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The Struggle for American Public Space

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Abstract

In this paper, I delve into America's relationship with public space. Through literature review, critical analysis, and case studies, I answer the research questions: what is public space in America, and does it need to be improved? According to literature and experts, public space does not have a concrete definition; instead, it is a concept that evolves as people change and time passes; public space in 1890 was very different from public space in 2020. And in 2020, there has been a consensus by experts that public space is endangered by increased privatization and a disregard for public space's importance. The issues of space seen in recent decades have created a need for an overhaul of public space, and a serious reevaluation of the need for open and free space in America. I discuss how public space can be improved, using principles from city planners, and planning associations, and show these principles at work by comparing two sites. This research involves all Americans. It is unlikely that anyone has never used a public space, and a decline in public spaces affects every American, and must be discussed to prevent further damage and remedy current issues.

Introduction

“The measure of any great civilization is its cities; and the measure of a city’s greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces – its parkland and squares” (Hinds 1979). John Ruskin, a 19th century writer, made this observation while musing on the character and nature of public space. Even two centuries later, Ruskin’s words ring true.

Centuries after Ruskin’s death, America still struggles with the concept of public space and property. Sidewalks, parks, malls, plazas, and streets are used by the public, but the simple act of allowing public access does not mean the place is owned by the people. Over the past several decades, the practice of limiting access to space has grown. With the new surge in privatization of space, discussion of public space, as a concept and commodity, has surged. Perhaps this rise is because we, as Americans, feel that our right to space is inherent. The Constitution discusses the right to freedom, which may be interpreted as a right to free space, or any space the public feels should be open. Conversely, Americans are very invested in private property, a core value in the United States’ free market, capitalistic economy.

In this paper, we will further define public space, discuss its importance, its history, and its place in civil discourse in America. Finally, we will examine what makes a good public space, and what makes a bad public space, using Savannah’s block system and Boston’s City Hall Plaza.

The question this paper seeks to answer is if public space, as a public commodity in the United States, is serving its purpose to the public. If it is not, then we must examine how public spaces can be changed to better support and enhance the communities they are a part of.

Defining Public Space

Trying to define public space is difficult. There are so many definitions and ideas of what makes a space public. There are legal definitions, strict and precise, and there are social definitions that explore the history and perception of public space. The real task, then, is to decide which definition – legal or social – is most correct.

The United States defines public space as “all the publicly owned property between the property lines on a street and includes, but is not limited to, the roadway, tree spaces, sidewalks, and alleys” (Public Space Management 2020). This definition, provided by the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT), is very technical, even if a little vague.

Nevertheless, public space cannot always be defined by the legal definition. Roads and alleys are technically public space because American citizens pay for their creation and maintenance through taxation, but pedestrians cannot typically inhabit a road or an alley and are unable to engage with the space as they could in a park or a square. Protests and demonstrations have occupied roadways in the past, but that is not all that makes a good public space.

In her book *Designs on the Public: The Private Lives of New York's Public Spaces*, Kristine F. Miller says that public space is expected to meet certain conditions. To be public, a space must be, in the eyes of the people, publicly owned, open, accessible, and a place for civic and democratic processes. Unfortunately, public space does not always meet these requirements. In fact, Miller describes public space as a “tenuous condition” and not a “concrete reality”, and public space is not always what is expected by American citizens and residents. (Miller 2008).

So, who is correct? Miller or the US government? The answer is, oddly enough, both. The DOT has given a very broad, legally correct definition. Undeniably, all the areas discussed are public; the public pays taxes to support these spaces. If they were not public, the American people would not and should not pay. This does not mean Miller is incorrect, though, because she touches on the public perception and expectation of public space, and the disappointment that comes when what is expected is not what is received. Taking both Miller and the DOTs definitions into account, public space is best defined as “a space that is open to all member of a society”. Public space is not supposed to exclude. If it does, it is not really public.

The Importance of Public Space

In *What Makes A Great City*, Alexander Garvin says that “any city’s infrastructure... is what allows people to live there. The more widespread and comprehensive the infrastructure, the greater the number of people who can use it” (Garvin 2016). Garvin includes public spaces as part of a city’s infrastructure, because without it, there would not be people. Public spaces allow for recreation, relaxation, and socialization. Cities and towns are starting to take note of the desire for public space in cities. In “Public Spaces, Urban”, Damian Collins and Sophie L. Stadler state: “Cities are increasingly aware of the contribution of public space to their reputations for livability and sustainability...” Collins and Stadler go further and discuss how public space, *good* public space, is important to the economic competitiveness

of the city, the health of the population, and a city's environmental performance (Collins and Stadler 2020). As John Ruskin said, cities are measured by the quality of their public spaces (Hinds 1979).

Public space plays a vital role in the social life of a community. A city's parks and plazas create a sense of pride in residents and foster feelings of loyalty to the community. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says, "the presence of local facilities was acknowledged...as a central aspect in allegiances to neighborhood" (Joseph Rowntree Foundation n.d.). Beyond a sense of community, public space improves the economy. The National Recreation and Park Association conducted a study in 2017 and found that in 2017 alone the economic activity generated by local parks and recreation areas was worth \$166.4 billion in the United States. The same study found that parks improved social equity and health and wellness in communities (National Recreation and Park Association 2017). Public space is a commodity to be cherished and enjoyed. It aids in community development, promotes socialization, improves equity, contributes to the economy, protects Americans right to freedom of speech and civic discourse.

History of Public Space in the United States

The history of public space is not easy to wrangle; people have used space for as long as humans have existed. To create a semi-coherent history of public space, there will be many eras skipped and types of space ignored; humans, as creative and unruly as we are, are difficult to put in any box, and the space we use is the same. The following history is general but meant to be informative. A discussion of parks, sidewalks, and modern issues of public space follow.

The history of public space in the (non-indigenous) United States began in Europe. Due to the colonial nature of the first European-American settlements, the colonists took what they knew about construction and cities and built on their previous knowledge. The plaza was the center of public space in Europe, and Setha M. Low describes the European grid-plan and how strict planning was "...one of social and racial domination reflected in the structure of the built environment" (Low 2000). Right from the start, public space in America was racially and socially divided.

The first plaza and the first official public space in the United States arrived with the Spanish. In 1565, a Spanish envoy arrived in Florida and established the city of St. Augustine. In 1596, the Plaza de la Constitución was established (originally called Plaza de Armas), marking the first public space created by

European colonists. The plaza was made to fit into the structured layout of the St. Augustine colony and the Spanish Royal Cedula (ordinances) (Halbert 1996).

As colonies continued to spread across the U.S., the grid plan was developed to fit specific cities and ideals. The thirteen British colonies had very distinct and unique grid-plans, and the center of public life was the plaza and square. No grid displayed the importance of the central plaza in early colonial life better than the Savannah grid in Georgia, with its multiple squares, surrounded by streets and housing blocks (Garvin 2016).

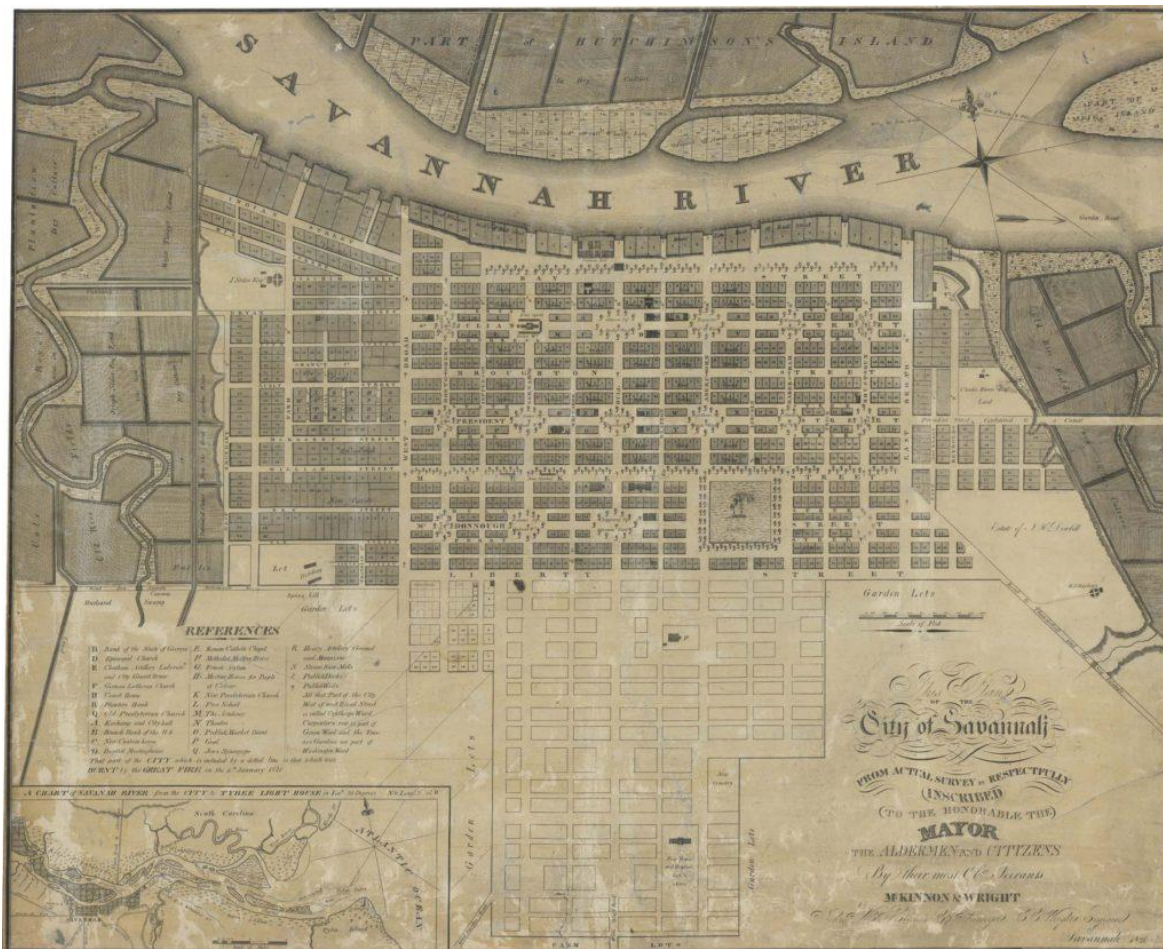


Image 1: Oglethorpe and Savannah's City Plan

The plaza space in American colonies gradually changed as settlements grew into towns and cities. Plazas were still used in public life, but as cities changed, so did public space. Cities and towns started to turn to parks to improve urban settlements and provide open space for residents as plazas became too small and green space was sought out. According to Galen Cranz and Michael Boland, "In the past,

citizens saw parks as an antidote to cities, which they perceived as stressful, dangerous, and unhealthy places to live” (Cranz and Boland 2003). Parks became the premier public space in the United States.

Cranz and Boland describe the first American urban parks as a response to social problems and were meant to display (but not interact with) nature. The first formal park type that is recognized in the United States is the Pleasure Ground. From 1850 to 1900, Pleasure Grounds were developed to improve public health and reform the lower classes, and were filled with meadows and sweeping paths, meant to imitate pastures and woodlands (Cranz and Boland 2003). John B. Jackson describes the Pleasure Grounds to show the lower classes how to act by mingling the upper and lower classes (Jackson 1994). In 1900, the Reform Park was developed to improve the lives of the working class and their children, who were often unable to visit Pleasure Ground parks and suffered from a lack of green space. By 1930, the Recreation Facility became popular and an updated version of the Reform Park and introduced standard play equipment to parks. 1965 saw the creation of the Open Space System in America, which was designed to revitalize cities and stop riots by providing small open spaces that featured art pieces and play areas. In 1990, the Sustainable Park was developed in response to concerns over the environment. Sustainable Parks are characterized by plant selections based on ecological function, educational programming, environmental restoration, and green infrastructure (Cranz and Boland 2003). Each park typology is different but were all designed to improve the lives of Americans and protect the environment.

Parks, plazas, and squares are commonly cited as public space. As integral as these spaces are, the most accessible public space in America is the street. The street includes both the sidewalk and the road, and while streets have been overtaken by the car, the road was once a very public domain. Peter D. Norton describes the history of streets in his essay “Street Rivals”:

By the turn of the nineteenth century, streets were already shared by several sociotechnical systems. Private, horse-drawn vehicles and city services (such as streetcars, telephones, and water supply) depended on them. Pedestrians, pushcart vendors, and children at play used them as well. The balance was always delicate and sometimes unstable, and crowds of automobiles soon disrupted it. During the 1910s and 1920s competitors fought to retain, or establish, legitimate title to the streets. (Norton 2007)

Norton explains that the fight between pedestrians and motorists was deadly and was fought with words. The term “jaywalker” was coined and used to describe pedestrians who were “...engaging in

street uses once beyond reproach.” The automobile was taking over the street, and pedestrians were pushed out and treated as a nuisance (Norton 2007). The age of the car had arrived, and America’s largest public space was suddenly off limits.



Image 1: Orchard Street, Looking north from Grand St., NY, 1906

America adapted to vehicle-centric cities and its loss of public space but refused to leave the street behind. The road is off limits, but the sidewalk is still open. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs discusses the use of sidewalks and roads in Boston’s North End, and the way it brought the community together (Jacobs 1961). The street is still a viable public space; people sit, walk, talk, and engage in social and commercial life on America’s streets. But a new space for commercial, civic, and social activities was needed.

American business moved into privately owned buildings and almost all commercial activity in the United States happens on and in private property. Jane Jacobs notes that “...many of the places in which Americans spend a lot of our time, places that may look and feel public are, from a legal perspective, private” and that because of the privacy of much of “public” space, like grocery stores, clothing stores, and malls, limiting who can enter the space is much easier (Jacobs 1961). Having rules and regulations is not a bad thing in public space, but the privatization of what used to be public creates a very precarious situation. Before President Trump’s inauguration in 2016 the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C. banished reporters from the premises and gave no explanation. In 2015, the Mall of America in Minnesota closed due to Black Lives Matter protests, forcing protestors and mall patrons from the building (Jacobs 1961). A substantial amount of public space is no longer actually public in the U.S.

Today, even legal public space is an ever-shrinking commodity. “Keeping the ‘Public’ in Public Spaces” considers the over-commercialization of public parks and squares. In particular, the article examines the Mercedes Benz New York Fashion Week takeover of Bryant Park. Every year, the park is closed to the public for 45 to 90 days, taking 9.6 acres away from New Yorkers (Project for Public Spaces 2003). Commerce is expected for public spaces, parks included, but a takeover of more than three months out of a year is almost hostile. American public space is declining, and for a country that prides itself on freedom and equality, this is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. There are places that are working to open space back up. Farmer’s Markets often close off roads for small businesses and pedestrians, parks are regaining importance, and most private businesses do not kick people out. American public space is not gone, but it is in danger.

Public Space as Political Space

The United States of America prides itself on freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. The country has a colorful history of protests, rallies, sit-ins, and riots. The most effective protests in American history took place in the public eye, in public space. Suffragists picketed the White House, Civil Rights activists marched in streets across the U.S., and Americans with disabilities occupied government buildings to fight for Section 504 (the predecessor of the Americans with Disabilities Act) (Cone n.d.). Most recently, Black Lives Matter activists in every state marched to fight police brutality. The pride America has for its civil disobedience is not unfounded; there is a clear history of activism, protest, and the positive effects free speech has had on the nation.

There are very famous examples of political and civic action in public space, such as Civil Rights activists and Vietnam War protestors. But subtler examples are just as important and useful in understanding how vital public space is. In 2015, a protestor covered a park sign near Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis, MN, with a sticker featuring indigenous terminology. Lake Calhoun was called Bde Maka Ska by the indigenous peoples of Minnesota, while John Calhoun, the politician for whom the lake was renamed, was an advocate for slavery and supported removing Native Americans from their lands (Brandt 2015). The 2015 action inspired a serious discussion in Minneapolis, and in 2019 official signs with the title Bde Maka Ska replaced the original signs around the lake (Sawyer 2019).



Image 3: Vandalized Lake Calhoun Sign



Image 4: New Bde Maka Ska/Lake Calhoun Sign

In 2020, against the CDC's recommendations and state-wide mandates to social distance and wear masks, many Americans went out in public and into public spaces without masks. Americans who refused to wear masks were protesting what they saw as restrictive policies and government overreach. The small act of refusing to wear a mask inspired more protests, and even inspired a plot to kidnap and overthrow Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer (Censky2020). Small acts of protest, good or bad, can and have had lasting effects. Public space is always there for political discourse, and facilitates such conversations, big or small. Whether or not this proud tradition of public protest will be allowed to continue is another matter.

"All Ours" by Thaisa Way explores the history of protest outside the White House in Lafayette Park, and how it has changed in 2020. Lafayette Park is seven acres and sits directly North of the White House. Planned and created in 1821, the park has transformed itself over the decades. Lafayette was a racetrack, a zoo, a graveyard, a slave market, and a camp for soldiers. It is also the most famous place for American political protest (National Park Service n.d.). Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream Speech" in Lafayette Park. Nuclear disarmament protestors took to the green to demonstrate. Opponents to the Vietnam War overtook the park (Way 2020).

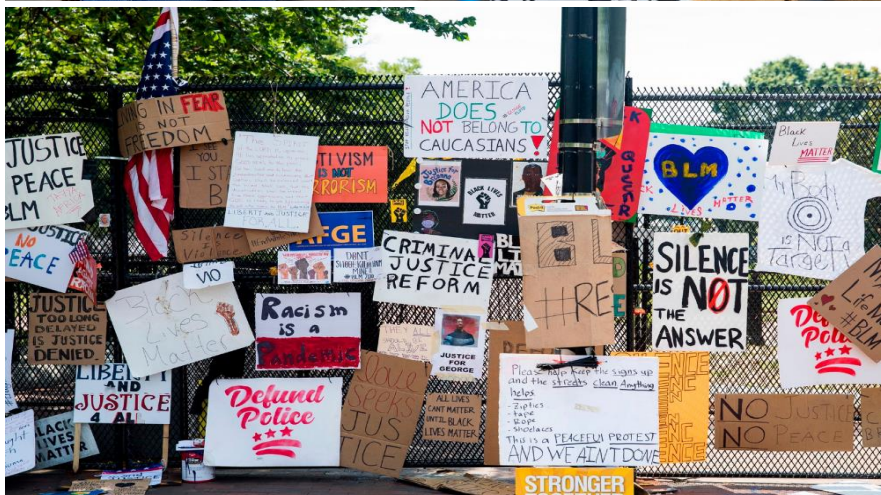


Image 5: Aerial view of Lafayette Park

Protestors in Lafayette Park often faced opposition and retaliation from the sitting president and endured police breakups, but the park itself was never closed to the public until June 1, 2020. In response to the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, the White House closed Lafayette Park. Protestors within the park were pepper-sprayed and physically pushed off the property so the government could secure and close the area. Lafayette Park falls under the jurisdiction of the National

Parks Service and belongs to the public. Way writes that “...perhaps the country’s most potent space for dissent and free speech, is taken away...”, and the message was not lost on protestors (Way 2020).

The closing of Lafayette park is not the only example of undue restrictions on public space. Restrictions on Black Americans and where they could sit, eat, and exist, despite paying and being entitled to public space, endured for year, for most of American history, in fact. People with disabilities were excluded due to ignorance and indifference until Section 504 was passed. America, despite its protestations of freedom, has a long history of exclusion. Despite these problems and the attempts to block people from public space, Americans still find ways to use these spaces. The walls put up to surround Lafayette Park were covered with signs and pieces of protest art as soon as they went up (Khalil and Ellgren 2020). Free political space is in danger, but it has always been in danger. What is important is that Americans have fought against restrictions and will continue to fight for freedom of space for everyone.



Images 6 & 7: Protest signs hung on the Lafayette Park barrier in 2020

Creating Great Public Space

Answering the question of what makes a good public space is difficult; the answer changes depending on the type of space (plaza, park, transit system, etc.) and the opinion of the answerer. In reviewing the literature, quite a few characteristics stood out, and when comparing articles and books, many more overlapped. Alexander Garvin, in his book *What Makes a Great City*, gives the most succinct answer. A good public space is “overwhelmingly *identifiable*, overwhelmingly *accessible*... overwhelmingly *safe*, and overwhelmingly *easy to use*” (Garvin 2016).

Identifiable, accessible, safe, and easy to use are very broad terms. Anyone can call a public space identifiable if they can personally identify it. The same goes for accessibility, safety, and ease of use. There are specific characteristics that create the kind of wonderful public space that Garvin describes.

Identifiability

Garvin’s first requirement is identifiability. Make a space easy to remember and find is a big step towards having a good space, because people return to what they remember. Sculptures, water features, and signage are just a few things that can make a space identifiable. The Paris Metro has very prominent and artistic signage that makes the location of each underground train stop easy to see and remember. The Seagram Plaza in New York City is easily described by its fountains and pools. The Federal Center in Chicago is instantly identifiable by the Flamingo sculpture outside the post office. The Minneapolis Parks System uses the same font and color for all their signs.



Image 8: Paris Metro entrance

Identifiability can be a double-edged sword, because an identifiable place is not always remembered for what is good about it. When the Eiffel Tower was constructed, Parisians absolutely hated it because they thought it was ugly. The Eiffel Tower was identifiable due to size and, after it was built, how ugly it was (Edwards 2015). Thankfully, the tower grew on Paris. But projects like the Eiffel tower illustrate how important knowing how a community will respond to designs concepts is. If the identifiable feature created is reviled a space will have a lot to prove to potential users.

Ease of Use

Ease-of-use is a combination of all user experiences that relate to the ease with which a user can interact with a space (Interaction Design Foundation n.d.). There are so many experiences in public spaces that there is no perfect way to determine ease-of-use, but there are some characteristics that make public space easier to use. Seating, drinking fountains, lighting, shade, and trash cans are a few ways to make public space easy to use. William H. Whyte researched public plazas in New York and found that nothing mattered to users as much as having a place to sit. In fact, Whyte noted that people would sit in places that were uncomfortable simply to sit (Whyte 1980). The other basic amenities – water, shade, lighting, and trash cans – create a more comfortable experience for users. If a person must

carry their trash until they return home, or go without a drink on a hot day, they will be less likely to think of the space they are using as comfortable (Project for Public Spaces n.d.). Public space that is easy to use is comfortable, and comfortable space encourages users to stay longer and interact with the space more.

Accessibility – Universal Design

Accessibility is a design term that is often used to describe designing for people with disabilities. What Garvin was trying to get at when he discussed accessibility was the concept of *universal design*. Universally designed spaces are “... usable by most people regardless of their level of ability or disability...” (Center for Universal Design 2006). Universal design concepts focus on developing space that does not need to be adjusted for anyone and exists for everyone from the start. Accessibility describes the ability to use a place, universal design allows accessibility. The term *accessibility* will be used in this paper and section to encapsulate that idea.

Accessibility is a constant struggle; designing for every person is a daunting task, even with the concept of universal design on the table. Instead of attempting to design specific spaces for everyone, examining what makes a space inaccessible in the first place is a good starting point. “‘Public Spaces for All’: Celebrating World Habitat Day 2015” (Project for Public Spaces 2015) provides a list of what makes a place inaccessible to every user:

- Fear of crime
- Fear of sexual harassment (a fear notable in women)
- Lack of inclusion for children and youths
- Lack of amenities for elderly and people with disabilities
- Lack of basic amenities (drinking fountains and bathrooms in particular)
- Exclusion (often intentional) of economically challenged and homeless peoples

Fear of crime and harassment are safety issues that create problems in accessibility. If a person finds a place unsafe, they will not return. People attract people, and if a space is not populated, it is unlikely that a community will begin to use it. The best way to prevent fear of crime and harassment is to design a space that includes every user possible. Journalist Jane Jacobs explains that a “...well-used street is apt to be a safe street” and this principle applies to every sort of public space (Jacobs 1961). To attract users, a space needs to have amenities. Ease-of-use is important to accessibility; an easy-to-use space is

a busy space, and a busy space is safe. Providing seating, water, bathrooms, and designing for the elderly, children, and people with disabilities is a step towards ensuring use.

A way to ensure accessibility is to invite the community into the design process. Listening to the community is important, because policy helps guide public space development, but there are many people who are not able to influence policy. Children, people experiencing homelessness, and low-income individuals are often unable to influence policy but are prolific users of public space. Designers who engage with users will have a better idea of what the community needs and be prepared to create an accessible public space.

Safety

Safety in a public space is less of a problem of security and more a problem of use. Jane Jacobs discussed how providing “eyes on the street” was very effective in keeping a space safe, because if people are watched by other people, they are less likely to commit a crime or more likely to be caught. Jacobs says public space “...must have users [in] it fairly continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings... to watch” (Jacobs 1961). People attract people; a deserted place is more dangerous than a bustling one.

There are still issues in areas that are heavily populated and used. Sadly, “eyes on the street” cannot fix everything, but designers have solutions and suggestions for bustling cities and towns, too. In *Neighborhood Parks*, the authors discuss designing parks to prevent crime in busy areas while still providing welcoming and open public space. To prevent property damage, designers should be careful in their placement of furnishings and amenities, so people cannot use them to reach lights and sit on roofs. Good lighting ensures users can be seen at all times and prevents vandalism. Little adjustments to a design to make the space safer and easier to publicly police (Marcus and Francis 1998). It is important to note that in making a safe public space, designers should not focus on the people who may ruin the space, but those who will want to use it; a public space that is obviously tailored to prevent crime is not likely to be used.

Safety on the sidewalk is trickier because of cars. Car accidents that involve pedestrians are devastating but creating buffers on every American sidewalk is not practical. Garvin suggests that, instead of permanent barriers, cars themselves can be a buffer. Parked cars along sidewalks protect pedestrians from moving vehicles, soften the falls of cyclists, and, Garvin notes, areas where parking is forbidden

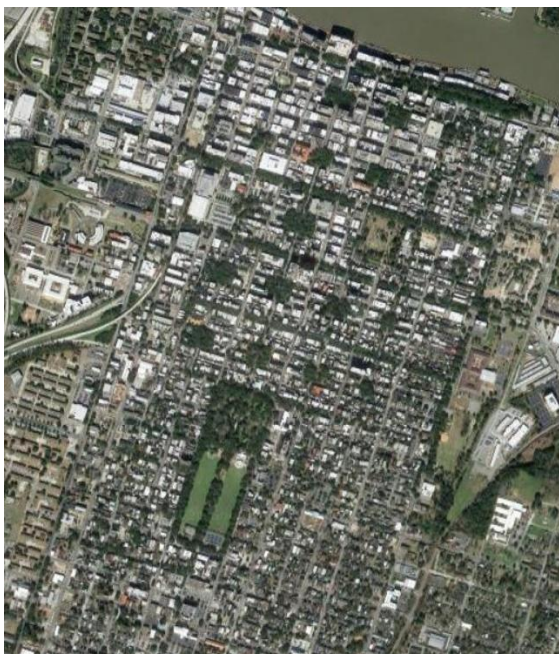
have more pedestrian-vehicle accidents. Again, safety comes back to having people in a space and making sure people are using a space.

Safety is an amalgamation of identifiability, ease-of-use, and accessibility. A space cannot be good without having some of each characteristic. It is comforting to know that what really makes good public space is the people. A space does not have to be fancy or on the cutting edge of design to be welcoming if it is safe, accessible, identifiable, and easy to use. So long as people are in a space, people will continue to use a space.

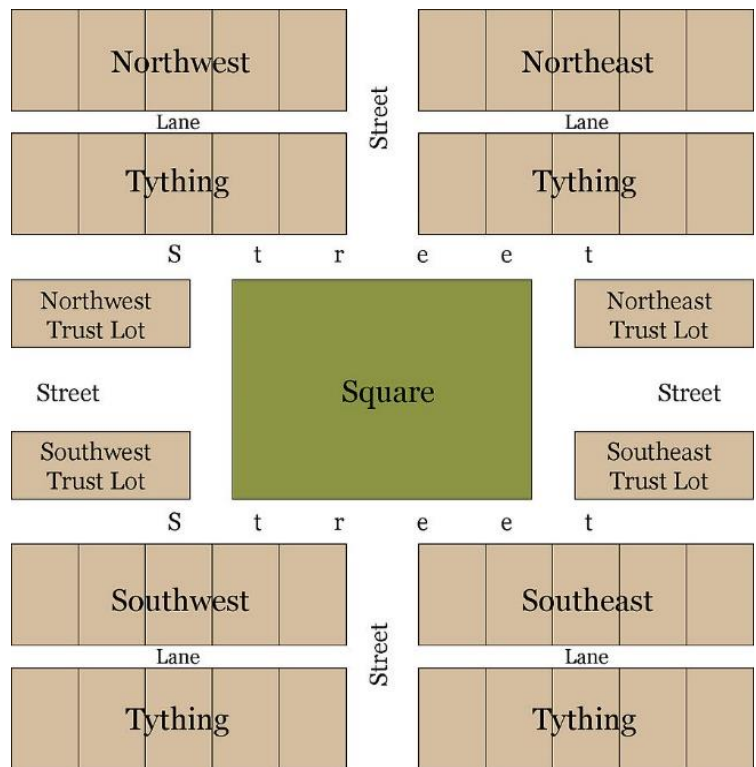
Case Studies – Good Public Space and Bad Public Space

There are so many different public spaces in the United States, each with pros and cons. Savannah’s Squares and Boston’s City Hall Plaza exemplify good public space and bad public space, respectively. Using Garvin’s characteristics, it becomes clear why Savannah’s Squares succeed, while Boston’s Plaza fails.

Savannah Squares, Georgia



Above: Image 9: Savanna Squares, 2020



Right: Image 10: Anatomy of a Savannah Block

The historic district in Savannah, GA follows the Oglethorpe Plan. James Oglethorpe helped found the colony of Georgia and designed a twenty-four square system with a central public space and eight surrounding blocks (Garvin 2016). The Savannah Squares, the central public space in the Oglethorpe Plan, are still used today, a testament to the success of these public spaces. Easily identified, the squares are a green space in the middle of a city and often include a central feature, such as a statue or memorial.

The squares are easy to use for residents and visitors alike. Office workers take lunch breaks and walk around the central ward while residents enjoy the quieter wards that are further from the old city center. Garvin notes that in Chippewa Square, a wedding, an argument, and a group of teenagers all coexisted in the one spot: "Everybody there knew it was 'their' square" (Garvin 2016). The squares are also all over the historic district and are easy to get to by foot. The two squares that are furthest apart, Forsyth Park and Johnson Square, are only about a mile away from each other, and there are more squares between the two. The squares are often shaded, and seating is available in most. It is important to note that the squares do not seem to include drinking fountains or permanent restrooms, which does make the spaces harder to use for the public. Accessibility for people with disabilities is taken seriously in the squares. Designers and ordinary people alike are working to make the Squares accessible to anyone with a disability. There are multiple travel blogs that discuss wheelchair accessibility in Savannah and how to use the squares (Lee 2020). Savannah itself has a travel guide of the historic district for people with disabilities (Savannah-Chatham Council on Disability Issues 2013). The squares are generally safe. They are used constantly, which means ever-present public policing. Some squares may be safer than others, depending on the time of day (residential squares may be empty at night), but most squares are always teeming with life from dusk to dawn and create a busy, safe, beautiful space. Savannah is trying to provide public space to everyone who encounters the famous Squares and is obviously concerned with ensuring the continued use of the historic Savannah by everyday people.



Image 11: Lafayette Square, Savannah, GA

Boston's City Hall Plaza

Unfortunately, not all public space can be good space. Boston's City Hall Plaza is a brick-paved expanse with little voluntary public use. Built in 1968, the plaza was designed during an architectural era that favored large Brutalist design focused on mass, angularity and minimalism. The space has little to no seating, no shade, and very little greenery. The plaza was proposed to revitalize the city but has instead made the public's most important civic space into something that is reviled and unwelcoming (Project for Public Spaces 2015).



Image 12: Boston's City Hall Plaza, circa 1970

City Hall Plaza is identifiable. It is hard to miss a red-brick desert in the middle of the city. The Plaza is open to everyone because it is a civic space, but it is also a 7-acre expanse with no shade, water, or

seating in the center. It is too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter, and there is nothing within it to occupy the public, so it has become hard to use and inaccessible. It is huge, and no person wants to walk across that space unless they must. According to *The Metropolis Observed*, the Plaza is used by 45,000 people a day, but is devoid of human life soon after the workday ends. Lack of use means lack of public policing, and a person who needs to walk through the plaza at night is going to feel very unsafe.

The Plaza is windswept, shapeless, and a place to escape from (Project for Public Spaces 2002). It provides nothing to occupy the public and makes what should be Boston's premier public space into something to be avoided. The City of Boston is working to redesign the Plaza, and in 2020 reconstruction began. Residents are optimistic, but cautious; the city has tried to redesign the Plaza before, and it did not work. Hopefully, the 2020 redesign will bring life and interest to City Hall Plaza, and make the space public, as it was always meant to be (City of Boston 2020).

Conclusion

Is public space serving the public? The answer is frustrating because it is neither yes nor no. Some space is serving the public well, as seen in Savannah and through the storied history of Lafayette Park. Other public space is unwelcoming and exclusionary, like Boston's City Hall Plaza and Lafayette Park after June 2020. There is no perfect solution to create good public space, and no perfect method. Even if a designer follows every step and makes an accessible, memorable, and safe place, it could still fail. Public use is not easily dictated. Even when Lafayette Park was closed, Americans still protested in the park by hanging signs condemning racism and police brutality on the fences meant to keep them and their opinions out.

What really matters is how America embraces its public space. Instead of reaching for new heights in design, public space should focus on creating community and embracing the people who will use the space. There is no perfect solution to public space, but America was built on trying to ensure freedom for all. Continuing to fight for free and open public space is a continuation of America's legacy of liberty and opportunity.

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Image 1:

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Image 2:

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Image 5:

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Image 6:

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Image 7:

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Image 9:

Screenshot from Google Earth, taken by author.

Image 10:

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Image 11:

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Image 12:

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