

The Barbican Estate:
Public Space and Surveillance.





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ARC501A: Design Praxis and Critical Context 5.1

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1090 Words



The traditional idea of public space as written by Henri Lefebvre describes social space as something natural that was developed over long periods of time, a place where everyone can access and carry out activities of ordinary life¹. However, Lefebvre goes on to discuss abstract space, the change in public space that has developed with capitalism and the privatisation of public space. Abstract places are specifically designed to be dynamic utilising current technologies and theories to create an orderly city¹. These privately owned public spaces are protected by surveillance and security to stop antisocial behaviour and other elements that would be undesirable for the middle class to have encounters within². The Barbican Estate is a good example of this. Prominent signage warns of surveillance cameras and makes sure to inform non-residents of the rules against antisocial behaviour such as, being rowdy and inconsiderate of residents, street drinking and inconsiderate use of vehicles, in this case bicycles³. This essay discusses the idea that surveillance in privatised public spaces is taken so far that it destroys the atmosphere of public space and the boundary between such spaces.

¹ Lefebvre, H., *The Production Of Space*, Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell, 1991.

² Nilsson, H., *Placing Art In The Public Realm*, Södertörns: Södertörns högskola, 2012.

³ Home Office, "Anti-Social Behaviour", *Crime And Policing In England, Wales And Northern Ireland*, 2017.

Due to the privatisation of public space, a boundary has developed between the affluent and the 'others'. The boundary creates separated communities within cities that Soja and Davis discuss. In the 1950s and 1960s when the Barbican Estate was being designed and constructed, the latest development in capitalist city centres was the fortress of urban spaces⁴. This design concept can be easily identified within the Barbican Estate, which is privately owned by the City of London Corporation. Entering the site presents an intimidating concrete boundary which repels non-residents. The fortress design of urban spaces is caused by the privatisation of space and facilitates policing and surveillance within the space to stop antisocial behaviour from outsiders and the unwanted⁵. From this it is possible to see why the architects' designing the estate would want a fortress boundary around the edge, to keep the internal spaces peaceful, creating a space that takes you away from the busy London streets. However, this concept for the design contradicts itself when the architects had to place an arts centre in the middle of the site, an amenity that attracts many tourists. Having a public amenity in the centre of a residential estate confuses the placement of the boundary between public and private. The external boundary to the site is unwelcoming and non-residents are guided down a specific path to lead them to the arts centre, the signs clearly warn outsiders where they are not allowed and to be respectful of the residents that live above the walkways. This supports Soja's argument that the fortress design of societies within a city destroys the public space because it does not allow the public to enter freely and use the space how they would like⁶.

⁴ Davis, M., *City Of Quartz*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

⁵ Soja, E. W., *Postmetropolis*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2000.




⁶ Plesske, N., *The Intelligible Metropolis*, Transcript-Verlag, 2014.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the public space is only destroyed when referring to the traditional idea of public space; Lefebvre's 'social space' as explained in the introduction. When the issue of fortified societies within a city is looked through the lens of 'abstract space' then the Barbican estate serves its purpose to the residents. The surveillance of a space does not have to be looked at negatively, Foucault argues that discipline can have a positive effect in a space. A workshop has strict rules for the workers to follow, these are there to stop theft and enforce respect for authorities but they also increase the efficiency in which workers produce outputs and therefore improves the profits of the workshop⁷. If this idea is applied to the Barbican Estate, the rules create peaceful spaces for the residents. However, it is convenient that the definition for abstract space does not include the terms public space, because it is clearly not for the public. Abstract spaces are beneficial for the people who own the privatised spaces. They are successful in creating an orderly space, as seen in the Barbican Estate where outsiders have to follow strict rules on how the residents want them to behave.

⁷ Foucault, M., Panopticism, in *Discipline And Punish: The Birth Of The Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

The modern capitalist society may find satisfaction in orderly spaces, where everyone follows a set of rules and never steps out of line. However these spaces lack energy, abstract spaces can be boring spaces. If people were allowed to enter at will and hold any activities they want, the space could be so much more diverse and vibrant. Bradley L Garrett writes about a visit he made to Vann Molyvann's 1964 Stadium, where there were hundreds of people undertaking various activities such as aerobic classes, barbecued food stalls and even people taking baths⁸. Garrett explains that in such a space there was an energetic atmosphere, something that is not seen in privatised public spaces because the people are too afraid of being reprimanded⁸. The statements in Garrett's article are reinforced by the abstract space of the Barbican Estate, people only follow the yellow line to the open space by the arts centre, they stand still taking in the view of the landmark that is surrounding them, intimidated by the endless amounts of warning signs and surveillance cameras making them afraid to do anything else in the space.

⁸ Garrett, B. L., The Privatisation Of Cities' Public Space Is Escalating. It's Time To Take A Stand., *The Guardian*, August 2015.



Spaces that are in residential estates, such as the one outside the arts centre in the Barbican, benefit from being abstract privatised spaces, so that outsiders can be controlled and forced to respect the residents, right from when they enter the site through the fortress boundary, to the numerous signs about surveillance and private residential areas. On the other hand, it is evident in the Barbican Estate that the privatisation of the space has had a detrimental effect to the atmosphere of the space. It is then argued that more social spaces should be implemented, where people would be able to carry out various activities, injecting life back into city spaces.

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○ Home Office, "Anti-Social Behaviour", *Crime And Policing In England, Wales And Northern Ireland*, 2017. <<https://www.police.uk/crime-prevention-advice/anti-social-behaviour/>> [accessed: 11 January 2017].

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○ Nilsson, Håkan, *Placing Art In The Public Realm*, Södertörns: Södertörns högskola, 2012.

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