The Publicly Private And The Privately Public

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In my practice I explore alternative methods of production and production sites for architecture and urban development. Public space, to me, is a constant venue for a sort of performative architecture, in which I look for experiences and knowledge found in interaction with others as well as with the architectural reality. By using architectural actions, installations and temporary spatial structures I examine the social implications of architecture and what happens when alternative or parallel social spaces are created.

I think a lot about what actually characterizes public space today and about what role the urban public space should fill. What happens when the division between public and private becomes less clear? How is the public space affected when gaps and slippages between these realms appear?

The terminology surrounding the public sphere seems to me to be quite limited and therefore impede the understanding of urban space. Often because the dichotomy of *public* vs. *private* is limping in its ability to describe the complexity of today's society. In discussions on architecture and urban development, in the media as well as internally among architects, there is also a vagueness about how the dichotomy is used as public and private are often defined in terms of spatial aspects in combination with various sociological models. In order to discuss and describe public life it feels necessary to find new terms that can be placed somewhere in-between the terms "public" and "private". During my search for such terms, I find in Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp (*In Search of New Public Domain*, NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2001) an interesting opening: the concept *parochialization* (from the Latin term *parochia* (congregation, parish).

Public space as a place of exchange

To understand how this concept can be used we also need a new vocabulary to define and find new forms of public space. Hajer and Reijndorp distinguish the broader *public space* from the specific *public domain*, attributed to certain characteristics:

"We define 'public domain' as those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs. (...) Public space is in essence a space that is freely accessible for everyone: public is the opposite of private. That is not to say that every public space is a public domain. Public domain entails additional requirements. We are interested in the question of which spaces are positively valued as places of shared experience by people from different backgrounds or with dissimilar interests. In principle, such places can also be found beyond the traditional urban space of streets, parks and squares. They can even be spaces that are not public in the strict sense, for example privately managed collective spaces that still function as public domain." (sid 11, *In Search of New Public Domain*, NAi Publishers, Rotterdam 2001)

I ask myself if the objectives of the city's public spaces, in fact, should always be to create *public domains*? In discussions on urban planning we often (in a routine manner) speak of a desire to create 'meetings' between people in the public realm, without further justification of how and why these meetings are important. Just as Hajer and Reijndorp, I believe it is more interesting to talk about an 'exchange' between different people. But how does this exchange take place and what do we seek to achieve with it? A public space, which meets the criteria of *public domain* and thus allows this *exchange* could involve:

- Different groups with different needs are using the same physical space for various purposes
- Conflict / cooperation in regards to how the space should be used
- Friction that challenges one to respond to the 'other'
- Overlap and exchange between different social groups

This may in turn allow for:

- Confrontation with other people and other views
- Social interaction outside ones own sphere
- New experiences, surprise and reflection
- Challenge / change in perspective
- Social intelligence, counter stereotyping and stigmatization

The definition of *public domain* expresses some of the qualities that are often said to be pursued by the public space, but not always achieved. Hajer and Reijndorp suggest we are limited by the ideas of public space in the form of middle-class urban ideals, which prevent us from seeing other forms of public life. The characteristics of *public domain* are not met if we choose only to copy *the form* from the public spaces of the traditional inner city without linking it to social functions. On the other hand there may be other forms of public spaces that meet these social characteristics. (For example, a public square being built in a pure residential area will not operate the same way as if it had been surrounded by public activity. However, the area around a kiosk in an otherwise sparsely developed area could possibly meet the functions of a public square.) If we seek to dissolve of other (restricting) dichotomies associated with urbanity, such as *inner city* vs. *suburb*, it also becomes important to find new expressions which meet the criteria for *public domain*, but which are not limited to the traditional form expressions derived from the inner city.

Claiming urban spaces

How can the public space in various types of urban situations become loaded with features that can create *public domain*? To explore this, I have in my practice tried to examine what happens when the boundary between private and public is no longer as strict. What happens when private domains become publicly accessible and the private is allowed seep into the public? When the Swedish architecture debate is talking about a private presence in the public sphere, it is often a commercially related presence (by advertising, malls or other places where you have to consume in order to reside). When economic assets set the rules, one can argue that the public space principle of universal access is threatened. Therefore all forms of private presence are often questioned and a 'neutral' public space is held up as ideal. But the definition of the private need not be reduced to correspond to only the privately owned and commercial. I'm interested in expanding on the description of the private influence on public space and its effects.

When I was working in Amsterdam, I was often struck by how people, even in central parts of the city, were using the public street outside of the home as an extension of the private room. Parts of the interior, such as tables and chairs are moved out temporarily when you want to drink coffee, eat dinner, read a book or just hang out for a while in the street outside your home. The private also puts an imprint in the public space by the residents decorating their facades, or using the streets for gardening and placement of plants in front of their entrance.

In Berlin it is rather common with smaller gardens, parks or plantations initiated by and managed privately by the residents in the neighborhood. These local parks are also used mainly by residents in the neighborhood, but are open to and frequented by outsiders, making them important elements in the city's urban landscape and *public domain*.

Hajer and Reijndorp use the term *parochialization* to describe various social groups claiming parts of the public space. *Parochial-* comes from, as already mentioned, the Latin term *parochia*: parish. It is difficult to find an exact equivalent in the Swedish language, but if you understand the parish as something related to a local context, one can perceive the notion as the presence of several smaller contexts (parishes), each of which is dominated by a specific group. I ask myself if this sort of private claiming would necessarily pose a threat to the public space in the same way as the commercial presence. Or should the ideals of an absolutely neutral 'meeting place' as a prerequisite for a fully democratic and non-segregated public space, in fact, be questioned? Can perhaps *parochialization* become an input into and support of a well-functioning *public domain*?

"Public domain as a sphere of exchange and confrontation in society presupposes the mutual proximity of different spheres much more than the fully shared use of one and the same space." (sid 89, *In Search of New Public Domain*, NAi Publishers, Rotterdam 2001)

Positive experiences of shared use of public space may well be based on contact with other groups and their domains:

"Anyone reflecting on personal 'public-domain experiences' will notice on closer inspection that the key experiences with shared use of space often involve entering the parochial domains of 'others'. Public domain is thus not so much a place as an experience. One experiences this space as public domain because one does not belong to that specific dominant group. (...) This entails an interesting paradox: the

dominance of a certain group does not preclude the experience of public domain, but rather produces it. (...) Successful public domain therefore requires a relatively strong group, without the position of that group leading to exclusion and repression." (sid 88 ff *In Search of New Public Domain*, NAi Publishers, Rotterdam 2001)

An important prerequisite for a positive impact of *parochialization* could hence be for outsiders not to experience an excluding or oppressing alienation. A certain amount of density between various *parochial domains* is also important. If they are isolated from each other, an overlap won't be made possible and neither will the friction that may lead to an exchange.

In Stockholm for example, it is difficult to identify any significant elements of *parochialization* in the public space. The streets are not characterized by any specific groups in attendance, but its neutral character is maintained and rarely challenged. The public realm works more as a space for friction-free flows than as places for interaction and exchange. The structure of Stockholm as a segregated enclave city, with separated satellites populated by relatively homogeneous groups, counteracts the experience of different but overlapping and connected *parochial domains*. Although there may be some *parochial domains*, it is lacking the mixture between / proximity to other groups that characterize *public domain*.

Parochialization as domestication

When the residents / locals of an area are perceived as being present in the street environment and significantly make use of 'their' local environment, a notion is created of you as an outsider or passer-by entering a group domain. This does not mean that the outsider is lacking access; the presence of a specific group is significant but without the public character of the area disappearing. I have taken interest in this type of *parochialization* operating at micro level, which implies a kind of domestication of street environment or neighborhood. The public-private situation in Amsterdam can be seen as an example of this, but there are also Swedish examples where a temporary expansion of the private domain, creates new conditions for the public environment. One example is people using the space in front of their terrace house or villa for private activities such as eating dinner, but with the possibility of contact with neighbors or passers-by in the public street space. However, such a temporary domestication of public space in central Stockholm, or its large scale housing suburbs, is rare. Perhaps this is due to the fact that here there are few zones in connection with the home that are in direct contact with the public and perceived as 'allowed' to claim? The neutral stairway creates a border between private and public, and thus a distance between the home and the street. The differences between how the street is used in Amsterdam's inner city and in the corresponding areas of Stockholm, could therefore have other causes than just cultural. Is perhaps a domestication of the street *supported* by the most frequent housing typologies in Amsterdam, where houses often have direct and easy contact with the street, for instance through many private entrances leading directly into the street environment? Will the social implications of the housing typologies affect how you can use the public space?

In the action *A public private dinner*, I make a specific, performative intervention to examine what *parochialization* as domestication could mean and what affects the conditions for its execution. By claiming the street space outside my own home (an apartment block in central Stockholm) for a private dinner, the strictly official nature of the street is temporarily suspended. The given context's (especially the housing typology's) impact on the conditions of domestication is illustrated when tables, chairs, china, food, and dinner guests are gradually transferred from the kitchen and the apartment's private zone, through the semi-private staircase and out into the public street environment. The dinner table was set up on the sidewalk outside the house and a group of invited dinner guests had dinner together while interacting with the surroundings.

Creating this kind of new (temporary) social spaces allows for me to introduce new ideas on how the city can be used. In this case it was about trying out new approaches to the division between public and private in the urban space. The action was an attempt to demonstrate the possibilities and also in some sense an encouragement to others to do the same. The experience of breaking an existing standard was evident, even though most passers-by and neighbors did not seem to (or were pretending not to?) care so much about the happening. The reactions consisted mainly of curious looks and friendly nods. The (apparent) absence of any major reaction immediately strengthened the notion that this form of micro-*parochialization* may not even need to be particularly far fetched. Should we more often defy the restrictions that the housing typologies

create and turn domestication into a habit? Although *A public private dinner* was primarily meant as a 'statement', it inevitably raises further questions. It would be interesting to move the action to other contexts to see if the surroundings were just as tolerant / uninterested. What are the limits of domestication? To what extent is it reasonable to domesticate? How important is the feeling of temporariness in order for this domestication to be accepted and to function?

I believe that more or less temporary private interventions in public space, in the form of *parochialization* at different scale levels, may contribute to the crossing and overlapping of different social spheres, and an exchange among themselves. When different groups are allowed to imprint the public, a multitude of subjective 'meanings' are created, with architecture as a surface of projection, thus *parochialization* can also help to recharge a public space with 'meaningfulness'. By allowing more slippages and overlaps between the different 'meanings' we will perhaps approach a greater understanding of what urban, public life today could mean and can perhaps find new opportunities for this, which the absolute, fully programmed city is unable to create.

Photographs on the following pages by Pål Bylund