
The future of public space: beyond invented streets and reinvented places

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What is the future of our public space? Not an unreasonable question to ask as we stand at the threshold of a new century. A hundred years ago this question probably would not have crossed our minds. There was then no reason to be concerned about the future of public space, for it was a time when the urban park systems of many major U.S. cities were experiencing remarkable growth (Rybczynski, 1999). In contrast, we have seen very little expansion of parks and open space systems in American cities in recent decades. Amenities that contribute to the livability of cities are now in short supply. The stock of open spaces has not kept up with population growth, especially in older core cities. While some suburbs at the edges of metropolises have added new open space, the overall metropolitan outcome has been uneven and unequal. While the wealthy suburbs flaunt their bridle paths, golf courses, jogging trails, tennis courts, and nature reserves,¹ more-moderate-income, older, and inner-city communities struggle to keep up with the growing demand for baseball diamonds, basketball courts, and soccer fields.

The shortage and inequity in the distribution of urban open space are symptomatic of larger transformations of public space and, indeed, of the public realm. Under way for some time, these changes reflect political, economic, and technological changes and make us wary. Because we do not fully grasp their implications, three key and interrelated trends continue to provoke our collective anxiety.

- First, there is a general agreement that we are experiencing a steady withering of the public realm, a trend recently exacerbated by a worldwide campaign for market liberalism and downsizing governments. As a result, we are witnessing a corresponding and palpable decline in the levels of goods and services historically provided by the government. As the traditional role and the fiscal capacity of government have shrunk, the role of the private, and to a limited extent, that of the nonprofit sectors has increased. While the growing involvement of the nonprofit sector has mitigated some of the slack created by the withdrawal of government, privatization—the “commodification” of public goods and emergence of local governments as entrepreneurs—seems to be the order of the day.
- Second, emerging conflicts and tensions at the local level over the economy, environment, and equity are becoming a by-product of a larger restructuring of the global economy characterized by growth of transnational corporate power, international labor mobility, polarized local and global economies, and subservience of local public interest to interests of global capital.
- Finally, the dizzying pace of the information and communication technology revolution is contributing to profound changes in the traditional concepts of place and community, local versus global interests, individual and group identities, and the nature of daily commerce and social relations.