraphrasing from my notes),

You want to build a place at Damascus Gate for "democracy," but you cannot show me—even supposing democracy is possible between victors and the people they have captured—what a democratic space looks like. Will better buildings incline the Israeli people to treat us as equals, better buildings curb the violent rage of our own young ones? As I say, even if we forget our impossible present circumstances, what effect can the mere shape of a wall, the curve of a street, lights and plants, have in weakening the grip of power or shaping the desire for justice?

Nusseibeh took the occasion of the ensuing silence to pour me more tea.

Nusseibeh's challenge to me had two mental parts: how visual design might serve the political project of democracy and what is urban about democracy itself. The context of our discussion was not a philosophy seminar. Moreover, the challenge haunts urban designers today in places as diverse as Sarejevo after its civil war, Berlin after the fall of communism, and Los Angeles after its racial riots. In these places, as in Jerusalem, the politics of conflict is hard to relate to urban design. Yet, the essence of democracy lies in displacing conflict and difference from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm. How to do so was Nusseibeh's challenge to me.

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Jerusalem is a very old city, and in ancient times, those who lived in Jerusalem might have known how to respond to Nusseibeh's challenge by invoking examples from Athens, the center of civilization in the ancient world. From roughly 600 to 350 BC, Athens located its democratic practices in two places in the city: the town square and the theater. Two very different types of democracy were practiced in the square and the theater. The square stimulated citizens to step outside their own concerns and note the presence and needs of other people in the city. The architecture of the theater helped citizens to focus their attention and concentrate when engaged in decision making.

We never would want to copy the social conditions of Athenian democracy. The majority of people living in the city were slaves, and all women were excluded from politics. Still, we can learn something

from how this often fickle, intensely competitive people related democracy such as they knew it to architecture.

It was in the Pnyx that the Athenians debated and decided on the actions the city would take. The Pnyx was a bowl-shaped, open-air theater about a 10-minute walk from the central square of Athens. Chiseled out of a hill, the Pnyx resembled in form other Greek theaters and, like them, originally provided space for dancing and plays. In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Athenians put this ordinary theater to a different use in seeking order in their politics. The speaker stood in the open round space on a stone platform called a *bema* so that he or she could be seen by everyone in the theater. Behind the speaker, the land dropped away so that words seemed to hover in the air between the mass of 5,000 to 6,000 bodies gathered together and the empty sky. The sun from morning to late afternoon struck the speaker's face so that nothing in his expression or gestures was obscured by shadow. The audience for this political theater sat around the bowl in assigned places, men sitting with others who belonged to the same local tribe. The citizens watched each other's reactions as intently as they did the orator at the *bema*.

People sat or stood in this relation for a long time—so long as the sunlight lasted. Thus, the theatrical space functioned as a detection mechanism, its focus and duration meant to get beneath the surface of momentary impressions. Such a disciplinary space of eye, voice, and body had one great virtue: Through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient political theater sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.

In the Pnyx, two visual rules organized the often raucous meetings at which people took decisions: exposure, both of the speaker and of the audience to one another, and fixity of place, in terms of where the speaker stood and the audience sat. These two visual rules supported a verbal order—a single voice speaking at any one time.

The other space of democracy was the Athenian agora. The town square consisted of a large open space crossed diagonally by the main street of Athens. At the sides of the agora were temples and buildings called *stoas*, the latter being sheds with open sides onto the agora. A number of activities occurred simultaneously in the agora—commerce, religious rituals, casual hanging out. In the open space also lay a rectangular law court, surrounded by a low wall, so that citizens banking or making offerings to the gods also could follow the progress of justice. The stoa helped to resolve this confusion; as one moved out of the open space inside the building, one moved from a public realm in which

citizens freely intermingled into more private spaces. The rooms at the back of the stoas were used for dinner parties and private meetings. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the stoa was the transition space just under the shelter of the roof on the open side; here, one could retreat yet keep in touch with the square and its activities.

What import did such a complex, teeming space have for the practice of democracy? A democracy supposes that people can consider views other than their own. This was Aristotle's notion in the *Politics*. He thought that the awareness of difference occurs only in cities because every city is formed by *synoikismos*, a drawing together of different families and tribes, of competing economic interests, of natives with foreigners.

"Difference" today seems about identity; we think of race, gender, or class. Aristotle meant something more by difference; he included the experience of doing different things, of acting in divergent ways that do not neatly fit together. The mixture in a city of action as well as identity is the foundation of its distinctive politics. Aristotle's hope was that when a person becomes accustomed to a diverse, complex milieu, he or she will cease reacting violently when challenged by something strange or contrary. Instead, this environment should create an outlook favorable to discussion of differing views or conflicting interests. The agora was the place in the city where this outlook should be formed.

Nearly all modern urban planners subscribe to this Aristotelian principle. Diversity loses its force, however, if in the same space different persons or activities are merely concentrated but each remains isolated and segregated. Differences have to interact.

The Athenian agora made differences interact among male citizens in two ways. First, in the open space of the agora, there were few visual barriers between events occurring at the same time so that men did not experience physical compartmentalization. As a result, in coming to the town square to deal with a banker, one might suddenly be caught up in a trial occurring in the law court, shouting out one's own opinion or simply taking in an unexpected problem. Second, the agora established a space for stepping back from engagement. This occurred at the edge, just under the roof of the stoa on its open side; here was a fluid, liminal zone of transition between private and public.

These two principles of visual design, lack of visual barriers but a well-defined zone of transition between public and private, shaped people's experience of language. The flow of speech was less continu-

ous and singular than in the Pnyx; in the agora, communication through words became more fragmentary as people moved from one scene to another. The operations of the eye were correspondingly more active and varied in the agora than in the Pnyx; a person standing under the stoa roof looked out, his or her eye searching and scanning. In the Pnyx, the eye was fixed on a single scene, that of the orator standing at the bema; at most, the observer scanned the reactions of people sitting elsewhere, fixed in their seats.



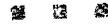
This ancient example illustrates how theaters and town squares can be put to democratic use. The theater organizes the sustained attention required for decision making; the square is a school for the often fragmentary, confusing experience of diversity. The square prepares people for debate; the theater visually disciplines their debating.

This is, of course, in principle. Throughout their long history, these two urban forms have been put to many divergent or contrary uses. We need only think of the Nazi spectacles in Germany to summon an image of theatrically focused attention dedicated to totalitarian ends, and the disorders of 19th-century Parisian squares frequently drove people further inside themselves rather than making citizens more attentive to each other.

Yet, the mind creates by considering models, ideals, and possibilities. For me, at the time I went to Jerusalem, the model of the agora was the touchstone of my love for cities and in my faith in urban design, as it was for other urbanists such as Jane Jacobs and Henri Lefebvre and, more largely, for radicals of the 1960s. I knew one big thing when I began to write. Every individual needs the experience of being challenged by others to grow both psychologically and ethically. Psychologically, human beings develop only in a rhythm of disorientation and recovery; a static sense of self and world becomes a type of psychological death. Ethically, painful and uncomfortable encounters with those who differ are the only ways in which individuals learn modesty. For these reasons, I believed, human beings need cities, and within cities agoras of some sort, to become fully human.

I could have summoned these arguments when Nusseibeh challenged me about plans for the Damascus Gate. I had reasoned them through in my first book, *The Uses of Disorder*, and spent a decade thereafter trying to realize them in practice. But I remained silent. In looking back, I

understand the reasons why I said nothing. First, I would have answered him in bad faith, as an American urbanist speaking about democracy. Second, in Jerusalem, I began to lose my faith in the agora.



A future historian might well conclude that Americans during the last half of the 20th century focused their energies on preventing democracy in the built environment. Gated communities, now the most popular form of American residential building, take to an extreme denial of democracy of the agora sort; here are homogenized communities guarded and sealed off like medieval castles. In my youth, less extreme forms of American development already tended to the same end. The shopping malls of the 1920s through 1950s were indeed diverse places. The malls that came into existence during the 1960s were monofunctional; today, one rarely will see an AIDS service agency or a police station in a mall or a Gap store next door to a school. Moreover, the renewal of old cities like my own, New York, had depended on the globalization of the world economy. Globalization creates cities that are sharply divided, and a globalized core now isolates Manhattan, for example, from the localized economies and cultures of the city's outer boroughs.

Professional urban design is part of this story of bad faith with democracy. The pristine, white-gleaming small towns produced by the movement called the New Urbanism are a world apart from the everyday disorders of life; the kitsch, pseudo-small towns now being built as an antidote to suburban sprawl provided no home for differences—differences of the sort that lead to conflicts of ethnicity, race, class, and/or sexual preference. In a purely stylistic vein, the battle between modernism and postmodernism is a clothing conflict about the surfaces of buildings, and these outer architectural garments tell us little about how to make buildings and spaces more democratic.

It could be said that the American city only reflects larger currents of American culture. American culture has indeed put a premium on difference in the "identity talk" that emphasizes distinctions, particularly between that familiar friend we love to hate—the white, middle class heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon male—and all those he has (at least in theory) oppressed.

Identity talk of the American sort leads to isolation rather than to interaction. Our culture prefers clear pictures of self and social context. For the sake of this clarity, and for the sake of identity, we sacrifice

democracy—democracy in Aristotle's sense of the dialogues, debates, and shared deliberations that might take us out of ourselves and the sphere of our immediate self-knowledge and interests. Writers from other cultures urge us to break out of identity ghettos. Stuart Hall does so in his writings on the hybrid identities of people who move geographically or socially, and Homi Bhabba contests the ghetto of the self by exploring the positive aspects of uncertainty when a person is in the presence of an alien "other." Still, these writers have not found a general public in their adopted country.



In 1980, when I went to Jerusalem, American ways of denying the agora were partly why I fell silent when challenged by Nusseibeh, an admission that I had come to him empty-handed. This he accepted in good grace by dropping the distasteful subject and returning tactfully to the origins of surrealism in Paris.

Yet, going to Jerusalem was an important event for me as an urbanist. The city challenged my belief in the agora, at least as school for democracy. Jerusalem's old city within the walls is filled with the human differences that thousands of years of conquest, migration, faith, and trade have laid on the land like a thick impasto on canvas. In its covered shopping streets, Jews and Muslim shopkeepers mix together in pursuit of trade and tourists. On the via Dolorosa, the processions of Christian pilgrims stream past the small shops of nonbelievers who acknowledge the pilgrims' faith by leaving the pilgrims alone in silence. When the right-wing Israeli government has sought to dig beneath the holy Islamic shrine of al-Aksa, many Jewish residents in the city have turned out in protest. All these are signs of the living presence of the agora.

Still, Jerusalem is hardly at peace. The spirit of the agora permeated Sarajevo before the civil war or, in a more moderate fashion, exists in post-Communist Berlin. All these places have known daily and painful encounters with difference, yet the encounters alone have not bred civic bonds. If these cities have various modern versions of the agora, then they lack any effective equivalent of a Pnyx. I do not mean to suggest that I suddenly stopped believing in the value of living in difference, only that psychological virtue requires something else to be realized as politics.

The trouble was that, for my generation of the 1960s, an ordered, focused space like the Pnyx was antidemocratic precisely because it was

disciplinary; we believed that freedom lay in breaking the bonds of discipline. Foucault's surgical dissections of disciplinary power frightened us. Moreover, we had an ambivalent relation to linking politics and theater. There was indeed a lot of political street theater in my generation, particularly in protests mocking the Vietnam War. But then, as now, political theater also summoned up the manipulation of public sentiment through clever role-playing, inflamed rhetoric, and artificial scenarios of doom or glory.

These political games might be perennial; they certainly took place in the Athenian Pnyx despite its architectural rigor. Such vices, unfortunately, are abetted by progress in its modern guises. The easy editing of televised imagery, particularly digital images, strengthens the politician's capacity to conceal rather than stand nakedly revealed. Unlike the ancient Pnyx, those watching television's glowing box cannot see each other directly; they rely on what the screen tells them for that sense of polity. It sometimes is said that the Internet might be a new space of democracy, but sociologists tell us that screen communities emphasize denotative statements and short messages. In these communities, the intensity of connection can easily be diminished; to exit from painful confrontation, you need only press a key. Easy, quick decisions are encouraged by such visual conditions, but not the difficult ones requiring time and commitment.

The most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate rather than "surf" social reality. To pay attention and to commit means that our culture needs, in a broad way, to revise its fear of discipline. Indeed, that change occurred in Foucault's own final thoughts about the disciplined care of the self; the polity also requires that care. For this reason, I have come to believe that designers need to pay attention to the architecture of theaters as possible political spaces. Live theater aims at concentrating the attention of those within it. To achieve sustained attention, to commit people to one another even when the going gets rough or becomes boring, and to unpack the meaning of arguments all require a disciplinary space for the eye and the voice.



I would like to illustrate the possibility of creating a modern Pnyx by discussing some innovative theater architecture created in the last half century. It is work that addresses, in different ways, how to make an

urban theater appropriate for the cities of our time. Even though entirely contemporary in form, these buildings are imbued with the ancient idea that the theater can be used as a space of political congregation.

Perhaps the most innovative is the theater recently created in Tokyo by Japanese architect Tadeo Ando. This is meant as a multiuse space, and Ando's emphasis is how to make speech from the audience as clear as speech from the central stage. Like the ancient Greek theater, Ando's theater uses as much natural light as possible, based on his belief that people can dwell comfortably in a space for longer periods of time in natural light than in artificial illumination.

Although Ando's theater is meant for plays, its other programmed uses include political meetings, and this political program relates perhaps to its most unusual feature. This is a portable theater; it can be taken down and reerected in different parts of the city. Portability has an important political dimension; meetings throughout the city can be organized under common physical conditions, and portability serves a certain equality of discourse.

When we think about the urban dimension of theaters used as meeting spaces, the integration of the theatrical space into the fabric of the city becomes an important consideration. In London's East End, a theater recently has been constructed that attempts this integration both in its siting and in the very articulation of its walls. This is the Angel Theatre. Every window looks and functions like a door. For both plays and community meetings, people walking outside have only to look in to see what is happening, much like the law courts in the ancient agora.

For Americans, these urban theaters might seem alien because so few of us live in the midst of dense cities. The suburban condition is one of dispersion; the densities of the shopping mall or of the big-box store, which keep customers moving rather than sitting and talking, are like crowd islands. In one of his most remarkable late projects, architect Louis Kahn addressed this problem. He sought a theater in which something like a city is contained within the theater's walls. The inner spaces surrounding the auditorium shell are articulated like the streets of an Italian hill town, and the program for this theater imagines these spaces open to the public at all times, even when there are no events in progress. By creating an inner agora, as it were, the program envisions that the theater itself would then become a familiar and natural place in which to hold meetings—large inside the auditorium, smaller in the multiple spaces that traditionally are seen only as foyers.



When my team returned from Jerusalem, we tried to make an experiment of our own in political theater. It was an experiment dictated by the site. Outside the Damascus Gate, the triangular area of empty land on which we focused abuts the Arab central business district. Just to the east is the Christian Garden Tomb, meant to commemorate the crucifixion. Next to the Garden Tomb is a Muslim cemetery as well as the remnants of a bus station serving Palestinian East Jerusalem. The triangle itself was, at the time of our journey, filled with buses and parked trucks, overflowing each morning with goods passing through the gate to the old walled city. Modern Jerusalem pressed in on this open triangle—pressed and threatened to explode. This was one of the most hotly contested sites of the new Jerusalem.

Among the plans the Harvard team generated for the Damascus Gate, under the general direction of architect Moshe Safdie, was a conference center fronting a new public plaza. The conference center was in the form of a semi-circular theater meant to be built low so that it would not loom over the walls of the old city. Parking for trucks and a new bus terminal lay tucked beneath an open plaza. This was in many ways a project sensitive to its site; for example, hiding the vegetable and meat trucks below the plaza helped to cope with the intense heat of the sun.

Still, the project lacked the political qualities of the other theaters I have described. A monument to discussion, divorced from the urban fabric of buildings around it, this meeting place did not draw the outside inside. Its open side gave out on an empty space, whereas it should have been turned toward the fabric of streets at its sides or pushed much closer to the masses of people streaming in and out of the Damascus Gate to the old city.

I have come to understand that these limitations, combined with the virtues of the other theaters, suggest one way of answering Nusseibeh's real question: What is urban democracy?



In the long course of Western development, democracy has been a relatively rare way of life and a way of life that appeared mostly in cities. Democratic participation has held out the hope of gathering together all people in a city. Ancient Athenians cherished this hope, as did later the citizens of Italian medieval communes and of Reformation

German towns. To realize this hope of coming together, urban democracies sought for a unifying political space to which all citizens could relate—the Pnyx, the parade routes of the communes, the German *Rathaus*. Urban democracy meant centralized power in the sense of a single site, a single image, where all citizens could witness the workings of government.

In the modern era, the hope for democracy has become nearly universal throughout the world, but the nature of democracy that people hope for has changed. National and even global visions of democracy are the old type of urban democracy writ large, a unifying political force. Against those visions has been set another—decentralized democracy, which does not aim at such cohesion. Instead, as the ideal of decentralized democracy first appears in the writings of Tocqueville and Mill, power is portrayed as becoming more democratic in the sense of inviting participation as it becomes more fragmented and partial in form.

Belief in local, decentralized democracy has radical political implications. Taken to the limit, such a belief rejects a single description of the good state or refuses to define citizenship in terms of rights and obligations applicable to each and every citizen in just the same way. Instead, it argues that differences and divergences will develop in practice. The national or global polity will resemble a collage difficult to resolve into a single image.

Decentralized democracy has a particular affinity to the modern city. Cities very rarely are coherent human settlements; that is what Aristotle tried to convey in the term *synoikismos*, a coming together of differences, be they families, economic interests, or political views. In the modern world economy, the fragmentation of urban settlements has increased radically; urban settlements are bigger and more stretched-out places but yet unified.

Decentralized democracy is an attempt to make a political virtue out of this very fragmentation, an attempt that appears in demands for local communal control of schools, welfare services, and building codes. Decentralized democracy also has a visual dimension. This democratic vision may prefer the jumbled, polyglot architecture of neighborhoods to the symbolic statements made by big, central buildings. It may reject the all-at-once, massive development of urban centers such as Berlin's Alexanderplatz and instead seek slower, less coherent growth throughout the city. Ultimately, the result of visual, decentralized democracy should be to shatter those images that attempt to represent the city as a whole.

This is appealing; real life is local, concrete, and particular, but the decentralization of power is in fact not so benign. Gated communities in the American suburbs exercise such local power; communities may decide, by quite democratic means, to exclude blacks, Jews, the elderly, or other "undesirables." Even if the community is benign, the smaller a unit of power, the weaker it becomes. I think, in this regard, of the small communities in upstate New York fighting against IBM during recent years when the giant corporation downsized local workers; the communities are simply too small to fight back effectively.

The word *decentralization* suggests an effort to break up an existing, comprehensive power or to limit its disciplinary tendencies. But as Tocqueville well understood, the process of attacking that central power, breaking it down to ever more local levels, can spin out of control so that ultimately no polity is left at all. In the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, there would remain only "individuals and families," no image of the collective good with which individuals could identify.

This last danger is what theatrical architecture used for political purposes can attempt to combat. Theatrical forms can attempt to develop civic connections not of the fleeting sort, as in a public square, but rather of a more sustained and focused sort. Using theater for this purpose means innovating in its form.

As the designers of London's Angel Theatre understood, a community center for sustained interaction must, in the context of the modern city, be open to casual inspection and entry, as the proposal for Jerusalem's Damascus Gate is not. A good local communal meeting place has to be integrating, especially when a city is fragmenting.

As Ando understood, a portable community meeting place might at least provide common ground in a fragmented city. We never can make do, I believe, with a city whose neighborhoods are identity ghettos of class or race; the more social isolation, the more possible are violent conflicts or sheer indifference to the fate of others. A portable political architecture, therefore, suggests a way of sharing political activity without unifying it. Ando wants people, as it were, to share a common mental ground in acting locally.

If a public culture is lacking at all in a community, then innovations in theater architecture can at least try to create something out of nothing. This was Kahn's vision of a theater set even in the isolated space of heartland America.

In arguing for the political virtues and design possibilities of theaters, I do not mean that we should forget about building public squares. Because cities gather together differences, strangers need a center; they need somewhere to meet and interact. However, the sheer arousals of the center are not enough to create an urban polity. The polity requires further a place for discipline, focus, and duration; decentralized polities particularly need such places where people can congregate.

Democratic decision making, particularly at the local level, is not fulfilling; local acts cannot realize all that we are capable of imagining about how we ought or want to live. Acting locally in the context of a city entails a loss of coherence, an acceptance of fragmentation. Democracy costs us something psychologically. This is why, in exploring the characteristics of democratic space, I have invoked Nusseibeh's character. Here was a man who saw further than the life of a manager of an ailing electric light company. His wealth and cosmopolitanism would have made it possible for him to have remained in Paris as an exile. Yet, he submitted to the discipline of living locally and so partially. Nusseibeh's sense of the insufficiency of life as we actually manage to live it seems to me relevant in this way to the experience of democracy. In a theater of democracy, his personally unsatisfying relation to others would be shared and sustained; his Israeli captors would share it.

Perhaps this is what I should have replied when he demanded what an urban democracy looks like. He had only to look in a mirror; the answer to his question lay within him.