

Modernism and beyond: positive and negative urban space

This brief historical review of public space would not be complete without some reference to modernist urban space, and the post-modern reactions to this movement, both of which have had profound impacts on how space is managed.

Modernism and public space

Modernism saw the city as a machine, with form following function, and treated urban public space as an undifferentiated whole, with a concern for light and ventilation uppermost, and seen as decisive benefits for health. Social and psychological needs were generally eschewed by the modernists, and therefore the function of public space was never fully considered. As such the large areas of open public space found in many modernist projects typically had no prescribed social activity or function (Figure 2.21). Madanipour (2003: 202) notes how these open spaces were also unconnected:

What resulted was vast expanses of space which could have little or no connection with other spaces of the city and could be left under-used, only to be watched from the top of the high rise buildings or from car windows. In this sense such space can be considered 'negative', in that its role is entirely subservient to that of the buildings in which the 'life' of the city is deemed to take place.

By contrast, 'positive' urban space can be seen as a container of public life, which, as the discussion in this chapter has shown, has been the dominant view of public space throughout history. Indeed, writing in the late nineteenth century, long before the modernists began their work, Camillo Sitte can be viewed as one of the first critics of the modern approach to city building. Sitte (1889: 53) eulogised historic spaces for their random and artistic city aesthetic (Figure 2.22), and instead attacked the uniformity and 'the artless and prosaic character of modern city planning'. His work was to be an inspiration for future critics of the modular regularity of the modernist city.

With reference to open space, Sitte criticises the power of the engineer and hygienist in determining design; the tendency of open space to be the unconsidered remainder of a site after a building has been placed upon it, the unenclosed open nature of modern streets and plazas, and the regularity of spaces. The importance of Sitte's work is that many of his criticisms are still relevant to contemporary public space, despite what some have characterised as a highly selective reading of the evidence (Bentley



2.21 Modernist functional space

1998). Sitte observed a convergence in urban public space designs that no longer had any link to the diverse artistic or cultural identity of man. Public space to Sitte was too often an afterthought.

SOCIAL CRITIQUES

Contemporary critics, by contrast, have tended to focus on social critiques for the failure of modernist public space. Sennett (1990: 4–5), like Sitte, eulogises past civilisations, particularly the ancients, in his case with reference to participation in public life. He argues that modern public life is too personalised, and it is modern society's obsession with personalities that has created a society where the majority of people have no real public role.

The Ancient Greek could use his or her eyes to see the complexities of life. The temples, markets, playing fields, meeting places, walls, public statuary, and paintings of the ancient city represented the culture's values in religion, politics, and family life. [By contrast] it would be difficult to know where to go in modern London or New York to experience, say, remorse.

(Sennett, 1990: xi)

Sennett (1977: 12) blames modernism for creating 'dead public space' where spaces are isolated and isolating and makes the criticism of many that modern public space is too often a space to move through rather than a place to be. He recognises that the city itself is an amalgamation of strangers and alludes to the problems the postmodern city dweller has in taking pleasure from the urban experience, particularly when space is divorced from context and sociability. He observes that the stranger is a necessity of the city, but 'The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few can take pleasure in that world of strangers' which is the cosmopolitan city (Sennett 1977: 3).

Many critics ascribe the failure of modernist space to the poor definition between public and private particularly with reference to crime. One of the most vehement was the influential writer Jane Jacobs who blamed modernist urban design for disrupting stable social relationships. Thus her classic critique discusses public space with reference to safety on sidewalks and lists three qualities a public street should have for handling 'strangers':