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INTERVIEW

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Finding Meaning in Public Spaces

LC Visiting Fellow **Peter G. Rowe** is a Professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and the author of *Civic Realism*, a book about public space. He tells Dinesh Naidu and Tan Pei En how public spaces aid self-actualisation, and why concerns about privately-owned public spaces, gated communities and gentrification may be overblown.

Are urban public spaces important?

I think the public realm of cities is very important. It goes back to "What do I get out of public space"? I live in New York. When I walk down the street, I don't necessarily feel super safe, and I'm likely to run into people, some of whom I know, some of whom I don't, and have encounters. Tourists are constantly asking for directions. I like that because it's a kind of encounter that I otherwise don't have in life.

That's the civilising aspect of it. When you encounter somebody you've never seen before, or you encounter difference and

you're challenged by that difference and you think about yourself vis-à-vis that difference. Or you're a little apprehensive. It's character building.

I'm a professor: I go to my class, I've got 40 students looking at me. It's not public. In public, you walk differently, or you adopt a different body language—you're more aware. I am, because sometimes it's not that safe. I'm not going to walk around in my pyjamas.

Is it about a sense of community?

Yes! Makes me feel as though I'm part of the human race, not the rat race!

Is this what some call the democratic or egalitarian function of public space?

No, it may not be. It has to do with self-actualisation, self-identity. It helps me tell a story about myself. How do I find meaning about myself from amongst other people, not necessarily my peers. That's one of the most important functions of good public spaces. I don't think you can have democracy without a reasonable amount of self-actualisation actually.

What to you is a successful public space?

Public space varies from one culture to another. In the West, we have certain ideas about public spaces: piazzas, plazas and boulevards, which don't exist in East Asia particularly. So how you assess the quality of public space depends how you define it, and your cultural setting.

Within an American or European circumstance, I think successful public spaces are those that are quite specific. And by that I mean in the design of them, they are making expressive references to particular events, or memorialising certain events or people. The idea of generalised public spaces doesn't work at all.

East Asian circumstances have other forms of public space, often in the form of widened streets or landings from

bridges. In Japan, thinking about the public spaces of Edo, I think about a bridge like Nihonbashi. It's where the bridge hits the ground, where it widens out—that's the public space where you'd see the troupes of clowns and so on performing. This will be the area people would look to for the kind of interaction amongst themselves, which we'd normally associate with a public space.

Why don't "generalised" spaces work?

Specificity is something that varies probably, culturally. Any artefact in the city, unless it has a very specific orientation or alignment, ends up in a fashion that is inarticulate to anybody. In other words, if I tried to satisfy everybody's claims vis-à-vis a public space, and don't favour some over another, I end up with a bad public space.

If you take Rome's Piazza Navona, or any major plazas in the Western sense, they have a very specific form, and a very specific expressive content, which you either buy into or you don't. Times Square is highly specific. It's iconic actually. Everyone knows what Times Square is—it's big, it's bold, it's flash.

When we talk about generalised spaces, which we tried to create during the height of participatory planning processes in the 60s and the 70s, you end up with mush.





“If I tried to satisfy everybody’s claims vis-à-vis a public space, and don’t favour some over another, I end up with a bad public space.”

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What about the open spaces between Singapore's public housing blocks?

Yeah. They have no character at all. That's the trouble. Modernist space between buildings or modernist space in general doesn't do very well on this count. It has to be infused with programme, very specific programme.

Does this mean history is important in public spaces?

No, not necessarily. Adriaan Geuze did this crazy plaza [Schouwburgplein] in Rotterdam, where it is raised up, has got big lights and is extremely specific! And it's very modern. The narrative is about performance space. It's set up that way, used that way probably once in a blue moon, but nevertheless it has that sort of character. It's got nothing to do with history.

So is something like Singapore's Padang, which may not be used often, a good public space?

It's fine, very specific, and historically entrenched. Kind of the hallowed ground of the Republic, used to celebrate National Day, when they fly over it.

The Padang is exactly the same idea as the Maidan in Mumbai. It can be used for cricket, it can be used for all kinds of things, and it is very multipurpose. But its specific purpose was not necessarily for nice reasons. The Maidan was for shooting guns at people, ultimately. But it has been adopted, because of its special characteristics, for lots of things.

You can have a well-made public space that is for a specific function that then, secondarily, can be taken over by other people for other purposes that may have nothing to do with the original function, and that's okay too. That's a very good public space.

01 Schouwburgplein, an elevated plaza with massive lights, is specifically designed for performances.

02 Cricket on Mumbai's Maidan, like Singapore's Padang, belies a darker colonial purpose.

Are privately-owned public spaces problematic, as some argue, because they are too surveilled or exclude some people?

No. Do you know why? Because the public spaces are all so highly surveilled! Rome has wonderful public space. You know how many CCTV cameras there are? The *carabinieri* [Italian police] can find anything! Public space can be as equally surveilled as private space!

In New York, privately-owned public spaces were put in as bonuses for developers. Some of them are absolutely wonderful! Midtown Manhattan is full of these. They have these little alleyways, running water, you can sit there with a book, and eat a sandwich. It introduced an atmospheric condition into the city, and in a manner where there were enough of them built, and with enough care, beauty, material quality and so forth to provide an alternative experience that never existed before. Some close at night, for various reasons. They don't want it to be vandalised, and they only put the gates in after they found that they were likely to be vandalised, but otherwise they are publicly accessible. You don't know they are not public parks, and they are, as far as the cops are concerned.

What about shopping malls as public spaces?

In the United States, courts have ruled that they may be private but they are considered as public spaces. So that settled that, *de jure* [by law].

The other issue is that the number of malls is declining substantially. And indeed, we seem to be going back to market-like spaces. They're very popular these days, particularly in America and in a number of other countries. So we're going in a loop from the market to the malls and big boxes and back to markets again. I think the big box and the mall were so narrowly prescribed towards consumption, as distinct from performance in public spaces whilst shopping. We're going back towards the market, but it's a market of a different kind where there are events. Spaces are arranged, devised and operated to allow events to occur. In most of the good markets, like at the Chelsea Market in New York, you go to buy stuff and eat there, but it also aligns itself for certain kinds of promotions, events and stuff like that.



01 Developer-provided seating and water features create a welcoming environment in Midtown Manhattan.

02 Events held at Chelsea Market include *Chelsea Nights*, a monthly concert series.



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“Gentrification probably exists ... but are we going to stand in front of all change? I don't think so.”

Are gated communities a problem for cities?

Gated communities get a bad reputation in circumstances where you're dealing with severe exclusion of one segment of the population by another. I don't think it's a problem in Singapore because you are fairly egalitarian. You have a lot of rich people, but they are over in houses somewhere. Eighty-five per cent of people live in public housing, which is all built more or less the same. Singapore may have one of the highest Gini indexes among developed countries, but it doesn't necessarily mean that every place on the higher Gini index registers itself spatially in the same way.

I just finished a book last fall titled *China's Urban Communities*. I did 100 or so interviews in cities with mainly middle class families in gated, fenced off homes. When you think about it historically, when you go through the *baojia* [stockaded village], and even the closed streets systems in Beijing, the Chinese have always lived with guarding walls around them. It's a cultural thing in the Sinic world. So they don't even think about it as problematic.

They think about it being problematic only because of the big blocks, and the fact that circulation is cut off. That's an issue, because it produces traffic patterns which are hyper congested: the block's too big and you can't move through them, and there isn't access for someone walking from here to here in the city. In other words, the circularity of the city is compromised.

Some criticise public space rejuvenation projects like the High Line for excluding lower-income groups, and causing gentrification. Is this a problem?

Well, gentrification probably exists. From a lot of empirical studies in the USA and in New York, it's exaggerated in terms of its exclusionary effect. So yes, it does happen but are we going to stand in front of all change? We're not going to reutilise old buildings that may merit being reused and brought back into service because it may cause some sort of disruption to the social-economic circumstances of places? I don't think so. I mean, change is change.

The High Line is a toy. It has received a lot of very clever, good publicity. But is it unique? These sorts of elevated railway



spaces exist elsewhere; Promenade Plantée in Paris is huge. Is it the best of its kind? No. Is it of the same sort of service to New Yorkers as, let's say, the West Side [Henry Hudson] Parkway? No! Not even close. But I don't think the High Line is problematic. It's just over exaggerated in terms of its value.

How do you think Singapore's public spaces fare? Do you have any advice for us?

Singapore is Singapore. It probably reaches its own conclusions about its public spaces and what defines public space.

I don't find Singapore bereft of vitality, or bereft of vibrant street scenes. If I walked down the food street in Chinatown, it's bustling with people, people are interacting with one another, and don't necessarily know each other.

I think one of the problems here though, is that Singapore is always trying to be like

somewhere else. Every time I come here, somebody's aping something about New York. You always seem to want to be like somewhere else. I would say, be happy to be yourselves, which is fine!

Singapore ought to be a little bit more introspective about what Singapore wants to be and not try to benchmark themselves constantly or copy what's going on elsewhere, or be concerned about that particularly. ●

Watch the interview here:



<https://youtu.be/QbUNe3hySY4>