



3.8 Exclusive space

Hajer and Reijndorp (2001: 49–50) note an unprecedented increase in the deliberate consumption of places and events as a consequence of the dramatic expansion and domination of the middle classes in developed countries.

A phenomenon that has mushroomed in recent years concerns the desire of the ordinary citizen to have ‘interesting’ experiences. Leisure experts talk about an ‘experience market’. Where all kinds of events are offered that can excite people for a short time, from factory sales to art biennials. ... Cities and organisations compete with other places by producing experiences.

Boyer explores the question of simulation further, and how postmodern cities contain layers of history and symbolism that can be manipulated and exploited as an instrument of late capitalism:

In Europe as well as in America, the postmodern return to history and the evocation of past city tableaux ... can be viewed as an attempt by political and social authorities to regain a centered world. ... [V]isual memories ... codified as fashionable styles and images ... could be manipulated to release the tensions that social changes and political protests, uneven urban and economic development, had wrought.

(Boyer 1994: 408)

Boyer observes that districts in cities may be carefully designed, but do not cater for all in society. Other districts in the same city are neglected leftover pieces of public space containing the realism of social decay.

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Although design and management strategies can be used to explicitly exclude certain groups (and encourage others), other forms of exclusion can be practised through financial means. This might be explicit, for example charging an entry fee, tied to a series of codified rules and regulations often specified on the ticket. Many internal public spaces – museums, underground railways, etc. – adopt such a strategy. A more subtle practice

involves establishing visual cues that communicate that only those with the ability to pay are welcome, and that those who fall outside this category will be treated with suspicion, or even physically barred. For those who enter, it is necessary to advertise their right of entry through a separate set of visual cues, for example the clothes they wear (Carmona *et al.* 2003: 127). Many shopping arcades fall into this category, outwardly welcoming all, at least all with the ability to consume (Figure 3.8).

By the same token, Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998: 291) argue that although public space in traditional cities serves as a venue for political debate, this is explicitly discouraged in the consumption space that characterises the new downtowns of America. ‘Owners and developers want their space to be “apolitical”. They separate users from unnecessary social or political distractions, and put users into the mood consistent with their purposes’ – to consume.

Mattson (1999: 135–136) discusses this trend in the context of the ubiquitous American suburban shopping mall. He argues that many shopping malls are examples of what sociologists call a ‘total institution’, in which the outside world is intentionally locked out so as not to divert shoppers attention from their primary responsibility, to shop (Figure 3.9). However, as malls have increasingly become the only central gathering place in many communities, ‘the activities of regular citizens who leaflet, protest, or otherwise use malls as public space have resulted in a number of contentious court cases’. In the US, many states have come down on the side of protecting private property rights over the constitutional rights to free speech, with only a minority validating the view of malls as public spaces.

Whatever the specifics of the debates, they always centre on the core issue of public space and democracy in America’s suburbs. Citizens have made clear that they need places where they can interact with fellow citizens and try to persuade others of their viewpoints. Malls, they have argued, must serve as these places, simply because they focus public interaction within a defined arena. In making the argument, these citizens have recognised a key weakness in the contemporary suburban landscape – a lack of public space and the insidious impact of that lack on democracy.

(Mattson 1999: 136–137)

Privatised space

In the US and the UK, debates over the management of public space have increasingly highlighted concerns over privatisation and related security issues in recent years. Low and Smith (2006), for example, highlight the increased security and regulation in the US, especially post 9/11. However,