



## The Value of Public Space

### Professor Liza Fior

### 28 January 2025

As the late Katherine Shonfield put it, *the public realm is a place we experience democracy – but it is also where we practise it.*

Public space does not just come into being – it is not mere leftover space between buildings. It is made by proclamations and regulations but also by use, imprinting habits and invitations for others which can last for centuries, and by the passionate protection of it as a shared resource. There are various explanations for spaces which do not invite lingering: perhaps designed for intentional emptiness to give status to a building, perhaps thanks to building regulations linked to adjacent development, or corralled as an extension of commercial floor space.

It's easiest if use comes first.

I give the example of a road beside a school being rerouted and a new square made by this adjacency, the UN Article 31 rights of children to play is respected. Through habits of use, spaces, or the objects in them become inscribed with permissions.

Buildings themselves can play their part. Town hall steps become a site for performance, whether weddings or protest. Buildings can become generous neighbours, whether casting light beyond their building line or like the National Gallery during the pandemic: closed to visitors, the institution continued to take care of the raised lawns around its perimeter, as Londoners with the city left for them, took an afternoon nap.

Useful, usable spaces need publics who advocate and fight for them – and that is not necessarily those who own adjacent property.

Giving status to use means protecting against monocultures. I start with historical examples. Common land was not a free for all.

Ownership was separate from rights of use for specific activities, some overlapping and others coexisting. In Moorfield's, areas for pasture, for washing and airing clothes were crisscrossed by paths people used to "take the air".

In Lincolns Inn Fields, there was fencing to keep animals in and a turnstile to allow pedestrians out, a piece of urban furniture that allowed more than one thing to happen there. Permission to build housing in Lincolns Inn came with a requirement to protect and take care of the fields, a *quid pro quo* which continued as more houses were built. But as they were built, pressure grew for enclosure and to restrict who used it, with aspect taking precedence. Railings were installed. The square only returned to public use by degrees, negotiated by asking permission – as Octavia Hill did - for the seemingly harmless, a one-off flower show or bringing "deserving children" to play for a day.

Use can change the meaning of a space and expectations of how it might be used; temporary uses inscribe possibilities for the future.

I shared a series of examples from the work of my practice muf architecture/art where we looked to the

users of the spaces we were designing to act as if they were our clients, recognizing that it is the bespoke which allows for ease of appropriation rather than the pretended neutrality of a plaza taking up space.

© Professor Liza Fior 2024/5

## References and Further Reading

Matthew Carmona (2022) The “public-isation” of private space – towards a charter of public space rights and responsibilities, *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 15:2, 133-164, DOI: 10.1080/17549175.2021.1887324

Elke Krasny and Architekturzentrum Wien, eds. *Hands-On Urbanism 1850-2012. The Right to Green*. Hongkong: mccm, 2012

*The London Square*, Todd Longstaffe Gowan, Yale 2012

More about muf's work: [www.muf.co.uk](http://www.muf.co.uk)