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AU IDEAS Pilot Centre:

The Democratic Public Sphere
– Challenges and Developmental Perspectives

No. 4

Tom Nielsen: Democratic Urban Spaces in the Nordic Countries?
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The Democratic Public Sphere – Challenges and Developmental Perspectives

The public sphere is generally considered to be the central nervous system of democracy. This is where society’s political opinion formation takes place and where elected politicians are expected to explain and legitimize their administration of power to the citizens. Today, however, the public sphere appears to be challenged in various ways by phenomena like spin, professionalization of politics, commercialization of media, inequality with regard to participation, etc. Furthermore, important political decisions are often made in contexts that are closed to the general public – e.g. professional networks, global enterprises, the EU system. This collective project will conduct a multifaceted, interdisciplinary analysis with the aim of mapping the nature and scope of these challenges. Subsequently, the project will consider possible models for strengthening the public sphere as a factor in the process of political decision-making.

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AU IDEAS is an initiative created in 2011 in cooperation between Aarhus University Research Foundation and Aarhus University. Its purpose is to facilitate the realization of visionary and original, interdisciplinary project ideas. An AU IDEAS Pilot Centre works for a period of 3-5 years on developing a research idea with the aim to establish a larger research centre. The present Pilot Centre has received funding for the period 2012-2015.
Tom Nielsen

Democratic urban spaces in the Nordic countries?

This working paper is based on an article I wrote for the catalogue for the exhibition New Nordic, architecture and identity, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2012.¹

Here the curators were interested in a discussion of contemporary urban space in the Nordic countries seen from the perspective of identity and the possibility of describing something particularly ‘Nordic’. Doing that, I cautiously entered a discussion about the relation between urban space and the welfare state, and this led me to include the often used but also problematic concept of ‘Democratic Urban Space’.

In this paper I will discuss the idea of the democratic urban space in relation to some concrete examples of recent urban space architecture from the Nordic countries. I will briefly introduce core examples in the development of urban space, as seen from the idea of Democratic Urban Space. Finally, I use three examples of contemporary urban space to exemplify and discuss the term in a current Nordic context.

Democratic urban space in the industrial city

From Antiquity to the Baroque, urban spaces, beyond their practical function, primarily were arenas for rulers to demonstrate and exercise their power.

With Modernity, the bourgeoisie and the big industrial cities arose the idea of the democratic urban space. The idea is generally attributed to the American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and 19th-century America. Olmsted was interested in how planning and landscape architecture could be used to support the democratic experiment that the young United States represented. He developed the idea of the modern city park – New York’s Central Park is his best known project – which he saw as a democratic space.²

According to Olmsted, a democratic space had three important functions:

1. it should create a point of identification that the city’s inhabitants could be proud of and unite around;

2. it should edify people’s character and morals by putting city dwellers in touch with nature (or, more accurately, natural materials cultivated by humans);

and, most importantly,

3. it should create a space in the dense and class-stratified industrial cities with free and equal access for everyone, where everyone could meet, or at least pass by one another, regardless of social class or race.

The city park functioned as a kind of pressure release valve in cities with big differences between rich and poor.

When the critique of the qualities of life within the industrial city (primarily focusing on the link between urban congestion, physical diseases and social degradation) was translated into new models of urban organization, the idea of democratic space was more or less
abandoned along with the whole idea of congestion. And together with that, the idea that urban space should accommodate different people and bring them together. This aspect which most urban scholars as well as practitioners today would consider fundamental for what we consider urban or ‘the city’, more or less disappeared with modernist urban models, most notably the CIAM-model of the functional city, developed in the 1920s. When this model was used as the basic formal and ideological foundation of the modern city of the second industrialization in the post WWII western world it had a huge impact on urban life. The scale and speed of the changes made to cities in the period from 1950 to 1975 was enormous. In Denmark, new urban areas and buildings equaling the total amount of all that had been built in historic time, were constructed in this period. Vast areas were transformed from fields into city. But at the same time that the production of actual physical space in the cities exploded, urban space seemed to disappear.

The functional city of the CIAM-model became the city of the Nordic Welfarestate – The Welfare City. This was a city of outside space and of inbetween space. Outside spaces which served the specific functions and enclaves of the city. Schoolyards for schools, empty city hall squares for city halls, lawns to look at for housing estates etc. And besides that of inbetween spaces, between the enclaves, buffering the infrastructure etc.

Interestingly, the Welfare City which to a large extent could also be seen as the realization of a socialdemocratic political ideology building on utilitarianism was a city without the democratic space of the first industrial cities conceived to counter class-differences and -conflicts. The urban space of the democratic city had more or less become abstract functional zones.

The realization of the second industrialised city sparked critical analysis and development of new models, just as the realization of the first industrial city had done. The critique of life within the modernised cities led to a renewed interest in urban space as it was shaped before modernism (here referred to as a way of organizing and designing cities), both in the industrial cities but also in the medieval, renaissance and baroque cities. And interestingly, with this the notion of democratic space came back.

\[\text{See Albertsen, N. and Nielsen, T. (eds.) Welfare City Theory, Nordic Journal for Architectural Research, Vol 17, no 2, 2004} \]
Democratic space and citizen involvement

It took a radical and dramatic example from the aftermath of the dictatorship in Spain to secure the comeback of the idea. In Barcelona, an urban-space project from the late 1970s was central in reformulating the city after industrialization and, not least, the fall of the Franco dictatorship. The project played a central role in building new faith in the political system and in democracy as a fair and attractive societal form, and it became a reference for the development of urban spaces in many other cities in the world.4

As the 1980s wore on, a string of market places, squares, and city parks of very high quality were established or renovated all over the city following an extensive process of public inclusion. This inclusion of the users was a new thing in terms of understanding democratic space, and it was quite central to the process of democratization that was the objective. Parks and plazas were seen as an important medium for having people meet again and freely discuss their lives and maybe even political and societal developments, too. The dictatorship had strictly controlled the use of urban spaces, with the result that people stopped using them for anything other than rudimentary activities, or the odd revolt or strike. The urban space initiative helped create a whole new identity for the city, serving both as a frame of identification for the citizens and as a signal point for tourists and visitors. The urban spaces became a central part of the city and its life.5

The urban space policy thus became a strategy for the city which really made it ready for the new reality of cities in the globalized world. Here competition with other cities on a very large scale is seen as crucial to attract investments, jobs, taxpayers etc. In order to continue the growth and to be able to maintain services. The urban space strategy of Barcelona was continued into the development of the Olympic Games of 1992, which again helped to take Barcelona to a new level. But this strategy was not only something that was useable for restarting life and democracy after the dictatorship. It became a common strategy.

In the Welfare states the deindustrialization and following unemployment of the 1970s and 1980s led to severe problems of actually maintaining the level of welfare service initi-

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ated during the Golden Age of the Welfare States in the 1950s and 60s. The city centers became worn down and unattractive for taxpayers and investors. And there was not much new urban greenfield development. Within this new ‘no-growth’ paradigm and as a consequence of the realization of the deficiencies of the modernist idea of large scale, top-down masterplanning, citizen involvement was established as an important component in the development of the Welfare Cities. In Denmark this happened from the beginning of the 1970s. But it was not used as a part of a general strategy of development of democratic space as in Barcelona. Examples of this we have seen much later, with the development of urban space in Copenhagen as the best example. After the near bankruptcy of the city, Copenhagen at the beginning of the 1990s initiated a more conscious development of making the city attractive which included a public space policy.6

The Welfare City as the Attractive City
We have moved into a situation where planning and the whole idea of the Welfare City has shifted from a paradigm of providing services to a more or less homogenous, immobile group of inhabitants, to a paradigm of creating attractive space to a mobile and still more culturally diverse group of citizens. The Welfare City has become the attractive city. This shift follows the lines of well-known established ideas so that we from the 50s and 60s until now have seen a shift from universalism to particularism, from masses to individuals, from solidarity to self-realisation and competition. This turning of the basic understanding of the inhabitants from being citizens with duties to individuals with rights and presumably much less interest in others might, to follow this logic, have resulted in a withdrawal from public space into more privatized forms.

But the opposite has happened. Since the comeback of urban space from the 1980s and onwards people have increasingly adopted a culture of being together and being different in public space. More and more people use and occupy urban space, unless planners and designers really fail to provide the most basic amenities.7 This leads towards the question

6 See Holger Bisgaard: Københavns genrejsning 1990-2010, Bogværket, København, 2010
7 See the story of the rise of the use of urban space in Copenhagen in: Gehl, Gemzøe, Kirknæs, Søndergaard. New City Life, The Danish Architectural Press, Copenhagen, 2006
of a renewed political role of public space which the Welfare City had abandoned completely.

**Democratic urban space in the 21st century**

The concept of democratic space deriving from 19th century early-industrial class-society is essentially problematic in a globalized world, where the technology that ties continents, countries, and cities closely together also makes it possible to have and maintain social relations independent of urban space and physical meeting places.

A large number of our encounters and relationships with acquaintances and strangers take place indirectly via e-mail, social media, websites, mobile phones, and television. The political debate that was a central function for democratic space to accommodate in much of the 19th and 20th centuries has largely moved from urban space and community halls to the screen. The classic, neutral “no man’s land” of industrial society, belonging neither to the upper nor the lower class, is problematic today because the very idea of the neutral democratic space refers to a unique Western culture, in which it can be difficult to act for someone from another cultural background, and because urban spaces today are controlled or controllable by surveillance methods of various degrees of refinement. The idea of a free, neutral space for expression and meetings is hard to establish anywhere else than in theory.

Even so, urban space today can still play a significant role in helping people to understand and live positively with the variety of cultural and political positions that characterizes today’s globalized society. It can help to constructively and positively express the experience of ‘multiplicity’ (Gilles Deleuze, Ash Amin) and of ‘throwntogetherness’ (Doreen Massey) in cities with people who are total strangers and very different from oneself, which is characteristic for urbanites today. Thus, while the present individualization and multiculturalization of urban life can be viewed as a significant problem for the idea of democratic space, one can conversely view these very tendencies as a significant argument for preserving the concept and the ambition.

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8 See Ash Amin: *Collective culture and urban public space*, Breus CCCB, Barcelona, 2008
From separation of functions and people to segmentation into cultural and social subgroups

While industrialism and the welfare city were characterized by the separation of functions, people, and urban life, today’s globalized society is characterized by the segmentation of everything and everyone into cultural and social subgroups. While industrialism was defined by logic of control and the idea that the city could be ordered and optimized on a general level, globalization is defined by a market logic in which we try to adapt products and urban spaces to increasingly narrowly defined units. We see that also in the urban spaces where the development of ‘private public space’ has become a genre or typology in itself. Where subcultural groups develop or are given their own ‘public space’ oriented towards a certain culture. Skateparks, caffe latte squares etc. could be examples. But this is not the only trend or current common denominator.

Urban space today will be embedded in networks of urban space, where different kinds of space will serve different purposes. There will be networks localised within what we have understood as the city as a physical entity, but also networks transgressing that, on a regional scale foremost. But even on an international scale.

If we look at the top of the hierarchy of this taxonomy within the cities, we find spaces which have a dual role of both being open and at the same time bringing different people together. Which are regional attractors but also local space at the same time. These spaces are interesting to understand within the framework of the concept of democratic space, because they are both open and inviting, or trying to attract people on more general or universal terms, than what could be called more local urban space or specialized culturally segmented space – both being more closed and related to specific uses and user groups.

Three contemporary urban spaces from Denmark, Norway and Sweden could work as examples of this:
Superkilen (2012, BIG, Topotek1, Superflex) in Nørrebro, Copenhagen, directly picks up the issue of identifying and representing diversity and the ‘throwntogetherness’ of globalized cities. With a basic division into an activity place, a market/social place and a park area, Superkilen seeks to cover the basic functions of most modern city parks, inviting many different types of users to use the urban space – segmented, but parallel, and in immediate proximity to each other. The furnishings in this urban space are derived from all of the 60 countries that the people who live around the space come from. The furnishings are selected through a process of user inclusion. Accordingly, the project proposes a new and surprising solution for how an urban space in a globalized, multicultural context can function as a common point of identification, not in spite of, but by virtue of, the existing differences. Superkilen is a ‘flagship’ project whose intention is to create a space with so many distinct and clear qualities that it can be used as a point of identification, not just for people in the local community but for the whole section of the city.
*The Oslo Opera House* (2008, Snøhetta) plays a similar role. Its architecture is iconic and loaded with metaphors (iceberg), like many other so-called iconic buildings these days. What is unique in this context is that the building is purposefully conceived, and functions, as an urban space. The space is distinctly different from Superkilen by in no way representing diversity in its expression. While Superkilen’s distinctive red-black-green colour policy sends an important signal to passers-by, the Oslo Opera House is purely white. The building’s exterior, constituting the urban space, is homogeneous, faced with white Carrara marble. It signals nothing other than its being an open, accessible plane that, thanks to its many different slopes, allows various opportunities for passing time. The experience of the almost shrill whiteness, which, like Superkilen, clearly calls attention to itself, is like a shouted invitation in the chaotic cityscape (in this case, the harbour). This aura of being a 100-percent public and accessible space is its fundamental quality. The boundary between the controlled interior and the open exterior is clearly legible.

The interest in creating access to former industrial harbour areas hardly springs from a unique Nordic singularity. It is an ambition and a type of project taken up over most of the globe these years.

*Bo01 in Malmö (2001, Jeppe Aagaard Andersen, Klas Tham)* and the harbour promenade built in connection with this new urban area is the most interesting project in this context. It is remarkable because it utilizes a recreational resource, not just by ensuring that it is attractive in terms of the real-estate speculation that often accompanies large recreational resources, but by designing urban space that is attractive, to the lucky few who have se-
cured apartments with a view of the Sound as well as to everyone else in the city. A broad invitation is created by having private outdoor areas and publicly accessible areas share the space and the view. People from all over the city are drawn to this place by the (very basic) attraction of sitting on the steps and looking at the sea with other people, and in return they provide something interesting to look at for people who live in the area. The whole urban space is designed so that the coexistence of local residents and other city dwellers will help to make this otherwise potentially thinly populated housing enclave a lively and interesting place.

**Conclusion**
My main point about these urban spaces is that they serve a role in the development of the welfare state understood in the way that they help create the understanding of the multitude, of the throwntogetherness, and the universal in the human condition, which will – maybe – support the feeling and idea that we actually have something together which is worth protecting. That the idea of society is relevant. The idea of paying taxes and voting, and all the other stuff of democratic societies.
So this could be understood just as a renewed version of the democratic space of Frederik Law Olmsted. These spaces also work as strong points of identification within the fragmented city. Maybe not the identification of civic pride that Olmsted thought of, but they are manifestations of society and they are attractive due to their specific design.
The idea of democratic urban space has been tied to the very ambitious idea that these spaces in themselves will generate democratic dialogue. This is the kind of democratic space which Richard Sennett calls and hopes for.\(^9\) This is extremely difficult to achieve. Maybe it worked in Barcelona. But I think that the pure representational aspects of the universal and the particular which the three presented new Nordic spaces do in different ways will help – not least through a bodily or sensational registration of these phenomena to establish an understanding of what society is today.
So in that way it is still the old idea of democratic space as the foundation of thinking a society based on the recognition of common interests.
That sounds really romantic and worn. Can we really still talk about democratic space in this way?

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