BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: PUBLIC SPACE AND PRIVATE LIFE

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This investigation originated in my dissatisfaction with a critical position that emerged in architectural discourse a few years ago. Critics and historians began to see multiple versions of the theme park in the increasingly spectacular and centralized zones of leisure and consumption—gentrified shopping streets, massive shopping malls, festival marketplaces. According to Michael Sorkin, one of the primary theorists in this arena, these ersatz and privatized pieces of the city—pseudopublic places—were distinguished by consumption, surveillance, control, and endless simulation. I include my own work among this body of criticism; I contributed a chapter concluding that the entire world had become a gigantic shopping mall to Sorkin's book *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space.*[1]

What concerned me more than the emerging theme-park sensibility as depicted in these studies was part of the book's subtitle, "The End of Public Space." This summarizes a fear repeated by many other critics, urbanists, and architects; in his essay in Sorkin's book, Mike Davis expresses alarm at the "destruction of any truly democratic urban spaces."[2] It is easy to find evidence to support this argument. Los Angeles, for example, is often cited as an extreme demonstration of the decline of public space. The few remaining slices of traditional public space (for example, Pershing Square, historically the focus of the downtown business district, which was recently redesigned by Ricardo Legorreta) are usually deserted, while Citywalk, the simulated cityscape, shopping, and entertainment center collaged from different urban elements by MCA and Universal Studio, is always jammed with people.

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Michael Sorkin, ed., VARIATIONS ON A THEME PARK: THE NEW AMERICAN CITY AND THE END OF PUBLIC SPACE (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990)

2
Mike Davis, "Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space," in Sorkin, VARIATIONS ON A THEME PARK, 155.

The existence and popularity of these commercial public places is used to frame a pervasive narrative of loss that contrasts the current debasement of public space with golden ages and golden sites—the Greek agora, the coffeehouses of early modern Paris and London, the Italian piazza, the town square. The narrative nostalgically posits these as once vital sites of democracy where, allegedly, cohesive public discourse thrived, and inevitably culminates in the contemporary crisis of public life and public space, a crisis that puts at risk the very ideas and institutions of democracy itself.

It is hard to argue with the symptoms these writers describe, but I disagree with the conclusions they draw. This perception of loss originates in extremely narrow and normative definitions of both "public" and "space" that derive from insistence on unity, desire for fixed categories of time and space, and rigidly conceived notions of private and public. Seeking a single, all-inclusive public space, these critics mistake monumental public spaces for the totality of public space. In this respect, critics of public space closely echo the conclusions of social theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Sennett, whose descriptions of the public sphere share many of the same assumptions.[3] Habermas describes the public sphere as overwhelmed by consumerism, the media, and the state, while Sennett laments in his book's very title "the fall of public man." The word "man" highlights another key assumption of this position: an inability to conceive of identity in any but universalizing terms. Whether as universal man, citizen, consumer, or tourist, the identified subjects posit a normative condition of experience.

Not surprisingly, the political implications that follow from the overwhelmingly negative assessments of the narrative of loss are equally negative. Implicit is a form of historical determinism that suggests the impossibility of political struggle against what Mike Davis calls "inexorable forces."[4] The universal consumer becomes the universal victim, helpless and passive against the forces of capitalism, consumerism, and simulation. This tyranny is compounded by the lack of a clear link between public space and democracy. The two are assumed to be closely connected, but exact affinities are never specified, which makes it even more difficult to imagine political opposition to the mall or theme park.

This universalization, pessimism, and ambiguity led me to seek an alternative framework—a new way of conceptualizing public space and a new way of reading Los Angeles. This essay represents an account of my attempts to rethink our conceptions of "public," "space," and "identity." The investigation revealed to me a multiplicity of simultaneous public activities in Los Angeles that are continually redefining both "public" and "space" through lived experience. In vacant lots, sidewalks, parks, and parking lots, these activities are

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See Jürgen Habermas, THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: AN INQUIRY INTO A CATEGORY OF BOURGEOIS SOCIETY (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); and Richard Sennett, THE FALL OF PUBLIC MAN (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

4
Davis, "Fortress Los Angeles," 154–80.

restructuring urban space, opening new political arenas, and producing new forms of insurgent citizenship.

RETHINKING "PUBLIC"

Nancy Fraser's article "Rethinking the Public Sphere" provided an important starting point for my quest.[5] Her central arguments clarify the significant theoretical and political limitations of prevailing formulations of "public." Fraser acknowledges the importance of Jürgen Habermas's characterization of the public sphere as an arena of discursive relations conceptually independent of both the state and the economy, but she questions many of his assumptions about the universal, rational, and noncontentious public arena.

Habermas links the emergence of the "liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere" in early modern Europe with the development of nation-states in which democracy was represented by collectively accepted universal rights and achieved via electoral politics. This version of the public sphere emphasizes unity and equality as ideal conditions. The public sphere is depicted as a "space of democracy" that all citizens have the right to inhabit. In this arena, social and economic inequalities are temporarily put aside in the interest of determining a common good. Matters of common interest are discussed through rational, disinterested, and virtuous public debate. Like the frequently cited ideal of Athenian democracy, however, this model is structured around significant exclusions. In Athens, participation was theoretically open to all citizens, but in practice the majority of the population—women and slaves—were excluded; they were not "citizens." The modern bourgeois public sphere also began by excluding women and workers: women's interests were presumed to be private and therefore part of the domestic sphere, while workers' concerns were presumed to be merely economic and therefore self-interested. Middle-class and masculine modes of public speech and behavior, through the required rational deliberation and rhetoric of disinterest, were privileged and defined as universal.

Recent revisionist histories, notes Fraser, contradict this idealized account, demonstrating that nonliberal, nonbourgeois public spheres also existed, producing their own definitions and public activities in a multiplicity of arenas.[6] For example, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, middle-class women organized themselves into a variety of exclusively female volunteer groups for the purposes of philanthropy and reform based on private ideals of domesticity and motherhood. Less affluent women found access to public life through the workplace and through associations including unions, lodges, and political organizations such as Tammany Hall. Broadening the definition of public to encompass

5 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in THE PHANTOM PUBLIC SPHERE, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

6 Joan Landes, WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE AGE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, WOMEN IN PUBLIC: BETWEEN BANNERS AND BALLOTS, 1825–1880 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

these "counterpublics" produces a very different picture of the public sphere, one founded on contestation rather than unity and created through competing interests and violent demands as much as reasoned debate. Demonstrations, strikes, riots, and struggles over such issues as temperance and suffrage reveal a range of discursive sites characterized by multiple publics and varied struggles between contentious concerns.

In the bourgeois public sphere, citizenship is primarily defined in relation to the state, framed within clear categories of discourse, and addressed through political debate and electoral politics. This liberal notion of citizenship is based on abstract universal liberties, with democracy guaranteed by the state's electoral and juridical institutions. Fraser argues instead that democracy is a complex and contested concept that can assume a multiplicity of meanings and forms that often violate the strict lines between private and public on which the liberal bourgeois public sphere depends. In the United States, counterpublics of women, workers, and immigrants have historically defended established civil rights but also demanded new rights based on their specific roles in the domestic or economic spheres. Always changing, these demands continually redefine democracy and redraw boundaries between private and public.

Fraser's description of multiple publics, contestation, and the redefinition of public and private can be extended to the physical realm of public space. First, these ideas suggest that no single physical environment can represent a completely inclusive space of democracy. Like Habermas's idealized bourgeois public sphere, the physical spaces often idealized by architects—the agora, the forum, the piazza—were constituted by exclusion. Where these single publics are construed as occupying an exemplary public space, the multiple counterpublics that Fraser identifies necessarily require and produce multiple sites of public expression. These spaces are partial and selective in response to the limited segments of the population they serve from among the many public roles that individuals play in urban society.

REDEFINING "SPACE"

In order to locate these multiple sites of public expression, we need to redefine our understanding of "space." Just as Nancy Fraser looked beyond the officially designated public to discover the previously hidden counterpublics of women and workers, we can identify another type of space by looking beyond the culturally defined physical realms of home, workplace, and institution. I call this new construction "everyday space." Everyday space is the connective tissue that binds daily lives together, amorphous and so persuasive that it

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is difficult even to perceive. In spite of its ubiquity, everyday space is nearly invisible in the professional discourses of the city. Everyday space is like everyday life, the "screen on which society projects its light and its shadow, its hollows and its planes, its power and its weakness."[7]

In the vast expanses of Los Angeles, monumental, highly ordered, and carefully designed public spaces like Pershing Square or Citywalk punctuate the larger and more diffuse space of everyday life. Southern California's banal, incoherent, and repetitive landscape of roads is lined with endless strip malls, supermarkets, auto-repair facilities, fast-food outlets, and vacant lots that defeat any conceptual or physical order. According to Lefebvre, these spaces are like everyday life: "trivial, obvious but invisible, everywhere and nowhere." For most Angelenos, such spaces constitute an everyday reality of infinitely recurring commuting routes and trips to the supermarket, dry cleaner, or video store. The sites for multiple social and economic transactions, these mundane places serve as primary intersections between the individual and the city.

Created to be seen and approached from moving vehicles, this generic landscape exists to accommodate the automobile, which has produced the city's sprawling form. Connected by an expansive network of streets and freeways, Los Angeles spreads out in all directions with few differences of density or form. Experienced through the automobile, the bus, or even the shopping cart, this environment takes mobility as its defining element. Everyday life is organized by time as much as by space, structured around daily itineraries, with rhythms imposed by patterns of work and leisure, week and weekend, and the repetitious gestures of commuting and consumption.

In contrast to the fluidity of its urban fabric, the social fabric of Los Angeles is fragmented; it is not a single city but a collection of microcities defined by visible and invisible boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, and religion. This multiplicity of identities produces an

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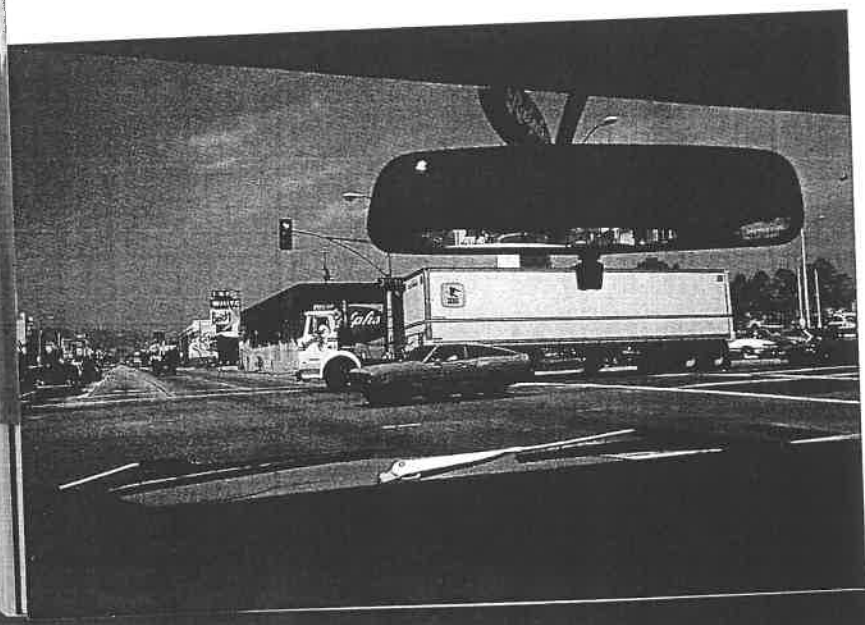
Henri Lefebvre, CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE (London: Verso, 1991).



Above: Pershing Square at noon on a weekday
Left: Everyday space in Los Angeles, through the windshield

intricate social landscape in which cultures consolidate and separate, reacting and interacting in complex and unpredictable ways. Spatial and cultural differences exist even within these groups. "Latino," for example, describes the now dominant ethnic group but hides the significant differences between Mexicans and Cubans, for example, or even between recent immigrants and second- or third-generation Chicanos. Mobility prevails here too. When new immigrants arrive from Central America, they tend to move into African American neighborhoods. Both African Americans and Latinos shop in Korean and Vietnamese shops. Other areas of the city, once completely white, then primarily Latino, are now mostly Asian.

These generally distinct groups came together—intensified and politicized—in the urban disturbances of 1992. According to Nancy Fraser's redefinition of the public sphere, these events can be seen as a form of public expression that produces an alternative discourse of "public" and "space." Both the direct causes of the riots and their expression of the riots were embedded in everyday life. For Rodney King, a drive on the freeway ended in a savage beating that shocked the world. The ordinary act of purchasing a bottle of juice in a convenience market after school resulted in Latasha Harlin's death. The verdicts in the Harlin and King trials unleashed a complex outpouring of public concern. Multiple and competing demands (some highly specific, others barely articulated), a spontaneous and undefined moment of public expression, exploded on the streets and sidewalks of Los Angeles. African Americans, many of whom called the uprising the "justice riots," attacked the criminal-justice system. Concepts of universally defined civil rights failed to ameliorate or condemn the visible racism of the Los Angeles Police Department and the court system, which to many constituted a denial of the fundamental rights of citizenship.

The riots dramatized economic issues: poverty, unemployment, and the difficulty of financial self-determination, all exacerbated by recession and long-term effects of deindustrialization. The disturbances also revealed the city's tangled racial dynamics: 51 percent of those arrested were Hispanic (and of that group, most were recent immigrants) while only 34 percent were African American. Immigrants were pitted against one another, and stores owned by Koreans were the focus of much of the burning and looting.

The automobile played a prominent role in the rioting, from the initial act of pulling Reginald Denny from his truck to the rapid expansion of looters who moved across the city by car. Spaces formerly devoted to the automobile—streets, parking lots, swap meets, and strip malls—were temporarily transformed into sites of protest and rage, into new zones of public expression.

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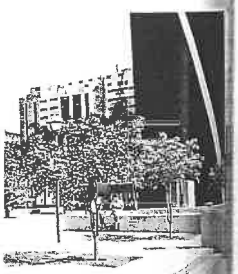

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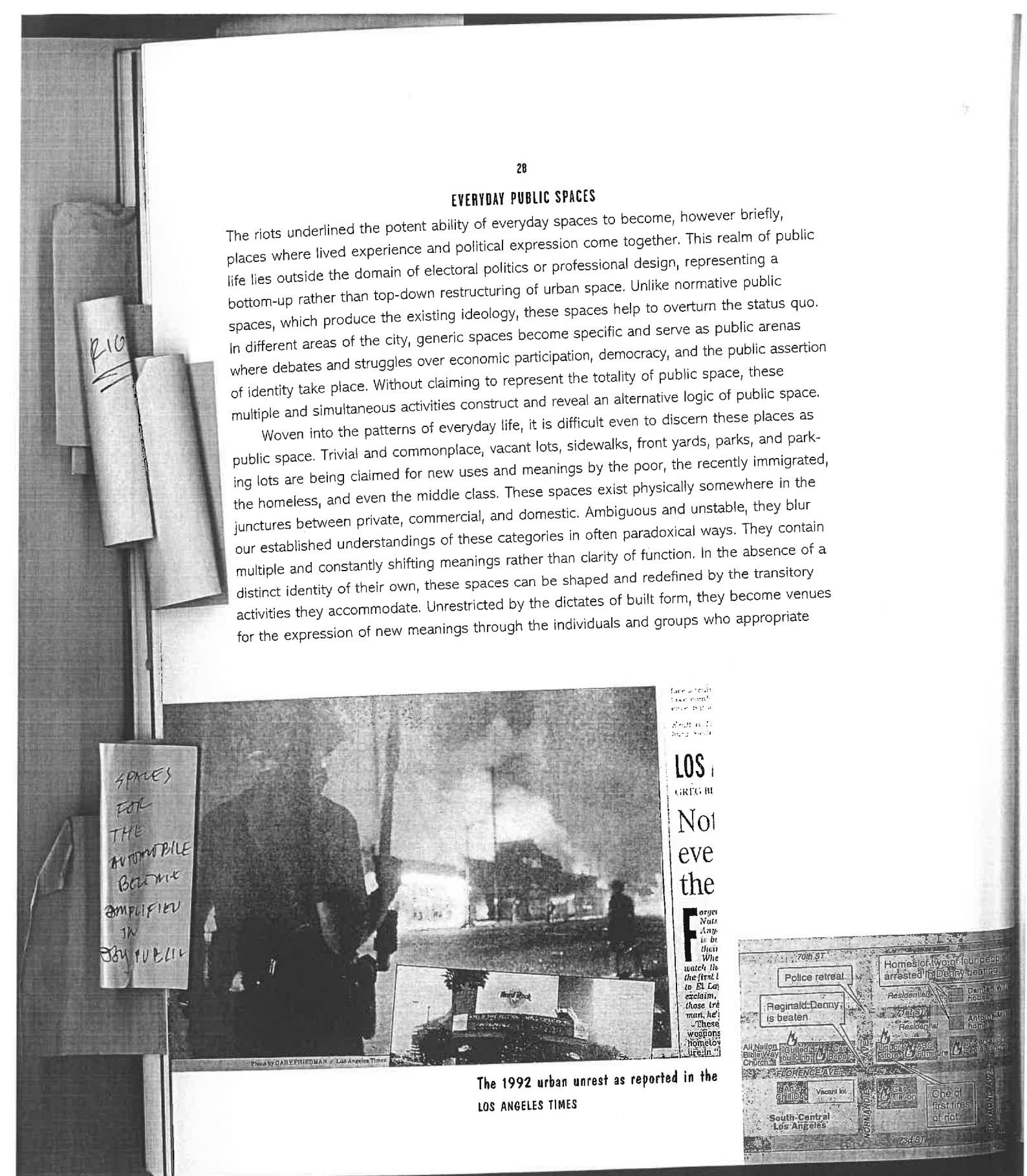
EVERYDAY PUBLIC SPACES

The riots underlined the potent ability of everyday spaces to become, however briefly, places where lived experience and political expression come together. This realm of public life lies outside the domain of electoral politics or professional design, representing a bottom-up rather than top-down restructuring of urban space. Unlike normative public spaces, which produce the existing ideology, these spaces help to overturn the status quo. In different areas of the city, generic spaces become specific and serve as public arenas where debates and struggles over economic participation, democracy, and the public assertion of identity take place. Without claiming to represent the totality of public space, these multiple and simultaneous activities construct and reveal an alternative logic of public space.

Woven into the patterns of everyday life, it is difficult even to discern these places as public space. Trivial and commonplace, vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards, parks, and parking lots are being claimed for new uses and meanings by the poor, the recently immigrated, the homeless, and even the middle class. These spaces exist physically somewhere in the junctures between private, commercial, and domestic. Ambiguous and unstable, they blur our established understandings of these categories in often paradoxical ways. They contain multiple and constantly shifting meanings rather than clarity of function. In the absence of a distinct identity of their own, these spaces can be shaped and redefined by the transitory activities they accommodate. Unrestricted by the dictates of built form, they become venues for the expression of new meanings through the individuals and groups who appropriate



The 1992 urban unrest as reported in the LOS ANGELES TIMES

the spaces for their own purposes. Apparently empty of meaning, they acquire constantly changing meanings—social, aesthetic, political, economic—as users reorganize and reinterpret them.

Temporally, everyday spaces exist in between past and future uses, often with a no-longer-but-not-yet-their-own status, in a holding pattern of real-estate values that might one day rise. The temporary activities that take place there also follow distinct temporal patterns. Without fixed schedules, they produce their own cycles, appearing, reappearing, or disappearing within the rhythms of everyday life. Use and activity vary according to the seasons, vanishing in winter, born again in spring. They are subject to changes in the weather, days of the week, and even time of day. Since they are usually perceived in states of distraction, their meanings are not immediately evident but unfold through the repetitious acts of everyday life.

Conceptually, these spaces can be identified as what Edward Soja, following Henri Lefebvre, called the "thirdspace," a category that is neither the material space that we experience nor a representation of space.[8] Thirdspace is instead a space of representation, a space bearing the possibility of new meanings, a space activated through social action and the social imagination. Multiple public activities are currently transforming Los Angeles everyday spaces, among them the garage sale and street vending.

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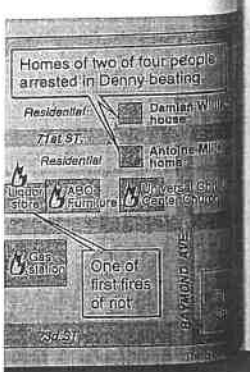
Edward Soja, THIRDSPACE: JOURNEYS TO LOS ANGELES AND OTHER REAL AND IMAGINED PLACES (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1996).

THE GARAGE SALE

An unexpected outcome of the recession of the 1980s and the collapse of the real-estate market in Southern California was the proliferation of garage sales, even in the city's wealthiest areas. As an increasing number of people found themselves un- or underemployed, the struggle for supplemental income turned garage sales into semipermanent events, especially on the west side of Los Angeles. Cities such as Beverly Hills have passed ordinances limiting the number of garage sales per household to two per year. The front yard, an already ambiguous territory, serves as a buffer between residential privacy and the public street. Primarily an honorific space, the lawn is activated as the garage sale turns the house inside out, displaying the interior on the exterior. Presenting worn-out possessions, recently the contents of closets and drawers, for public viewing and purchase transforms the usually empty lawn into a site of representation. Unwanted furniture, knickknacks, and clothes are suddenly accessible to anyone passing by, melding the public and the extremely private. The same economic forces that caused the proliferation of garage sales also produced their



mobile clientele, shoppers who drive through the city in search of sales or who discover them accidentally on the way to somewhere else.

In the Mexican American barrio East Los Angeles, with its less affluent population of homeowners and low real-estate values, commerce and domesticity have coexisted for a long time. A more permanent physical restructuring has already taken place, generated by a distinct set of social and economic needs: the front yard is marked by a fence, delineating an enclosure. The fence structures a more complex relationship between home and street. Different configurations of house, yard, and fence offer flexible spaces that can easily be adapted for commercial purposes. The fence itself becomes a display for ads or goods. Paving the lawn, a widespread practice, creates an outdoor shop. For Latino women who don't work outside the house, the garage sale has become a permanent business. Many move beyond recycling used items to buying and reselling clothes from nearby garment factories. Garages are simultaneously closets and shops, further linking the commercial and the domestic and producing a public place for neighborhood women. Men use the paved yards differently, as spaces for auto repair or car customizing. This attracts other neighborhood men, establishing a gathering place that is similarly domestic and commercial.

STREET VENDORS

All over the city, informal vendors appropriate marginal and overlooked sites chosen for their accessibility to passing motorists and pedestrians: street corners, sidewalks, and parking lots and vacant lots that are often surrounded by chain-link fences. Through the types of goods they sell, vendors bring to these urban spaces the qualities of domestic life. Used dresses from innumerable closets form a mural of female identity. Cheap rugs cover the harshness of chain link, overlaying the fence with the soft textures and bright patterns of the interior, defining a collective urban living room and evoking a multiplicity of dwelling places, an analogue for the diversity of the city. The delicate patterning of lace, flowers, and pillows, the softness of T-shirts and stuffed animals—all invoke the intimacy of the interior rather than the no-man's-land of the street. In public places, familiar items such as tables, chairs, and tablecloths, usually seen inside the home, transform neglected and underused space into islands of human occupation. Exchange both commercial and social, including that of the messages transmitted by T-shirts and posters, takes place. The vendors' temporary use hijacks these spaces, changing their meaning. Publicly owned spaces are briefly inhabited by citizens; private spaces undergo an ephemeral decommodification. Temporarily removed from the marketplace, these spaces now represent more than potential real-estate value.

Left and below: Garage sale in Mid-City

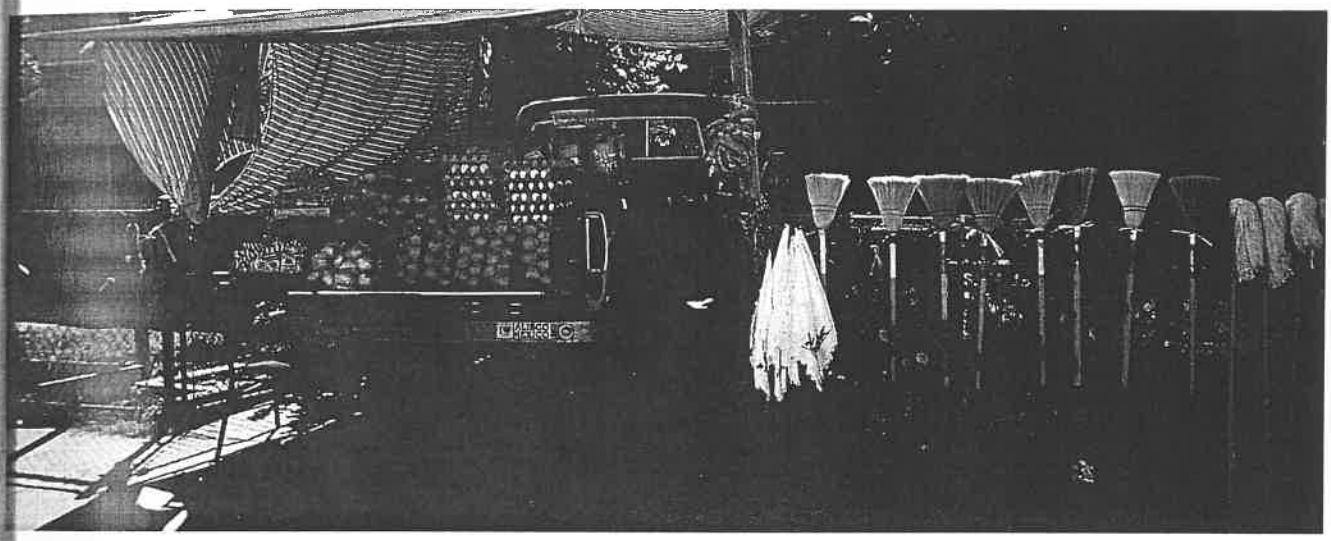
Orange seller's wares on median, Venice Boulevard

Vending display at curbside, La Brea Avenue, Baldwin Hills

Chain-link display, Sixth Street, MacArthur Park

Baldwin Hills

Vendor, La Brea Avenue, Baldwin Hills



Driveway/commercial space, East Los Angeles

ı-link display, Sixth
ıt, MacArthur Park

Vendor, Alvarado Street

Vending is a complex and diverse economy of microcommerce, recycling, and household production. Like the garage sale, vending supplements income rather than constituting an occupation—or, more likely, supports only the most marginal of existences. The varieties of vending visible across the city publicly articulate its multiple economic and social narratives. In neighborhoods populated by Central American immigrants, women prepare or package food or craft items in the home for sale on the sidewalk, extending the domestic economy into urban space. The social dramas of migration to Los Angeles are played out daily on the streets. The ubiquitous orange sellers, found on street dividers all over the city, are recent and undocumented arrivals who work to pay off the *coyote* who brought them across the border. Other immigrants vend for economic mobility, an alternative to sweatshop labor, that may eventually lead to a stall at a swap meet or to a small shop. Both sellers and goods can be read as local messages, attesting to the economic necessities and cultural values of a neighborhood.

Vending on public property, streets, and sidewalks is illegal in both the city and county of Los Angeles. When enough vendors congregate in a single place regularly enough, however, they can muster the political power to change the nature of urban space. Chanting "We are vendors, not criminals," Central American vendors demonstrated at the Rampart police station, demanding the right to pursue their economic activities without police harassment. Since many of the vendors are undocumented, this makes them doubly illegal. Central American vendors have organized themselves, acquired legal representation, and pressured the city to change its laws to permit limited vending. Through the defense of their livelihood, vendors are becoming a political and economic force in the city.

DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SPACE

This brings us back to the question that started this investigation: how can public space be connected with democracy? Individual garage sales might not in themselves generate a new urban politics, but the juxtapositions, combinations, and collisions of people, places, and activities that I've described create a new condition of social fluidity that begins to break down the separate, specialized, and hierarchical structures of everyday life in Los Angeles. Local yet also directed to anyone driving or passing by, these unexpected intersections may possess the liberatory potential that Henri Lefebvre attributes to urban life. As chance encounters multiply and proliferate, activities of everyday space may begin to dissolve some of the predictable boundaries of race and class, revealing previously

hidden social possibilities that suggest how the trivial and marginal might be transformed into a kind of micropolitics.

In some specific circumstances, as I've suggested, the intersection of publics, spaces, and identities can begin to delineate a new urban arena for democratic action that challenges normative definitions of how democracy works. Specifically constituted counterpublics organized around a site or activity create what anthropologist James Holston calls "spaces of insurgent citizenship."[9] These emergent sites accompany the changes that are transforming cities such as Los Angeles. Global and local processes, migration, industrial restructuring, and other economic shifts produce social reterritorialization at all levels. Residents with new histories, cultures, and demands appear in the city and disrupt the given categories of social life and urban space. Expressed through the specific needs of everyday life, their urban experiences increasingly become the focus of their struggle to redefine the conditions belonging to society. Once mobilized, social identities become political demands, spaces and sites for political transformation, with the potential to reshape cities.

The public sites where these struggles occur serve as evidence of an emerging but not yet fully comprehensible spatial and political order. In everyday space, differences between the domestic and the economic, the private and the public, and the economic and the political are blurring. Rather than constituting the failure of public space, change, multiplicity, and contestation may in fact constitute its very nature. In Los Angeles, the materialization of these new public spaces and activities, shaped by lived experience rather than built space, raises complex political questions about the meaning of economic participation and citizenship. By recognizing these struggles as the germ of an alternative development of democracy, we can begin to frame a new discourse of public space, one no longer preoccupied with loss but instead filled with possibility.

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James Holston, "Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship," PLANNING THEORY 13 (summer 1996): 30-50.