Jones, Peter ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9566-9393 (2022) The changing relationship between public and private space. Town and Country Planning. pp. 202-207.

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/11234

the changing relationship between public and private space

Peter Jones explores changes in the relationship between public and private space and examines some of the debates raised

In November 2021 BBC Scotland carried a report noting that 'Edinburgh's heritage watchdog is concerned that temporary structures erected during the pandemic for outdoor eating and drinking could be made permanent'.[1] The Director of the Cockburn Association (the watchdog cited), Terry Levinthal, was quoted as saying that:

'there are a substantial number of planning applications now for them to be made permanent. This means public places are being given over for private use. [...] Moving from a temporary arrangement to a permanent one becomes a Trojan horse for the privatisation of public space.'[1]

Although the concerns expressed about Edinburgh covered small spaces in relation to that city as a whole, they drew attention to a wider debate about the changing relationship between public and private space.

Public space has long been an important theme in planning. While Bahar[2] has argued that 'town planners have a critical role when it comes to integrating and designing public space', Duivenvoorden *et al.* have argued that 'managing public space is a big and important blind spot of urban and regional planning and design'.[3] At the same time, Leclercq and Pojani[4] claimed that 'under the neoliberal practices that have taken root since the 1980s in cities around the world', governments have allowed private interests to take over public spaces in order to save on planning and management funds, and have sold out public interests.

This article explores changes in the relationship between public and private space, and rehearses some of the debates raised by these changes.

Public space

Littlefield and Devereux[5] suggested that defining public space posed problems in that it 'can be considered either as space owned by public institutions, or space used by members of the public'. At the same time, they also argued that the term 'public' is often used to describe 'everyone' and that this generalisation ignores the range of the population for whom public space is being made available, and makes it difficult to assess the success or failure of public places. For Sendi and Marusic,[6] 'public space is [...] a place outside the boundaries of individual or small-group control, used for a variety of often-overlapping functional and symbolic purposes. Accordingly, people have access to spaces, access to activities, access to information, and access to resources.'

The Greater London Authority Planning and Housing Committee 2011 report *Managing London's Public Space*[7] argued that:

''public space' (also called 'the public realm') considers all spaces including streets, squares and parks that everyone can use and access in principle, regardless of who owns or manages the space. There may be restrictions to the activities that are deemed acceptable in some of those public spaces, i.e. cycling might not be allowed or a park might be closed at night-time.'

Public spaces are vital to the quality of urban life, but in recent years the ways that such space have been managed and maintained have raised a number of issues

In her Chair's foreword to the report, Nicky Gavron suggested that 'public spaces and places—our streets, squares, parks, waterfronts and footpaths—define how people perceive and live in a city. They reflect the priority we give to the wellbeing of our city and its citizens. They are vital to the quality of life London can offer.' The report emphasised that the capital's 'public spaces should be secure, accessible, inclusive, connected, easy to understand and maintain, relate to local context, and incorporate the highest quality design, landscaping, planting, street furniture and surfaces.'

CABE Space's 2014 report *The Value of Public Space*[8] suggested that high-quality public spaces 'create economic, social and environmental value'.[8] In terms of economic value, for example, it argued that:

'A high-quality public environment can have a significant impact on the economic life of urban centres big or small, and is therefore an essential part of any successful regeneration strategy. As towns increasingly compete with one another to attract investment, the presence of good parks, squares, gardens and other public spaces becomes a vital business and marketing tool.'

It also argued that, on the social dimension:
'Public spaces are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society. When properly designed and cared for, they bring communities together, provide meeting places

and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.'

At the same time, public space is also seen as having a positive impact on physical and mental health, in reducing crime and the fear of crime, and in enhancing biodiversity within the urban fabric. In a similar vein, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[9] suggested that public places play a vital role in the social life of communities and offer many benefits, including 'the 'feel-good' buzz from being part of a busy street scene; the therapeutic benefits of quiet time spent on a park bench; places where people can display their culture and identities and learn awareness of diversity and difference; and opportunities for children and young people to meet, play or simply 'hang out' '.

However, public spaces within urban areas are also widely associated with a number of problems and challenges, although Carmona and de Magalhaes[10] have suggested that many people's negative perceptions of public space have reflected how it has been managed and maintained, rather than its original design. More specifically, a wide variety of problems identified within public spaces include the proliferation of litter, graffiti, dereliction and empty shops, people sleeping rough on the streets at night and begging during the daytime, the aggressive behaviour of charity fund-raisers, and, contrary to

some of the benefits claimed for public space, the fear of crime.

Privatising public space

In simple terms, while private space might be seen as the opposite of public space, with the former being wholly owned by an individual or an organisation and the latter in the public domain and in public ownership, the notion of the privatisation of public space is not straightforward. Littlefield and Devereux,[5] for example, have claimed that the 'consideration of the 'privatisation of public space' leads to a wide variety of similar, inter-related concepts including: public access to private space; quasi-public space; relationships between ownership and use; and modes of governance which might be situated along a spectrum ranging between the polarities of public and private'. Pratt[11] defines quasi-public spaces as 'open spaces that look and feel like public places, open to all; however, they are in fact private spaces that are only conditionally made available to the public'.

Furthermore, real estate services and investment company CBRE[12] has used the term 'privately owned public spaces' but suggests that it does 'not necessarily mean that [such spaces are] owned by profit-making enterprises. Such spaces could also be owned by non-profit organisations and charities.' In some ways, Carmona[13] turned the issue on its head, arguing that, while the majority of dialogue has been about the privatisation of public space, 'in London at least, we have actually witnessed the reverse, a 'public-isation of private space'. That said, and for simplicity, in what follows in this article the terms 'private space' and 'the privatisation of space' are used as umbrella terms to refer to all these concepts described.

The privatisation of public space has a long history, but in modern times within the UK the process has been largely, although not entirely, underpinned by urban regeneration or retail development. On the one hand, for example, in the 1980s the creation of a number of Urban Development Corporations led to major redevelopment projects such as Canary Wharf. More recently, urban regeneration and redevelopment has effectively increased the privatisation of public spaces, and a variety of private sector urban redevelopment projects have been pursued in a number of cities on land previously in local authority ownership. Gillespie and Silver,[14] for example, have charted two phases of such development in Ancoats and New Islington, to the east of Manchester city centre, which saw the remediation of land and the construction of new houses and apartments for both sale and rent.

On the other hand, from the mid-1980s onwards a number of large retail developments, in both out-of-town locations and city centres, saw the creation of a new generation of private spaces specifically designed for public use. The first

out-of-town centre, the Merry Hill Centre at Brierley Hill in the West Midlands, was developed between 1985 and 1990 in an Enterprise Zone to house over 217 stores, with a total retail floorspace of over 150,000 square metres. A number of large new out-of-town centres followed, including the Metro Centre (Gateshead), the Trafford Centre (Greater Manchester), Meadowhall (Sheffield), Bluewater (Kent), Cribbs Causeway (near Bristol), and Braehead (near Glasgow). The space within all the out-of-town shopping centres is privately owned, initially usually by the developer, although in many cases the ownership and management of the centres has changed hands over time; but the creation of these centres has generally not involved the privatisation of spaces that were previously publicly owned.

Within town and city centres, the development of new enclosed shopping centres — including the original Bull Ring in Birmingham, the Arndale Centre in Manchester, and Eldon Square in Newcastle upon Tyne — can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. From the late 1990s onwards, a new generation of enclosed retail developments were constructed in town and city centres, such as The Oracle in Reading, Buchanan Galleries in Glasgow, the Saint David's Centre in Cardiff, and West Quay in Southampton. Here again, while these central shopping centres were privately owned and managed, they were developed and designed to provide a modern shopping environment to meet perceived public needs and demands. That said, while they have not physically replaced the city centre's streets, they effectively provided new privately owned and managed spaces and environments for shoppers.

However, Liverpool One, in the heart of the city, involved the redevelopment of 170,000 square metres of land. It was developed, and is owned, by a private property corporation, and the city centre, embracing some 170 retail outlets and over 30 streets, has effectively been privatised. Liverpool One was opened in 2008, and, in addition to its shops, there is a 14-screen cinema, a golf centre, restaurants, a Hilton hotel, some 700 apartments, a small park, extensive car parking, and a public transport interchange.

Reflective discussion

A number of issues merit reflection and discussion. First, there are issues concerning the role of town planning in the changing relationship between public and private space.

Traditionally, many early urbans plans were based on the concept of a centrally located public space, which usually provided a focus for markets and trade and for the life of the community. In the late 19th century, the creation of new public parks (as in Birkenhead and Manchester) offered fresher air and leisure and recreational opportunities. Two of the

distinctive features of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept were green spaces and public amenities, and the spirit, if not the letter, of this approach underpinned the landmark 1947 town and country planning legislation — in the Second Reading of the Town and Country Planning Bill in Parliament, the Town and Country Planning Minister, Lewis Silkin, suggested that its primary objective was to 'secure a proper balance between the competing demands for land, so that all the land of the country is used in the best interests of the whole people'.[15]

'There are issues about the social impacts of privatising space within towns and cities... Pratt[11] argued that cities were losing control of the public realm and a crucial opportunity to shape public culture and that culture is often an instrumental hook to place branding and attracting foreign direct investment'

Changes in detailed planning guidance and policies during the second half of the 20th century effectively saw an erosion of commitments to public space, and in some ways, although often indirectly, planning served to encourage the growth of private space within developments. In reviewing the 'ins and outs of retail development' since the late 1960s, Jones and Hiller,[16] for example, charted the establishment of the new out-of-town shopping centres noted above. They argued that a 'relaxation in central government thinking and controls concerning new retail development and a seemingly greater enthusiasm to leave the impetus for retail growth and change to retailers and developers, as well as increasing uncertainty at local authority level in the face of powerful development pressures, meant that traditional planning policies were often honoured more in the breach than the observance'.

More recently, in the 'Achieving well-designed spaces' chapter, the latest version of the National Planning Policy Framework[17] states that planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments 'optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space)'. The 'Promoting healthy and safe communities' chapter states that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve places which 'are safe and accessible [...], for example through the use of [...] high quality public space'. That said,

the dominant focus is on providing 'a framework within which locally-prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced', and although the government's proposed planning reforms are now under review, it remains to be seen how the protection of existing, and the creation of new, public space will fare in that process.

Secondly, concerns have been expressed about the impact of the privatisation of formerly public space on sustainability. A critical literature review conducted by Ntakana and Mbanga[18], for example, revealed that the privatisation of urban public space raises questions about the sustainability of urban settings, and about the impact that privatisation has on social inclusion and access to urban land and well developed public spaces. The authors found that, while local authorities partnered with the private sector in an attempt to build environmentally friendly cities, privatisation serves as a vehicle for economic development and financial revenue, to the detriment of social and environmental goals. More generally, in a study of the 'incremental demise of urban green spaces', Colding et al.[19] claimed that privatisation schemes can lead to a gradual loss of opportunities for people to experience nature.

At the same time, the development of modern new shopping centres also has an impact on sustainable development. There is general, although not universal, consensus that any transition to a more sustainable future will require a reduction — many would say a substantial reduction — in consumption, particularly within advanced capitalist economies. However, new shopping developments such as Liverpool One are specifically designed to stimulate consumption behaviour and to offer consumers a seemingly ever-wider range of goods and services, and as such they can be seen to be the anthesis of sustainability. Furthermore, where private transport is used to visit new shopping centres (and Liverpool One, for example, advertises that it has over 3,000 dedicated car parking spaces on three sites in the city centre), this will do nothing to contribute to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

Thirdly, there are issues about the social impacts of privatising space within towns and cities. Minton,[20] for example, claimed that 'the privatisation of the public realm, through the growth of 'private-public' space, produces overcontrolled, sterile places which lack connection to the reality and diversity of the local environment, with the result that they all tend to look the same'. More critically, Pratt[11] argued that cities were 'losing control of the public realm and a crucial opportunity to shape public culture', that 'culture is often an instrumental hook to place branding and attracting foreign direct investment', and that 'consumer culture, and retail consumption (or increasingly the experience of shopping) is the end point'. This led him to suggest that 'this must mean that the market is for the richest and most privileged, it is not profitable to

Westfield Stratford City, shortly after opening in 2011

promote the cultural diversity that would appeal to the whole community, non-elite shopping experiences, or non-'high-culture' venues.

There have been concerns about where, and how, people fit into the private/public debate, and more specifically about the threat to people being able to celebrate and protest in public places. Minton,[20] for example, has argued that the privatisation of formerly public land raised 'serious questions about democracy and accountability. But perhaps most worrying of all are the effects on cohesion, battered by the creation of atomised enclaves of private space which displace social problems into neighbouring districts.' Furthermore, she suggested that while 'economic viability is important, successful places must be about more than a balance sheet, or they will fail to connect with local communities. City centres which are designed purely with shopping and leisure in mind produce strangely 'placeless' places, cut off from their original wellsprings of local life and vitality.'

In looking to examine where users fit into the public/private debate, Leclercq and Pojani[4] posed the question of whether users are concerned about public space privatisation. Their approach to addressing this question was based on surveying users and observing their behaviour in three public spaces in Liverpool. It led the authors to conclude that 'users appreciate a privatised area for the pleasant, clean, and safe environment it offers—not to mention shopping and entertainment opportunities'. Furthermore, they suggested that 'privately-produced and -owned spaces can therefore be

characterised as social spaces, in which one can meet others and engage in daily encounters', that 'the meaning of 'private' and 'public' is not necessarily clear to all', but that 'privatised spaces send subtle signals to users that certain activities, people or behaviours are not tolerate or encouraged'.

Finally, some pressure groups, investigative journalists and academic researchers have expressed concerns about the transparency of the process by which public spaces are privatised and managed. Gosling,[21] writing for the pressure group, The Land is Ours, reported that a number of local authorities, including those in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds and Glasgow, would not provide details of the spread of privately owned public areas, or provide details of 'their secret prohibitions, which may include protesting or taking photos'. The Greater London Authority Planning and Housing Committee[7] argued that the 'lack of transparency and clear lines of accountability' at Stratford City, which includes the Westfield Shopping Centre, as well as a large residential area, commercial offices, a number of hotels, community facilities, and open space, is a cause of a concern.

Conclusion

In recent decades many of the UK's towns and cities have seen a growth in the amount of space that is privately owned and managed but which is designed for public use—and new retail and housing developments have been the major drivers in this process. However, the very existence and nature of the process is contested, and while some

commentators are critical of the privatisation of urban space, others have called into question the characterisation of the process as one of privatisation. It remains to be seen how public/private space debates will be played out in the future, but planners, both in local authorities and in private practice, will want to keep a watching brief on such discourses.

● **Peter Jones** works in the School of Business at the University of Gloucestershire. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

1 A Brown: 'Edinburgh heritage group concerned over outdoor eating areas'. *BBC News*, 13 Nov. 2021. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-59264756

2 U Bahar: 'Urban design and masterplanning in the UK: the best practices'. Website article. Urbanist Architecture, Oct. 2021. https://urbanistarchitecture.co.uk/urban-design-masterplanning-uk/

3 E Duivenvoorden, T Hartmann, M Brinkhuijsen and T Hesselmans: 'Managing public space — A blind spot of urban planning and design'. *Cities*, 2021, Vol. 109, Feb. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264275120313809

4 E Leclercq and D Pojani: 'Public space privatisation: are users concerned?'. *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking & Urban Sustainability*, published online Jun. 2021. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17549175.2021.1933572

5 M Devereux and D Littlefield: *A Literature Review on the Privatisation of Public Space*. University of the West of England Department of Architecture and the Built Environment, for Grosvenor, Jan. 2017. https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/1433865/a-literature-review-on-the-privatisation-of-public-space

6 R Sendi and B G Marusic: 'Neighbourhood design: public spaces'. In S J Smith (Ed.): *International Encyclopaedia of Housing and Home*. Elsevier Science Direct, 2012. www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/public-space#:~:text=Public%20space%20is%20thus%20a,information%2C%20and%20access%20to%20resources.

7 *Public Life in Private Hands: Managing London's Public Space*. Planning and Housing Committee, Greater London Authority, May 2011. www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/Public%20space%20June%202011%20Webme.pdf

8 *The Value of Public Space: How High Quality Parks and Public Spaces Create Economic, Social and Environmental Value*. CABE Space, 2014. www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/the-value-of-public-space1.pdf

9 *The Social Value of Public Spaces*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Apr. 2007. www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/2050-public-space-community.pdf

10 M Carmona and C De Magalhaes: 'Public space management: present and potential'. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 2006, Vol. 49 (1), 75-99

11 A Pratt: 'The rise of the quasi-public space and its consequences for cities and culture'. *Palgrave Communications*, 2017, Vol. 3, Article No. 36. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0048-6

12 'Privatisation of public space'. Webpage. CBRE. www.cbre.co.uk/research-and-reports/our-cities/privatisation-of-public-space

13 M Carmona: 'The 'public-isation' of private space — towards a charter of public space rights'. *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking & Urban Sustainability*, published online Mar. 2021. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17549175.2021.1887324

14 T Gillespie and J Silver: *Who Owns the City: The Privatisation of Public Land in Manchester*. University of Salford/University of Manchester/Greater Manchester Housing Action, 2021. www.gmhousingaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Who-Owns-The-City-v1.9.pdf

15 'Town and Country Planning Bill'. House of Commons Debate. *Hansard*, 29 Jan. 1947, Vol. 432, cc947–1075. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/jan/29/town-and-country-planning-bill

16 P Jones and D Hillier: 'Changing the balance — the 'ins and outs' of retail development'. *Property Management*, 2000, Vol. 18 (2), 114–26

17 *National Planning Policy Framework*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2

18 K Ntakana and S Mbanga: 'Privatisation of urban public space and its impact on sustainable cities and social inclusion'. Paper to the South Africa Sweden Universities Forum (SASUF) Conference on Sustainable Urbanization, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 2019. www.researchgate.net/publication/338356795_Privatization_of_urban_public_spaces_and_its_impact_on_sustainable_cities_and_social_inclusion

19 J Colding, A Gren and S Barthel: 'The incremental demise of urban green spaces'. *Land*, 2020, Vol. 9 (5), No. 162. www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/9/5/162

20 A Minton: *The Privatisation of Public Space*. Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2006. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/e87dab_c893a52a18624acdb94472869d942a09.pdf

21 T Gosling: ' 'Appeasing the developers': Even Labour controlled cities keep extent of privatised public space secret'. Website article. The Land Is Ours, Jan. 2018. https://tlio.org.uk/?s=appeasing+the+developers