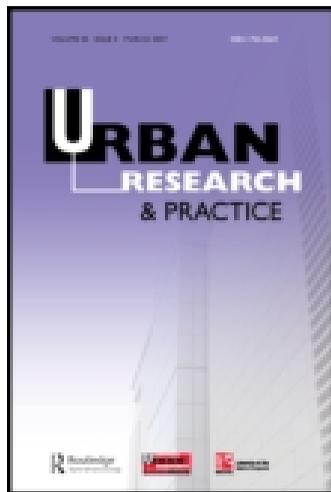


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### Ali Madanipour, Sabine Knierbein and Aglaée Degros, Public space and the challenges of urban transformation in Europe

Pedro Gomes<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lab'URBA, Université Paris-Est, Paris, France

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Public space and the challenges of urban transformation in Europe**, edited by Ali Madanipour, Sabine Knierbein and Aglaée Degros, New York and London, Routledge, 2014, xi + 217 pp., £27.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-64055-8

The book's premise is that in the context of rapid change the European cities currently face, public spaces play an increasingly important role in such transitions. Its purpose is to address a 'major gap' in the literature: 'the role of the state at its intersection with the multiple roles of public space and the everyday lives of people in European cities' (p. 1). The book is thus structured into three parts comprising rich and diverse accounts of cases throughout Europe by scholars of varied disciplinary backgrounds.

Part one (*Strategies, Plans and Policies*) addresses the relationship between the state and public space, mediated through planning and design policies. Each chapter presents case studies of different approaches to the issue: market-based, on how brownfield developments in Milan use public space to organise separation; state-driven, on the variegated translations of public space's structuring role in Viennese urban policy in different urban projects; collaborative, on how the particular views on sustainability of an environmental NGO in Antwerp succeeded in introducing a specific form of public spaces in the port area; and transitional, through an analysis of tensions between politicians and civil society on the roles of open air markets in Budapest.

The second part (*Multiple Roles of Public Space*) analyses stakeholders' competing views on the roles and nature of public space, through studies on the relationship between emptiness-as-publicness and public authorities' *horror vacui* in Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin; the paradoxes of making a European and neutral-thus-democratic public space in post-Reunification Dresden; the messy politics of memorialisation and public space interventions in Warsaw; and the exclusionary effects of public space management and regulation in six Swiss cities.

Finally, part three (*Everyday Life and Sharing the City*) investigates social diversity as experienced in public space and different policy and analytical approaches to the challenges of sharing urban space. Contributions include an analysis of public life and attitudes towards it in a socially diverse neighbourhood in Paris; a discussion of the spatialities of diversity governance and public life in Hackney, London, which extends beyond public spaces; a counter-proposal to prevailing critical urban theory on public space, analysing recent developments in London's public life; an evaluation of the sites of public life in informal settlements in Istanbul; and a methodological approach to community planning based on conflict-ridden Naples and Belfast.

The concluding chapter by the editors connects the different chapters, namely through the relationship between the production of public space and each of history, social diversity and power relations, separately.

Even if the editors' initial claim of a 'major gap' in the literature deserved a fuller demonstration, and of consequent research strategies, it does constitute a fruitful and promising path for public space research. Accordingly, the book brings about some novel and important contributions to the ongoing debates. Its deep empirical rooting in very

different settings proves the importance of mitigating grand narratives of urban change with grounded accounts of the variegated unfolding of structural forces in different contexts. It is particularly successful in combating the frequent spatial bias of public space research (especially the one in English), by presenting multiple countries and spaces beyond the city centre or other areas of exceptionality. Broadening the spatial spectre of public space research is promising especially when, as is the case here, researchers in different national settings mobilise references from their national traditions, irrespective of language. The cross-fertilisation between different academic traditions in different languages could potentially bring forth innovative and exciting insights into public space research.

The editors' remarks on the ways an idea of 'Europeanness', as urban morphology and a modality of urbanity, structures the representations of public space stakeholders in different settings, especially those in the 'periphery' of the continent, is particularly interesting. That such a notion carries in itself an apparent paradox between historicity and modernity and the multifarious ways it is mobilised in the different case studies suggest a potentially fertile ground for cross-national comparative research.

Personally, however, the most exciting aspect of the book is the glimpse of a debate engaging Koch and Latham's critique of the limits of the dominant analytical apparatus of critical urban theory (Chapter 12) and what could be interpreted as a response by the editors in the concluding chapter. Here, while acknowledging their potential in advancing the ways we think and analyse public spaces, they caution against the perceived dangers of approaches 'ignoring the political nature of public space', for they 'bracket out the political, embracing and accepting a situation without asking questions' (pp. 188–189).

While the two do not seem mutually exclusive to me, I would rather focus on what I find so promising here. After decades of research on public space of a somewhat self-referential character, there seems to be insufficient debate on the ways public space is used as an analytical category or as a research object, and the theoretical assumptions implicit therein. Scholars should more vigorously address persisting blind spots such as, but not only, the conflation between public spaces and public life, the often murky entanglement of normative and descriptive connotations in the category itself, immediate causal links between structural driving forces and the micro-geographies of public spaces, and inferring, from the materialities of spaces, a monolithic and univocal rationality in the state, the private and design professions. While these issues are occasionally addressed (including in this book), their impact on mainstream research still falls short. Symposia such as this book are a great opportunity to explicitly tackle these and other questions.

Similarly, and notwithstanding the worthy contributions by the individual chapters, a thorough examination of the actual *intersection* of the workings of the state, expected roles of public spaces and everyday life is hindered by the mere partition of the book into three separate sections. Strategies for a more comprehensive approach to the production of public spaces, from policy and plan making to the actual lived experiences of the everyday, are needed.

All in all, the book is an important contribution to current debates in public space research, relevant for all scholars in the field.

Pedro Gomes

*Lab'URBA, Université Paris-Est, Paris, France*

[pedro.gomes@univ-paris-est.fr](mailto:pedro.gomes@univ-paris-est.fr)

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