

Experiments in Public Freedom

Sergio Lopez-Pineiro

Course	Harvard GSD DES 3357 Spring 2022
Schedule	Mondays, 1:30 – 4:15 pm
Instructor	Sergio Lopez-Pineiro
Teaching Assistant	Sophia Xiao

Overview

Cities are spatial accumulations of capital and culture that can host and must cater to a vast array of different and often contradictory publics. Incongruent publics defined by a mix of capital and cultural interests are a sine-qua-non characteristic of the urban environment as opposed to other non-urban ones where congruent publics define stable and recognizable social and urban fabrics (dormitory cities, central business districts, suburbs, or villages, for example).

This seminar assumes that incongruent publics are an unavoidable issue that cannot and should not be resolved. It is not possible nor desirable to attempt to inventory all current identities and predict future ones within a city. It is impossible to inventory all sensibilities because the number and types are in constant flux due to the perpetual evolution of cities—this attempt would not be a practical option. It is also undesirable to attempt to predict any future sensibilities as this attempt would presume that the number of individual and collective identities is a finite one and that, therefore, all of them can be imagined at any moment in time—this attempt would not be an ethical option. In other words, incongruent publics are not a problem but a condition. The actual question is how to render these multiple publics spatially visible within the city's urban fabric while catering to their individual needs.

While public space can be easily conceptualized and designed in response to congruent publics, the incongruency found in cities presents a fundamental challenge in the definition of public space. Because of the impossibility and undesirability of fully understanding incongruent publics, cities require public spaces that enable non-hegemonic identities and events. Due to their role and meaning in constructing and defining cities' public realm, public spaces are expected to embody a well-defined character and gravitas. However, due to the diversity of publics, these spaces must engage with temporary, overlapping, and often-contradictory sensibilities and occupations. The design question that emerges is how to conceptualize and design public space that embodies a non-hegemonic character and gravitas?

This design theory seminar presents an amalgamation of views from different perspectives (architecture, art, landscape architecture, urban design) that coalesce around six spatial conditions helpful in conceptualizing and designing spaces that promote cultural diversity, social acceptance, and individual spontaneity. Through this amalgamation, this course explores containment, neutrality, blankness, normalcy, anarchy, and amnesia as conditions that can open up public space.

Despite their potential, these spatial properties are usually underestimated because they seem to lack what is generally considered essential for designing successful public spaces: site-specificity, sensibility to local aesthetics, socio-cultural appropriateness, permanent and fixed identity, etc. Consequentially, these spatial properties are controversial, and they are generally labeled by designers of the built environment (architects, landscape architects, urban designers) as incompatible with the making of places. However, it is precisely due

to these so-called deficiencies that these spatial properties can be instrumental in imagining spaces that enable constant recirculation of multiple temporary publics rather than permanent forms of regulation, identity, or appropriateness.

Objective

This course aims to construct an intellectual position to conceptualize and design open spaces fostering public diversity and enabling individual spontaneity. This course is neither a comprehensive survey nor a historical account of containment, neutrality, blankness, normalcy, anarchy, and amnesia.

Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will have acquired the following outcomes:

- They will have understood how to frame public space as contained yet open for multiple temporary and contradictory publics.
- They will have observed multiple examples where this framing is valuable and successful and others where it is not. At the end of this course, students will be able to critically assess the value of the framework presented.
- They will have learned the primary characteristics of the six spatial qualities studied in the course (containment, neutrality, blankness, normalcy, anarchy, and amnesia) and their value in the design of public space.
- They will have acquired a wide range of design techniques that would allow them to imagine and propose public spaces according to the ideas put forward in this course.

Structure

The course is composed of six sections, one per spatial condition:

- The Contained exposes how bounded and localized spaces allow for unregulated freedoms.
- The Neutral proposes homogeneity as a medium to enable the emergence of unexpected nonparadigmatic intensities.
- The Blank poses a design approach devoid of predefined and socioculturally controlled content.
- The Normal explores how the quotidian can be the source of a new sublime liberated from the tyranny of the exceptional.
- The Anarchic discusses if the absence of authority is a possible basis for the design of public space.
- The Amnesic argues that the constant recirculation of occupations, sensibilities, and meanings is necessary for a diverse, rich, and healthy socio-cultural environment.

Each section lasts two weeks and begins with a lecture by the instructor around a constellation of references (projects and texts). For each section, students are asked to present an analysis of an environment of their choice (building, landscape, open space, etc.) that demonstrates the value of the spatial condition being discussed.

Schedule

Course Introduction

January 24 Instructor lecture and discussion

The Contained

January 31 Instructor lecture and discussion

February 7 Student presentations

The Neutral

February 14 Instructor lecture and discussion

February 21 President's Day: No class

February 28 Student presentations

The Blank

March 7 Instructor lecture and discussion

March 14 Spring Break: No class

March 21 Student presentations

The Normal

March 28 Instructor lecture and discussion

April 4 Student presentations

The Anarchic

April 11 Instructor lecture and discussion

April 18 Student presentations

The Amnesic

April 25 Instructor lecture and discussion

Final Review

May 4-9 Final student presentations

This schedule is subject to change.

Arguments

Each section explores the following arguments:

The Contained

In cities, public space has traditionally been understood as every space that is not private, as the filler of the space in-between buildings. In this view, public space is the streets, parks, plazas, etc. We are comforted by distinguishing between public and private spaces based on ownership because this implies that public space is present everywhere. However, this distinction is not productive from the role that public spaces should have. What is required for public space to be genuinely public is the allowance “for contest and struggle.”¹ “What makes a space public is democratic control over that space, and therefore the willingness to allow a space to host sometimes contentious publics.”²

To address this fundamental question, two types of spaces that epitomize conditions useful for the re-conceptualization of public space should be discussed: adventure playgrounds and speakers’ corners. These two spaces afford freedoms of activity and expression that are restricted to them and unable anywhere else. Unlike common public spaces, these two spaces are not present everywhere in the city, and they appear as voids within their respective patterned realities (predictable games and political restrictions). However, it is precisely because of their contained and localized presence that they can allow for unregulated and unexpected freedoms.

The first adventure playground was designed by the landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen in 1943 as an edge enclosing a flat and neutral space. In other words, all the design efforts were concentrated on conceptualizing the boundary, an edge condition defined as a planted berm that allows the contained area to embrace, intensify, and protect indeterminacy.

The Neutral

Neutrality has a bad reputation as it is usually seen as an expensive commodity, the luxury of those who are untouched by others’ problems and struggles, allowing them to become, unconsciously or purposefully, absent-minded and forgetful about others. This safe distance from where to observe without declaring one’s position is ignorance’s perfect excuse, isolation’s ideal strategy.

Due to this lack of positioning (achieved unconsciously or purposefully), neutrality is generally seen as a dangerous platform to frame the conceptualization or design of the built environment. The safe distance afforded by a neutral position is in opposition to the close range (in the form of clearly defined political power and aesthetic sensibility) necessary to construct the built environment. There are, however, potentials to be found within this apparent lack of position if we follow Roland Barthes’ definition of neutrality:

“... we therefore call Neutral the field of nonparadigmatic intensities (those introducing a trick into the paradigm), and in consequence we ask that the Neutral not be conceived, connoted as a flattening of intensities but to the contrary as a bubbling up {*émoussillement*} (< champagne foam).”³

¹ Don Mitchell and Richard Van Deusen, “Downsview Park: Open Space or Public Space,” in *Case: Downsview Park Toronto*, ed. Julia Czerniak (Munich; New York; Cambridge: Prestel; Harvard University, Graduate School of Design, 2001), 104.

² Ibid., 113.

³ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 197.

To achieve Roland Barthes' neutrality—a form of unneutral neutrality—a designer would need to have an in-depth disciplinary knowledge—in order to understand the paradigm and the possible ways to subvert it—as well as a committed attitude toward achieving this condition—which allows for the emergence of unexpected nonparadigmatic intensities. No more ignorance, no more isolation.

The Blank

In many ways, the disciplines that deal with the design of the built environment can be described as instruments for materializing socio-cultural forces into physical spaces. Design variables such as program, surface area, seasonal adaptations, or spatial adjacencies, to name a few, are all devices through which designers assess their ability to translate forces into spaces. Physical spaces, in return, help shape and change traditions, rituals, and habits. Undoubtedly, most designers aspire to master this feedback loop.

As a product of rational discourses, this feedback loop is continuously optimized through technical means, constantly fine-tuned to current cultural meanings, perpetually reassessed in its political repercussions, constantly reevaluated for its aesthetic implications, and continually questioned for its ecological impact. However, it is possible to prevent socio-cultural forces from becoming embedded within the designed spaces.

“... what is “the architectural” in an edifice? We can begin to answer this question by noting that, strictly speaking, architects design frames.”⁴ Bernard Cache's description in *Earth Moves* has the summarizing power of a maxim. Deriving his ideas from Eugène Dupréel's notion of the frame of probability—as an interval that separates causes from effects—Cache further elaborates by proposing architecture as “the art of introducing intervals in a territory in order to construct frames of probability.”⁵ In other words, architects design frames that cannot be considered the direct cause or effect of the events that happen within them. Expanding Bernard Cache's position, it could be argued that if architects design frames of probability, landscape architects design grounds of probability, and urban designers design fabrics of probability.

Peter Smithson, a longtime interrogator of charged voids with Alison Smithson,⁶ expressed this position engagingly: “In a way, what I am explaining is like a children's party. The mother organizes certain possibilities for play, but whether the party goes well or not depends on the invention of the children. The mother is designing a framework.”⁷ Blankness severs links between spatial organizations and socio-cultural structures and represents the possibility of a design approach devoid of predefined and socioculturally controlled content.

The Normal

Fifty years ago, amid the 1960s social revolution, everyday life was seen as the source of all evils. For example, artists like Constant imagined new environments, such as New Babylon, capable of liberating people from the ordinary. “New Babylon describes a world where people are liberated from all forms and conventions; where fixed patterns of social obligations and loyalties to family or to specific places are dissolved; where the law of the transitory prevails; where immediate situations have primacy over permanent structures. The

⁴ Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ Alison and Peter Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001).

⁷ Catherine Spellman and Karl Unglaub, eds., *Peter Smithson: Conversation with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 81.

commonplace—the ordinary, everyday framework that gives life its form—has been abolished in this brave, new world.”⁸

Today, the situation is quite the opposite. The ambition for the singular and exceptional, which denotes difference, has been commercialized to the extent of becoming an inescapable norm. In the context of ever-present commercialism, any routine internal to the city but external to its everyday use can be accepted as a form of escape leading to a new sublime outside of the control of commercial pressures.

Urban voids are gaps within the urban continuum of program, capital, expectations, and obligations. As open spaces within the urban environment—that is, as empty and vacant spaces surrounded by the built environment—they are simultaneously outside and inside the city. Due to this double condition of detachment and embeddedness, urban voids can host and absorb unregulated and unexpected events, all those events that do not subscribe to the city’s programmatic and productive expectations and obligations. These spaces are intentionally or accidentally left outside the smooth continuum of organization, infrastructure, and control that we call the city. In this context, the term void signifies a place where capital, social control, and sovereignty are no longer. This use does not imply an adverse judgment. Instead, as used in this disciplinary context, the term suggests “a space of the possible, of expectation.”⁹

“Terrain Vague,” an article published in 1995 by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, was the first text to point toward the “residual city” as an alternative to the “planned, efficient, and legitimated city.”¹⁰ Not only despite but also because of their marginal qualities (economic value, use, maintenance), urban voids can offer an openness, heterogeneity, and freedom not found anywhere else within cities.

The Anarchic

“Wild cultures—says Ernest Gellner—reproduce themselves from generation to generation without conscious design, supervision, surveillance or special nutrition. ‘Cultivated’ or ‘garden’ cultures, on the contrary, can only be sustained by literary and specialized personnel. To reproduce, they need design and supervision; without them, garden cultures would be overwhelmed by wilderness. There is a sense of precarious artificiality in every garden; it needs the constant attention of the gardener, as a moment of neglect or mere absent-mindedness would return it to the state from which it had emerged (and which it had to destroy, evict or put under control to emerge). However, well established, the garden design can never be relied upon to reproduce itself, and never can it be relied upon to reproduce itself by its own resources. The weeds—the uninvited, unplanned, self-controlled plants—are there to underline the fragility of the imposed order; they alert the gardener to the never-ending demand for supervision and surveillance.”¹¹

⁸ Hilde Heynen, “New Babylon: The Antinomies of Utopia,” *Assemblage*, no. 29 (April 1996): 36.

⁹ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” in *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters: On modernity, post-modernity, and intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 51. Zygmunt Bauman is quoting Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 50. Gellner and Bauman have used the analogies of the gamekeeper and the gardener when analyzing the changes in cultural and political roles incited by the birth of modernity. Although their studies are not explicitly connected to the built environment, I would like to use their analogies to illustrate two types of organizing and authoring tendencies.

These two models of organization imply two models of authorship. Gardeners specialize in cultivating plants and gardens according to specific aesthetic criteria. Gamekeepers restrict themselves to regulating different parameters for the survival of woodland environments. The first model of organization is based on authority, and the second on probability. Accordingly, the first model of authorship implies using design to control planned occurrences, while the second involves observing to regulate spontaneous events.

Culture is an “order imposed by humans—whether by design or by default.”¹² In either case, authority is required to implement the imagined order. As Zygmunt Bauman states, “the wild culture itself cannot be perceived as a *culture*.”¹³ Consequently, anarchic environments pose an interesting contradiction since, while they can promise unrestricted and uncontrolled openness, they appear to be outside of culture itself. This conundrum leads to an exciting possibility in the reimagination of public space as places outside of culture.

The Amnesic

Memories are sacred: they define identities. Within the design disciplines of the built environment, memories need to be considered from physical and cultural perspectives—respectively, as traces and their meanings. In this context, most settings show physical traces (e.g., dimensions) of cultural conventions (e.g., program) that have a specific social purpose (e.g., ownership). It is indubitably the precise management of these traces coupled with aesthetic ambitions that designers and the general public understand and perceive as design. For this reason, spaces that do not show this kind of traces are generally seen as lacking both disciplinary and cultural identity.

The lack of markings and registrations transforms a place into space in limbo: a locus without an identifiable identity and in permanent transition. While this state is generally perceived as lacking the character and gravitas required to embody publicness, it is precisely the lack of a fixed and identifiable identity that allows multiple events of very different sensibilities to occur. For re-conceptualizing public space, it is essential to highlight that this opportunity for diversity and inclusion is enabled through a framework that accepts a constant and periodic renovation of activity and expression. However, this potentially randomized sequence of temporary and independent events becomes the precise identity of this place, making it possible to think of this amnesic place as a platform for a free life.

A constitution is a body of principles by which a state or an organization is acknowledged to be governed. In a democratic state, this set of principles establishes the means for electing representatives and the duration of their responsibility, after which they must be reelected or renewed. Since any changes in the constitution would alter the state’s identity, constitutions are rarely modified. A democratic constitution could be understood as an (almost) inalterable framework that can enable and assure the periodic rotation of different political ideas through its inalterability. For this reason, constitutions only register changes of a high order, and the everyday does not leave any trace in them. The physical structure of public spaces, an integral part of democratic societies, could parallel this political organization to produce a renewable space open to all.

Readings

Students are expected to read the following selection of texts before each of the lectures:

¹² Ibid., 53.

¹³ Ibid.

Introduction

- Seyla Benhabib, “Models of public space” in *Situating the Self: Gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 89-120.
- Garnette Cadogan, “Walking while Black.” Originally published as Garnette Cadogan, “Black and blue” in *Freeman’s: Arrival*, ed. John Freeman (New York: Grove Press, 2015), n.p.
- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Preface” and “Imperial sovereignty” in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), xi-xvii, 183-204.
- Hashim Sarkis, “Space for recognition: On the design of public space in a multicultural society,” *New Political Science*, vol. 19, no. 1-2 (1997), 153-170.

The Contained

- Iñaki Abalos, “Warhol at The Factory: From Freudo-Marxist communes to the New York loft” in *The Good Life: A guided visit to the houses of modernity* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2001), 109-137.
- Michel Foucault, “Of other spaces” in *Heterotopia and the City: Public space in a postcivil society*, eds. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 12-29.
- James Pritchett, “What silence taught John Cage: The story of 4’ 33”” in *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and experimental art*, ed. Julia Robinson (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), 166-177.
- Alexander Robinson, “Modulating infrastructural flows to create open space” in *Landscape Infrastructure: Case studies by SWA*, ed. Infrastructure Research Initiative at SWA (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2011), 30-35.

The Neutral

- Pier Vittorio Aureli, “The barest form in which architecture can exist,” *San Rocco*, no. 2 (2011): 141-146.
- Roland Barthes, “Intensities” in *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 196-201.
- Anuradha Mathur, “Neither wilderness nor home: The Indian maidan” in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in contemporary landscape architecture*, ed. James Corner (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 204-219.
- Richard Sennett, “The neutral city” in *The Conscience of the Eye: The design and social life of cities* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 41-68.

The Blank

- Reyner Banham, “The vast and the empty” in *Scenes in America Deserta* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1982), 55-65.
- Bernard Cache, “Architectural image” in *Earth Moves: The furnishing of territories* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1995), 21-30.
- Rem Koolhaas, “Typical plan” in *SMLXL*, eds. Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 334-353.
- Peter Smithson, “The response to the glut” in *Peter Smithson: Conversation with students*, eds. Catherine Spellman and Karl Unglaub (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 52-69.

The Normal

- Don Mitchell, “The end of public space? People’s Park, the public, and the right to the city” in *The Right to the City: Social justice and the fight for public space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 118-160.
- Don Mitchell and Richard Van Deusen, “Downsview Park: Open space or public space” in *CASE: Downsview Park Toronto*, ed. Julia Czerniak (Munich: Prestel; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2001), 102-115.
- Robert Smithson, “A tour of the monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” in *Robert Smithson: The collected writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 68-74.
- Ignasi de Solà-Morales, “Terrain vague” in *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 118-123.

The Anarchic

- Kristiaan Borret, “The ‘void’ as a productive concept for urban public space” in *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis*, ed. Ghent Urban Studies Team (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 236-251.
- Chantal Mouffe, “Art as democracy,” *Open*, no. 14 (2008): 6-15.
- Simon Springer, “Public space as emancipation: Meditations on anarchism, radical democracy, neoliberalism, and violence,” *Antipode*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2011): 525-562.
- Colin Ward, “Play as an anarchist parable” in *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 1996), 87-93.

The Amnesic

- Pier Vittorio Aureli, “The theology of tabula rasa: Walter Benjamin and architecture in the age of precarity,” *Log*, no. 27 (Winter/Spring 2013): 111-127.
- James Corner, “Landscaping” in *Stalking Detroit*, eds. Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim, and Jason Young (Barcelona: Actar, 2001), 122-125.
- Alexander García Düttmann, “Getting rid of traces,” *Quaderns d’Arquitectura i Urbanisme*, no. 211 (1996): 212-215.
- Rahul Mehrotra and Felipe Vera, “Temporary flows and ephemeral cities,” *Room One Thousand*, no. 3 (2015): 160-180.

All readings have been made available to the students via the course’s Canvas and MSTeams sites.

Deliverables

Students are asked to actively participate in the discussions following each instructor’s lectures.

Student presentations should be graphical analysis (drawings, diagrams, images, etc.) of an environment (building, landscape, open space, etc.) that demonstrates the design techniques used to achieve and implement the different spatial conditions.

At the end of the semester, students are asked to assemble these six analyses into a visual design primer for the enabling of public freedoms. The primer should be formatted as a PDF book with a cover size of 8.5x11” and a spread size of 11x17”. The PDF file should use the following file naming convention:

des3357_spring2022_lastname_firstname.pdf

This course is a design theory seminar, and, for this reason, the deliverables must be primarily graphic. A brief text describing each study is expected to be part of each presentation and chapter of the primer, but the primary medium to communicate information should be graphic and visual (drawings, diagrams, images, etc.).

Evaluation

Following the course structure and deliverables explained above, the breakdown for the evaluation of student work is as follows:

- Discussions 10%
- Presentations 40%
- Primer 50%

Incomplete work is not graded.

Logistics

All students enrolled in this course are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment conducive to intellectual freedom and the pursuit of knowledge.

Attendance and prompt arrival to class are mandatory. Any absence needs to be notified to the instructor in writing and in advance. Two or more unjustified absences from this class can affect grading.

Plagiarism is strictly prohibited. It is the sole responsibility of each student to document all sources of information according to standard citation methods.

Extraneous communications of any kind (emailing, messaging, or online posting) are not allowed in class except in the case of emergencies.

Students can reach the instructor and teaching assistant via email or the MS Teams messaging system:

Sergio Lopez-Pineiro, lopezpineiro@gsd.harvard.edu

Sophia Xiao, sxiao@gsd.harvard.edu

The instructor will hold office hours online by appointment only on Wednesdays, 10:30 am – 12:30 pm. Students can make an appointment at their convenience here:

<https://sergiolopezpineiro.youcanbook.me>

The course will rely on the following online platforms:

- **MS Teams**

MS Teams is the primary vehicle for disseminating course information. Students in this course must join the team “DES3357 SP22 Experiments in Public Freedom” with the following code:

[u73m6cy](#)

- Zoom

In the case that classes need to take place online according to the university or school's policies, the course will take place on Zoom via the following link:

<https://harvard.zoom.us/j/98360490618?pwd=bWNKZG9KTkpDckJ2R3RSWklOSldBQT09>

- Canvas

Canvas will be used exclusively for disseminating the course syllabus and readings, and for archiving final submissions.

This course is the joint copyright of The President and Overseers of Harvard University and the Instructor of Record. No reproduction of any part of this course in any form is allowed without the express permission of the Instructor of Record.