THE PHYSICALITY OF CITIZENSHIP: THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND INSURGENT URBANISM

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People use violence to make claims upon the city and use the city to make violent claims.
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Both the global Occupy movement and the large number of protests sweeping through Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other parts of North Africa and the Middle East have captured the world’s imagination, not just because of their seemingly momentous political import, but also because they literally show the enactment of democratic sentiments in the form of bustling bodies physically clamoring for rights and recognition in the face of power. Without cameras, such insurgent urbanism would neither be accessible to the world at large, nor understood as violently disrupting the status quo. These images render legible the intensity of people’s emotions whether they’re camping at the seats of political and economic power, or marching towards a phalanx of armed police. But it is not merely the pictures that inspire. It is also the physical concentration of bodies in open and highly symbolic spatial locations that sparks an interest in the geographies of rebellion. Recent events suggest that the public square has become the proverbial “center stage” upon which collective action is both possible and symbolically meaningful. Like Tiananmen Square, the mere mention of Tahrir Square, Pearl Roundabout, Green Square, and Zuccotti Park evokes images of people whose power to confront an autocratic system needs only the proper physical venue. Such possibilities suggest that when people enact and voice their rights as citizens in public spaces, they indeed have the collective capacity to speak truth to power. In the most literal sense, this also means that citizenship is physical as much as political. It is the physicality of citizenship as a form of insurgent urbanism—as well as its origins, limits, and possibilities—that concerns us here. How is democratic citizenship enacted in the city and is it solely concentrated in formally planned public squares? Our essay lays out a set of questions and examples to explore the relationship between revolutions and urban space.
Precisely because physical space matters in insurgent collective action, regimes have long sought heavy-handed and subtle measures to control or limit citizen congregation, particularly in cities. Even in the United States, most major cities require a public permit to hold a demonstration, and recent laws have further curtailed the right to protest. In non-democratic urban settings, a much larger array of tactics is used to curtail public gatherings, ranging from military containment of public sites to proactive monitoring and the strategic interception of communications used to plan mobilization. Such tactics are not new: the grand design of Paris boulevards by the renowned Baron Haussmann, for example, was crafted with an eye to thwarting mass urban rebellions associated with the 1848 uprising. In the contemporary world, we see the state’s continued efforts to control mobility and seal off open spaces as a central response to the challenges imposed by collective action.

Yet it is important to remember that the idea of public space, and its starring role in social protest or democratic struggle, is grounded in much more than the physical. Even as a preferred site of mobilization, spaces become “public” not just because they are materially constructed as such, but because they are willfully appropriated by citizens for public purposes. Tahrir Square in Cairo, Pearl Roundabout in Manama, and Zuccotti Park in New York City have been elevated to the status of iconic public spaces not because they were built by prescient urban planners to accommodate political revolutions, but because they have become highly accessible focal points whose character and function is part of a city’s urban and political history, in turn interpreted and re-written by its own citizens. The iconic public squares that characterize central areas of most major metropolises around the world have been protected and celebrated because they represent the larger society’s most critical economic, political, and cultural conquests.

It is no surprise then that because monumental public squares serve as symbolic sites for the principal institutions of power, whether political, religious, or cultural, they draw the critical or dissatisfied masses, whose very presence makes a statement that a country’s institutions should include the very people whose bodies inhabit that space. Any link between the right to protest for a better life, on the one hand, and the occupation of those institutional and physical spaces associated with governing power on the other, will recall French urban philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” oratory as a plea for more general social inclusion. Who does the city belong to in terms of space and socioeconomic benefits, and how might a physical “retaking” of certain spatial sites become the first step in challenging the larger social and political order? The distances between the actual, intended, and ideal rights to the city are often mediated by protest, and even by violence as enacted in public performances on public squares. Still, we might argue the more autocratic the regime and the more violent the protest, the less an identifiable public square or clearly defined public space is actually needed. Moreover, if there is no agreement on the symbolic and actual act of sharing public space, the unrest is more likely to
spill beyond the familiar or easily managed spatial bounds of the public square. As such, the uses of space in social protests unfold dialectically: the occupation of public squares and parks as a means of social protest will both reflect citizen dissatisfaction and serve as the catalyst for social and political negotiations between citizens and the state, with the hope that the latter will ultimately accommodate or respond to physically expressed dissatisfaction.

When public squares are not routinely occupied, however, we also know something about citizenship. Either there is no claim-making and the status quo is not under fundamental challenge, whether literally or figuratively; or, conversely the depth, critique, and extent of citizen dissatisfaction with existing power structures is so great that claim-making and negotiation are bypassed and efforts are directed towards more rebellious and unconstrained insurgent action. In such settings citizens will turn not to the public squares but to the streets or the underground. And in this sense, while citizenship and insurgency both have a physicality, they suggest a different spatiality: the former is more likely to be enacted in public squares and other physically bounded spaces that are recognized by states as appropriate sites for claim-making, while the latter unfolds in interstitial, marginal, dispersed, and less easily controllable spaces where the state’s power and authority is less easily wielded.

The Occupy protests in the United States are primarily focused on dismantling a fundamentally unequal political and economic system, and as such are examples of relatively non-violent protests of relatively conventional citizenship given life through the occupation of parks and other public spaces near financial districts. The desired permanence of these protests through the erection of fixed encampments (and in some places, the establishment of insurgent infrastructure like toilets and wooden shelters) is intended not just as a visual and conceptual juxtaposition to the Wall Street-type buildings that often surround these locations, but also aims to celebrate and institutionalize the use of public squares as spaces of citizen dissent. But in light of the ways that the United States legal system both enables and constrains the physicality of citizenship in public spaces, in most cities Occupy strategists have been prevented from making these public sites their own autonomous urban villages, with protesters and their tents forcibly removed when the courts and the police ruled against their right to remain. Some of this owed to the pure physicality of these citizenship claims—the fact that many of the Occupy protesters both derived and found their political agenda within the physical act of occupying public space. Unlike Tahrir Square, where the deliberation between the organizers of the movement occurred as much in private residences and online as in the plaza itself, and where the motivation for protest built on a sustained critique that permeated all aspects of life, not just the right to gather publically, many of the Occupy protestors saw the taking of public space as the primary object and focal point of political deliberation and opposition. That is, the preoccupation with the physical site of the protest was so great that it at times served to sideline some of the larger injustices that inspired
indignation in the first place, with the more fundamental political goals of societal transformation falling to the wayside in the struggle to remain physically ensconced in the formally-designated Occupy spaces.

Moreover, different cities hosted very different types of protests, depending on the nature of the spaces under occupation. While the original Occupy Wall Street (Figure 1) targeted a privately owned public space named Zuccotti Park, the Occupy Boston movement congregated in a city-built public park called Dewey Square. These two sets of protests also convened two different groups of people whose relationships to the physical space suggested very different forms of politics and citizenship. Occupy Wall Street hosted a permanent encampment but gained its greatest visibility by drawing weekend protesters who lent their voices to the actual protests but did not remain committed to protecting or colonizing the Occupy spaces on a daily schedule. Occupy Boston built its visibility around a permanent core group that spent all its time at the Dewey Square site, strategizing and planning protests while also engaging in a committed media campaign to legitimize their physical presence and build support in a larger circle of citizens. Sometimes the aims of the permanent occupiers clashed with the weekend protestors. And in both cases, the divergent relationships to physical space established by the protesters reflected the limits and possibilities of the movements’s capacities to both keep visible and engage a larger audience of supporters nation-wide. By building a movement that focused on actual public space, the Occupy protesters did indeed evolve a new form of articulating citizenship by strategically deploying public spaces in the construction of a larger movement for democratic citizenship. But the ambiguous role that the commitment to physically occupying space played within the different urban factions of the larger struggle, and the failure of these simultaneously-enacted, city-based protests to link larger citizenship concerns to social or legal rights to permanently occupy physical spaces, also limited the power of the movement both locally and nationally, further reflecting divisions within the movement about its larger political purpose.

The Occupy movement and the limits of its spatial strategies can be contrasted against those deployed in the Egyptian case, where Tahrir Square became the single strategic and symbolic site for a variety of claims from various competing groups, all sharing a desire for large-scale political change but not agreeing on its component elements. Whether from anti-Mubarak, anti-military, pro-Islamic, or pro-democratic forces, all Egyptians appear to have agreed that Tahrir Square should symbolize the necessity of a fundamental socio-political transformation in forms of governance in Egypt, thus explaining why a small group of protesters grew into a mass mobilization, energizing thousands in a short amount of time and keeping them committed for days on end. In this sense, it stands almost as the obverse of the Occupy movement, where there may have been unity of purpose among those initially visiting or camping at the site, but greater disunity as questions emerged about whether and how the symbolic appropriation of the site should be linked to a larger movement...
for change. Part of the difference here rests in the divergent political contexts. In Egypt the “physicality of citizenship,” as enacted through protests in an iconic public space associated with government power, can be understood as a call for recognition of the rights of citizenship in an urban and national context where such forms of claim-making have been controlled, monitored, or repressed by the state for decades. In such an environment, any actions on the part of people to lay claim to public space will be seen as a direct challenge to the power and legitimacy of the government. In the Occupy movement in the United States, the use of public space for protest has become a relatively routine form of enacting citizenship, and it usually unfolds in a political and spatial environment where such actions are legally tolerated (if not in fact implicitly invited, as in Zuccotti Park, which was purposely designated as a privately-owned public space in order to reap zoning concessions to real estate developers).8

All this means that while showing the physicality of citizenship, the Occupy protests in the United States were far from radical or system-altering (as in Egypt), and their appearance served as just another form of pluralist politics. Public spaces in United States cities may offer a physical venue for voices not readily heard within the halls of legislative power, but as a platform for dissent they often fail to fundamentally challenge the status quo, serving instead as a format for giving voice to those who seek to join, reform, in or redirect—rather than overturn—the existing political structure. This surely is citizenship, but citizenship in a democracy is relatively stabilizing, whereas citizenship marshalled in the call for revolutionary transformation is a more de-stabilizing form of political insurgency. In the latter conditions, public squares and concrete spaces for physical protest are essential precisely because the ballot boxes as sites of change are likely to be closed off.

Roads and Roundabouts: From Spaces of Citizenship to Infrastructures of Insurgency

The distinction between citizenship and insurgency is relevant not just for political theorists, but also for those who seek to understand geographies of protest and to assess whether there are established spatialities associated with particular forms of collective action and opposition politics. One way to pursue this line of thought is to consider the socio-spatial dynamics of different aspects of the urban built environment, and to contrast the forms, meaning, and strategies of protest that are deployed in public squares with those that unfold in other types of urban spaces. How do the physical attributes of built environmental space mold citizen action? How can spatial forms or modes of territorial connection be seen as a relatively autonomous element in the construction and study of urban protest or its origins, nature, and impact? How and why are public spheres in a city commandeered by one group to establish hegemony?9
Protest in a public square conjures up images of democracy at work—concerned and proactive citizens gathering together peacefully to voice their opinions to a benevolent government. Famous revolutions staged in public squares, like the February Revolution and the May Day demonstrations, have helped elevate such spaces to the higher realm of mythology even as they have inspired everyday citizens to try to accomplish similarly democratic feats. But this may be because public squares and central plazas are usually cavernous sites that concentrate large numbers of people in a single location, providing collective interaction that in its form will reflect a mass—rather than class or hierarchically stratified—society. As noted, there is often a state logic involved in the construction of public squares, or a market logic involved in the creation of central plazas, with both such spaces being easily monitored by the state. To be sure, public squares can be the sites of potential insurgency, especially when the collection and display of mass protest becomes so unwieldy that even armed police cannot control the tumultuous crowds. In such instances, governing officials often seek other forms of spatial control or physical intervention to minimize the collective power emanating from these places. Among these techniques, the erection of walls and barricades are among the most common. In Egypt, in fact, the recent resurgence of riots and protests centered in Tahrir Square pushed authorities to erect walls and place heavy concrete blocks around key government buildings. In order to undermine the protesters, police strategically positioned several “24-foot tall concrete barriers bisecting streets leading from the symbolic center of the protests, Tahrir Square, to their most despised target, the Interior Ministry.” Such actions not only show both the possibilities and limits of enacting citizenship through protest in a single public square, they also remind us that public squares are not the only actionable spaces in cities, nor are they the only sites of protest.

Indeed, the types of protests that emerge in streets and in lateral spaces leading to and from public squares may have an entirely different ethos and political logic than those focused on public squares. Frequently, central plazas become visible in the first place not just because of their closeness to the symbols of power, but also because they stand at the intersection of a city’s main transport routes. Many so-called public squares are merely traffic intersections masquerading as public spaces. Although they sometimes serve the same function, traffic intersections are not as easily walled or controlled without impeding the flows of citizens and goods that provide the economic and social lifeblood of a city. Thus they not only may invite more insurgent politics, they may also enable more disruptive and effective revolutionary action. After all, there is much to be risked when authorities put key transport nodes on lockdown, or when the city’s transport grid comes to a standstill in the effort to squelch political protest. The intersection of roads and different modes of transportation may trace their history to engineering logics, but whatever their original design they enable the coming together of different classes of people from all parts of the city, and often to a single site to protest a united cause. More prosaically, large traffic intersections and roundabouts (which would include Tahrir Square and Pearl...
Figure 1  Occupy Wall Street, New York City, USA, October 5, 2011.

Figure 2  Cairo, Egypt, February 11, 2011, showing protesters marching from Abbasisa neighborhood to Tahrir Square.

Figure 3  Pearl Roundabout, Manama, Bahrain, February 19, 2011.
Roundabout, Figures 2 and 3) allow different groups of people to gather efficiently. The 2010 Red Shirts protests in Bangkok also emphasize the importance of streets and intersections. Controlling major intersections also meant shutting down access to large swathes of commercial activities, aggressive acts which intensified the pressure on the government. Bangkok’s famously crowded streets were empty during the clashes as a visible reminder of the Red Shirts’ ability to majorly disrupt economic, political, and social life if their demand for change was not met. There were no Public Squares or ordered civic spaces the Red Shirts occupied. The streets functioned as the tools, symbol, and platform of protests. Because roads transform into sites of greater historical weight when they are used as glorified soapboxes to air public grievances, they remind us that both function and form define a public square.

So why is there so little emphasis on the analysis of major confluences in transportation networks and their impacts on protests or the physicality of citizenship, and so much attention focused on the romanticized notion of public squares? Is it merely sexier to see civic centers and public squares as emblematic democratic spaces? To a degree, yes, although it also much simpler to frame the world in terms of “democratic” and “undemocratic” spaces than to articulate what such spaces actually look like or to explain what about their physical form and urban social function makes them democratic. Likewise, it is easier for observers in the democratic West to identify with common spatial and political symbols like public squares, as they try to make sense of the mysterious or “exotic” foreign locales that are now awash in protest, than to link mass mobilization in physical space to the complicated social, political, and economic dynamics that run beneath the surfaces of rebellion. But doing so can misrepresent the nature and significance of a protest. For example, the Sidi Bouzid protests in Tunisia sparked the greater North African and Middle Eastern revolution not just because they catalyzed anti-government sentiment but because the outrage was inspired by the political repression of an informal street vendor—a type of activity that relies on free movement in public space and is ubiquitous in the plazas and streets in cities in this and other regions of the world. Even so, the everyday repression on the street that helped spark the Tunisian uprising was almost immediately overshadowed in the Western media by a focus on the monumentality of mobilizations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Green Square, and Zuccotti Park. Has this happened because outside observers equate a successful revolt with a concentration of violence in yet another iconic public square?

Such assumptions belie a causality that must be subject to interrogation: do public squares make revolutions or do revolutions make public squares? There may be no clear answer to this question, but it should force more thoughtful discussion of why so many observers are pre-occupied with activities that unfold in public squares. It should also inspire expanded deliberation over what form the physicality of citizenship takes in a given social and spatial environment, as well as a more nuanced assessment of the role of variegated urban spaces in the social construction of
a continuum of political actions, ranging from expressing citizenship to enacting protest to undertaking insurgency to fomenting revolution. It may be that, in contrast to public squares, urban infrastructure like roads and bridges provide a network for sustained social and spatial interaction, and these sites may be just as central to protest outcomes because they are less likely to be controlled by the authorities even as they offer an infrastructure for an engaged yet mobile insurgency. Conversely, when the unencumbered free flow of people is blocked and when collective mobility in space—within and between public squares, roads, bridges, and other types of infrastructure—is completely blocked off, then it is likely that one is witnessing a full-blown insurgency, if not a revolution.

The street was a key unit of analysis in the revolution in Libya. Anti-government protesters were flooding urban roadways, alongside the police and the military, trying to take back Libya one street at a time, one city at a time. In spite of Qaddafi’s brutal use of air strikes and imported mercenaries, in the initial months of the struggle, protesters transformed the geography of Libya into a giant public square. Oddly enough, Green Square in Tripoli, a city almost entirely controlled by Qaddafi until his death, remained peaceful because tanks blocked the roads into the city and the army pro-actively shot any protester attempting to move towards the square. Turning Green Square into Tahrir Square was the dream of Libyan protesters, but such objectives were continually thwarted by the authorities, who had programmed counter-uses of the space to undermine such a possibility. During much of the conflict, Green Square remained in the hands of Qaddafi, who used it to celebrate Jamahiriya Day with elaborate parades that manifested his iron grip on the city’s streets and open spaces. The unfortunate Libyan example demonstrates the futility of public squares as driving forces of political change without a public free enough to articulate and physically access such spaces for their own democratic purposes. And precisely for this reason, the streets of Libyan towns like Benghazi and Brega became the real sites of dissent, because they were not as easily colonized by the authorities. Even in the case of Tahrir Square, citizen access to the square through existent roads and intersections was as central to protest outcomes as were the wide-open spaces downtown that received the peripatetic masses.

Although increased mobility in space can enable acts of protest, just as public spaces can serve as symbolic sites for enacting citizenship, the question of whether these and other built environmental factors will motivate—rather than just mediate—political dissatisfaction remains open to further reflection. To what extent does the built environment, itself, structure the nature of protest or citizenship claims? Preliminary studies of social movements have shown that groups of citizens who feel most institutionally, culturally, politically, and geographically distant from governing institutions and/or the ruling classes tend to be a main source of rebellion, while those with social, spatial, and political proximity to sources of power and authority may be less likely to mobilize, rebel, or revolt. Such findings help explain why the occupation of
public spaces near centers of political and financial power can both symbolize and bridge the distance between citizens and the government. This in essence is what protest is all about: reducing the gap between ruler and ruled, have and have not, rich and poor. Sometimes the simultaneous enactment of citizenship in both center and peripheral urban spaces is all that is needed to call attention to these gaps at the level of the city, and to set the engines of change in motion.

**Can Urban Design Create Democracy?**

In this climate where venues for the enactment of physical—and virtual—citizenship are shifting or in flux, we must return to the question of whether and how urban design can enable democracy and/or citizenship, insurgent or otherwise. To be sure, a prior question might be whether planners and urban designers should be involved in the construction of protest landscapes in the first place. The history of Tahrir Square shows that it was precisely the failure of urban planning that led to the unintended construction of the public square, which eventually became the physical launching pad and international face of Arab Spring. As such, the protesting citizens who articulated Cairo’s central city plaza as a site for insurgency, thus elevating it to the iconic status of a Public Square, are the real protagonists in the struggle for change. Thus we should think of the irate citizen as inadvertent yet insurgent designer. Likewise, the Occupy Movements in the United States can be considered a challenge to the safely conventional programming of open sites around financial districts, with protesters turning publicly-accessible parks into insurgent spaces by voicing their claims.

In all of these examples, protest spaces were not formally designed as venues for making public claims so much as articulated and created as such by citizens. Such insurgent actions are perhaps the most valuable tool for making effective claims on the city and for actively using the city to make claims on the state. If Tahrir Square had been intentionally constructed as an official protest landscape by the state and/or urban planners, a Hyde Park of sorts, would Egypt’s democratic revolution have been as successful? Possibly. But it may be that the sheer act of challenging the gap between the “design from above” and “citizen claims from below” that is the most effective strategy for fomenting revolt, a sort of “insurgent design” that builds on the formal properties of place but creates something new in the process. Whether cast from above or below, urban design is political, as are the planning decisions that give life to design projects, particularly when they empower citizens to express their grievances and make public their sentiments. The design of space must be considered a central protagonist in the struggle to create a new social order.

But urban design is only one element in the construction of a democratically inclusive public sphere. The notion that through proactive urban design one can induce or govern the spatiality of political gatherings and protest is flawed, be-
cause when the will to gather and protest is strong enough, anywhere will do, as the cases of Bangkok and Istanbul have shown. The pictures of Tahrir Square and Pearl Roundabout filled with protesters are impressive because they convey a sense of limitlessness to people power. And in this regard, the street is as good or even better than pre-planned public squares, while public squares will remain empty and the streets silent if the public itself is not on the move. Moreover, public squares are usually static spaces, and as such are unlikely to capture the dynamism of large-scale protests or organized social movements that find themselves capable of entering all spheres of public life, not merely public squares. It is for this reason that transportation networks and hubs become essential to designing protests as cities haphazardly expand, particularly in settings where the state has learned to crack down or control open public squares, as with Tiananmen Square. When physical space for protest becomes a rare commodity, a city’s democratic and civic spheres are also under threat. Yet when the desire for rebellion is strong enough, public squares are not required—a street is sufficient to effect change.

We conclude with a set of queries about the role of formal urban design in creating democracy, whether in terms of spatial integration, political inclusion, or other common manifestations of such ideals. If any urban artery and clearing can be used for demonstrations, are well-designed public squares actually necessary for democracy?13 If people wishing to exercise their physical and political citizenship become accidental insurgent designers, is the role of professional urban design redundant, at least in terms of its commitment to the creation of public spaces? And if so, what role should urban design and planning play in the creation of socially-just cities and in enabling urban citizenship? Perhaps the value of design professionals lies not in the explicit construction of protest landscapes, but in the response to and recording of physical claims to citizenship in the already built environment. For example, after the rebels took Tripoli, they renamed Green Square to Martyrs’ Square, as a symbol of respect to those who had lost their lives in the fight to reclaim Libya from Qaddafi and his forces.14 Among other things, urban designers can help preserve the spatial history and memory of the battle for Libya and other sites of insurgency by building monuments and iconic architecture that reflect the symbolism of the square and the importance of such sites in a country’s history. Perhaps urban designers can best serve the city and democratic ideals by being urban spatial scribes, using their professional skills and legitimacy to make public the citizen battles both won and lost in struggles over access and control of the city. The marriage of sensitive political awareness and meaningful urban design can go a long way in inspiring an ongoing struggle to create a more just and equitable society.
6 Tali Hatuka, Violent Acts and Urban Space in Contemporary Tel Aviv: Revising Moments (Austin: University of Texas, 2010).
7 Taking a cue from the Spanish Acampadas.
10 It was inspired in part by a deadly riot after a soccer match that brought out nascent tensions within and among divergent political forces competing to guide the post-Mubarak political transition.
13 The use of technology in mounting protest demonstrations and inspiring dissent online have implications for urban designers and others interested in creating or strategically utilizing spaces in the city for citizens to publically voice their concerns. But whether such technologies will make the Hyde Parks of the world disappear, or whether parks, streets, sidewalks, and public squares will be replaced by the Internet, still remains to be seen. See Cody Doctorow, “The Internet is the Best Place for Dissent to Start,” The Guardian, 3 January 2012, accessed 16 February 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/blog/2012/jan/03/the-internet-best-dissent-start.