



URBAN SQUARES AS PLACES, LINKS AND DISPLAYS

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

Jon Lang and Nancy Marshall

ROUTLEDGE

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Successes and Failures

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URBAN SQUARES

AS PLACES, LINKS AND DISPLAYS

To attract investment and tourists and to enhance the quality of life of their citizens, municipal authorities are paying considerable attention to the quality of the public domain of their cities – including their urban squares. Politicians find them good places for rallies. Children consider squares to be playgrounds, the elderly as places to catch up with each other, and for many others squares are simply a place to pause for a moment.

Urban Squares as Places, Links and Displays: Successes and Failures discusses how people experience squares and the nature of the people who use them. It presents a “typology of squares” based on the dimensions of ownership, the square’s instrumental functions, and a series of their basic physical attributes, including size, degree of enclosure, configuration and organization of the space within them and, finally, based on their aesthetic attributes – their meanings. Twenty case studies illustrate what works and what does not work in different cities around the world. The book discusses the qualities of lively squares and quieter, more restorative places, as well as what contributes to making urban squares less desirable as destinations for the general public. The book closes with the policy implications, stressing the importance and difficulties of designing good public places.

Urban Squares offers how-to guidance along with a strong theoretical framework, making it ideal for architects, city planners and landscape architects working on the design and upgrade of squares.

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Nancy Marshall is a Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, where she was Associate Dean/Education from 2009 to 2013. She has taught theory and practice in the Planning Program there since 2004 and won the UNSW Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Teaching Excellence in 2007. Born and raised in Calgary, Canada, she received her undergraduate and post-graduate degrees from the University of Calgary and her PhD from the University of New South Wales. Prior to coming to Australia, she worked as a planning consultant in Canada, specializing in public involvement in urban planning and design. Her work as a planner at the local government level included efforts to more efficiently deliver high quality parks and civic spaces. She has been greatly involved in the affairs of planning – serving as a national, senior editor of the Canadian Institute of Planning’s journal *Plan Canada* from 1997 to 2002 and a member of Calgary’s Subdivision and Development Appeal Board from 1994 to 1997. She is currently a corporate member of the Planning Institute of Australia.

"Whilst successful urban spaces are internationally recognised, all too often the cultural, ethnic, environmental and religious differences are forgotten. *Urban Squares as Places, Links and Displays* transcends these issues by eloquently and comprehensively synthesizing the plethora of research and literature on urban squares in a well-organised and comprehensible style. As such, this book provides an insightful and invaluable resource for practitioners, academics and students across a range of disciplines."

Professor Tim Heath, University of Nottingham, UK

"*Urban Squares as Places, Links and Displays: Successes and Failures* is a comprehensive critique and synthesis of recent thinking about public space, specifically squares as a links and displays. This truly impressive piece of work explains the importance of experience when building square, analysing case studies, understanding what does and does not work and finally, synthesising how various squares function based on the findings of current research and case studies. This book is certainly a vital resource for urban designers, landscape architects, city planners, policy makers, students, practitioners and all those involved in creating and understanding a functional built environment."

Dr. Alpana Sivam, School of Natural and Built Environments, University of South Australia, Australia



Times Square, New York
Photograph by Kate Bishop

Places do not become loved because they are great;
they become great because they are loved.
G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908)



Cloud Gate by Anish Kapoor in AT+T Plaza, Chicago

P R E F A C E

Urban open spaces are fundamental to establishing the image of a twenty-first-century city and contributing to the enjoyment that people, young and old, gain from urban life. Cities, towns and villages around the world have public gardens, waterfront promenades, extensive park systems and other public amenities that provide opportunities for walking, jogging and strolling to see the sights. Famous squares adorn many cities. Fountains, sculptures, seating and place activation strategies make diverse urban squares attractive spots in which to linger. Some squares, however, do not function well; a noticeable number of recently created ones have not met what was expected of them by their designers, municipal authorities and the general public.

Much has been written on the qualities of urban public places over the past 150 years. Many books and articles have been authored by very knowledgeable observers of the urban scene. Phenomenological studies of the experiencing of urban environments have added to our knowledge of how people evaluate the public realm of cities. Systematic empirical studies on the use and meanings of streets and squares abound. These studies have significant implications for professional practice in urban design, landscape architecture and city planning. While cities and societies evolve continuously, this new research on urban squares offers many insights into what works and what does not work for different groups of people living, visiting and working in very different climatic, sociocultural, economic and political contexts.

One difficulty faced by designers is that the findings of these numerous studies are widely spread in books, journals and conference proceedings so that the existing body of knowledge is not easily accessible. The result is that, in creating squares, designers often rely on intuition shaped by personal experiences and on the casual observations they make as part of daily life. Such observations are important but they are also limiting. The design of urban open spaces, including urban squares, should be evidence-based.

Our Objective

The aim of this book is to synthesize existing research, the often forgotten observations of a large number of scholars and our own studies into a coherent collection of statements about urban squares. Our objective is to present this body of knowledge to the professional world in a form that is easy to understand and accessible for architects, landscape architects, planners, municipal authorities, students and members of the general public who are concerned about the quality of the built environment. The focus in this book is primarily on public and quasi-public open spaces in cities lying within the world's temperate climatic zones and within the social norms of Anglo-American, European and Latin American cultures. Squares in other cultures are mentioned in passing to place our observations into a broader

context. Great care must be taken to avoid imposing Eurocentric ideas onto Asian and African cities.

There are often desires for more public squares in cities that have no tradition of or sociocultural use for them. For example, Kolkata has BBD Bagh (formerly Dalhousie Square), a product of the British colonial administration of India, but little else in the form of squares other than small, but important *chowks* at street intersections. One of India's leading architects, B. V. Doshi, has called for more public open spaces where people can meet "by accident." Much can be learnt from the global experience but it should be treated with caution.

We are fully aware that there is vast knowledge that exists about squares in cities of diverse cultures and climates. By no means is a complete analysis presented in this book. We discuss a representative sample of types of urban squares in order to present an understanding of what have proven to be lively and well-used places and what factors contribute to making squares quiet, restorative places and those that are unintendedly less desirable places. We have not attempted to provide a full explanation of each square that we mention, nor do we provide exhaustive scholarly citations for the sources of our information. At the end of each chapter References and Further Readings are listed. Collectively, these contain a substantial listing of subjects related to the design of squares which, we hope, will be of assistance to many readers.

The Outline of Our Argument

For the everyday life of pedestrians, squares are part of the public realm usually on the ground floor of cities. In recent years a great deal of effort and money has been expended on enhancing urban squares with some success but many of the results have incurred substantial opportunity costs. Some new squares were considered only as open areas and thoughts of what they can and should offer people were neglected in their design. This book begins with a Prologue, has a core that consists of four parts, each with several chapters, and ends with an Epilogue, all of which are described briefly below.

The Prologue brings attention to the nature of urban squares and to the number of squares being built or refurbished as the result of public policies and private initiatives around the world. It considers what has been gained from recent developments and what has been disappointing.

Part I presents an introduction to how squares should be considered, based on our understanding of how people experience them and the nature of the people who may or may not use them. We argue that any approach to describing the functioning of squares has to be based on an understanding of the perception and the role of movement through spaces in allowing an appreciation of what squares may afford. We suggest that squares can best be considered as potential behavior settings and displays, primarily visual displays. The people who use squares in either an active or passive manner vary as do their perceptions of any open space's utility. People of all abilities, the young and the old, men and women, the wealthy and the poor, tourists and local residents, scan the environment to recognize

what it offers them in terms of their own interests and motivations. Individuals have differing motivations. An individual perceives the behavioral opportunities and messages contained in the built environment based on who they are, their experiences and background. While every person is unique, the manner in which diverse people scan and assess the environment is similar and can be understood.

Part II presents a typology of squares. Squares come in a seemingly haphazard range of configurations and identifying the types that exist is a complex task. There are a large number, if not infinite, dimensions on which a square could be described. The most important of these dimensions are presented chapter-by-chapter in four sub-sections. The first sub-section consists of one chapter discussing types based on ownership. The second looks at types of squares based on their instrumental functions and the third on their physical attributes: size, degree of enclosure, their configuration and organization of the space within them. We regard these characteristics as the basic attributes of squares. The fourth sub-section classifies squares based on their esthetic attributes – their meanings.

Part III consists of a single but significant chapter, Chapter 12. In it, we present a description and analysis of 20 squares. The purpose is to enhance and concretize the observations made throughout the book about types of squares. The case studies clearly illustrate what works and what does not work, for whom, in a variety of places. The combined evidence from abstract empirical theory and from case studies provides the basis for designing successful open spaces and for predicting and explaining the utility of any design when it is still on the drawing board or computer screen.

Part IV is a synthesis of our knowledge and describes how squares of various types function, based on the findings of current research and the analyses of the case studies. Although much remains poorly understood, we have the empirical knowledge to make the sound design judgments that are required to ensure that a specific design meets the goals and objectives set for it. The proviso is that the goals – always political in nature – are realistic. Chapter 13 discusses the qualities of lively squares. We also know how to make squares quieter and, possibly, more restorative places as well as what contributes to making them less desirable as destinations for the general public. That discussion is the focus of Chapter 14.

The Epilogue of the book describes the issues involved in applying knowledge about the nature and functioning of urban squares that is available to design professionals. It also discusses the design process and policy implications for municipal governments, city planners and design professionals. We hope this book will also help explain the importance and difficulties of designing good public places for the inhabitants of and visitors to a city.

The Illustrations

“What is the use of a book without pictures and conversation?” asked Alice in Lewis Carroll’s (1865) *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The question certainly applies to a book dealing with city design. Jane Jacobs, in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) suggested

that all one had to do is look carefully around to understand the points she was trying to make. While acknowledging the veracity of her sentiment, our stance is different. We have attempted to illuminate the points we make in the text of the book with illustrations. The photographs and drawings could all have been of any one major city: Berlin, Buenos Aires, London, New York, Paris or Sydney. They are, however, drawn from a variety of cities and towns. The reason is simply to show that much of what is covered in this book is generic to a range of urban contexts.

Assembling the illustrations has been a demanding task and we would like to thank Rachel Cogger and Katie Withers for their assistance with that process. The source of every drawing and photograph for which Jon Lang or Nancy Marshall does not hold the copyright is specified. Every attempt has been made to credit the copyright holders of the other illustrations that we have used. If copyright proprietorship can be established for any work incorrectly attributed please contact either of the authors. Any error will be gladly rectified.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It will immediately be evident to the readers that the information presented in this book has relied heavily on the work of others. The names of the people whose studies and writings have been crucial to the development of our argument are referred to frequently throughout the book and listed in each chapter's Reference Lists. Special mention must be made of the studies of Camillo Sitte, Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets, Paul Zucker, Jane Jacobs, William (Holly) Whyte, Rob Krier, Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis, Cliff Moughton, Matthew Carmona and Jan Gehl. These authors and many others established the foundation on which we have built.

This book had its genesis in a study completed for the City of Sydney on one small public open space, Oxford Square, which we undertook with Kate Bishop and Rachel Cogger. A brief summary of the research is presented in Case Study 12, included in Chapter 12. The review of the existing state of our knowledge about what works and what does not work conducted for that study was the point of departure for this examination of urban squares.

Finally, we are grateful to the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, for providing us with the institutional support without which this book would have been impossible to produce. The support of the Faculty is much appreciated.

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PROLOGUE



Heroes Square, Budapest
Photograph by Mike Sheppard.

THE CONCERN

This Prologue addresses why it is important to write about urban squares. The justification is simple. Streets and squares are the primary and, many would argue, the most important open spaces in the dense urban core of cities throughout the world. They constitute a city's ground floor: the world of pedestrians and motorists alike. Skylines can be spectacular when seen from afar but it is the nature of their ground floors that largely differentiates one city from another. The qualities of a city's ground floor create its unique sense of place and its affordances¹ for public sociability. They need to be designed well.

Urban squares are a key element in a city's network of public open spaces. They constitute part of a city's amenities and add to its character and identity. Municipal authorities in cities vying for a place in the global spotlight understand that the public spaces of their cities must be of a high standard. As a result, a lot of attention is being paid to the upgrading of the public realm in cities around the globe as they compete to be regarded as a 'world city.' Existing squares are being refurbished and new ones built in major metropolises such as Berlin, London, Paris, New York, Shanghai and Los Angeles, to note just a few. Smaller cities, towns and villages are also being revitalized. Ageing infrastructure is being upgraded – squares are being remodeled and sidewalks² are being widened or narrowed as the case may be and repaved, or reclaimed with 'parklets,' or temporarily activated with pop-up features.

Considerable financial resources, both public and private, are being invested in squares in order to improve the quality of the urban environment for people who live and work in cities and for visitors. Some of the new squares are the product of public policies and community processes; others have resulted from private initiatives. Some are much loved by the public; they are an integral part of a city's flow of pedestrian life and vehicular circulation. Many recently designed squares are, however, incurring substantial opportunity costs as hindsight and analysis indicate; alternative designs would have worked better. Some squares, while highly praised, are unloved and are dilapidated places only a decade after construction because the physical or social context in which they exist was misunderstood or has changed since they were designed. A number of such squares have been designed by internationally renowned architects and have received awards and widespread acclaim from professional associations such as institutes of architecture and landscape architecture. The role of these squares in the day-to-day life of a community hardly warrants their fame.

Are the disappointments of many new squares due to the belief among municipal authorities that any open space is desirable? Are some squares disappointing because of a failure to recognize the importance of a square's geographic and social context? Is it because built environment professionals fail to understand how different patterns of squares can and do function or perhaps is it because these