The sociology of urban public spaces

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Abstract

This paper identifies, through a brief review of a variety of urban spaces in France and in the USA, the street, the shopping mall, the train station, the café, the square and the garden, two main questions facing designers and scholars of public space today: How to conceive spaces that are at once accessible to everyone and which also foster a sense of shared concern, the emergence of a local public sphere?

Keywords: Public space, public sphere, accessibility, communication, design of public space, France, USA.

1. Why are public spaces so important today in the practice of urban planning?

In the last 20 years, public spaces have acquired a renewed visibility in the French urban planning world (Billiard 1988; Jolé 2002). Briefly put, the general opinion is that public spaces are an essential ingredient to the sustainability of cities for political, social, economic, public health and biodiversity reasons (Banerjee, 2001). However, the dominating trend observed by many is one of shrinkage rather than expansion of the public realm. Diverse processes of privatization have given rise in the last half century to an array of city forms less and less amenable to the daily copresence of a diversity of urbanites. Suburbanization and highways, "theme park development", technologies of surveillance, shopping malls, gated communities and condominiums, all testify to an ongoing enclosure of the urban world (Low and Smith 2006). Accordingly, global indicators of segregation (class, race and ethnicity, gender) seem to show a worldwide growing separateness of the different categories of the population (United Nations Human Settlements Programme. 2004). Today, for a number of planners, public space thus appears as an important means to alleviate these ills while at the same time addressing emerging issues such as the imperative of sustainable development and social justice. This paper proposes to review the diverse movements that contribute to the renewed interest in public space.

1.1. What is public space?

In urban planning, public space has historically been described as "open space", meaning the streets, parks and recreation areas, plazas and other publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces, as opposed to the private domain of housing and work. However, the recent evolutions of the forms of urban settlement and the growing number and variety of semi-public spaces managed by private-public or entirely private partnerships questions this notion inherited from a legal perspective. Somehow today, public space needs to be understood as different from the public domain of the state and its subdivisions, but rather as a space accessible to the public. In terms of law, it is perhaps closer to the older concept of the "commons", although we have to recognize that today, at least in the western world, every bit of land is now regulated by the laws of property making it difficult to consider anything as common without encountering an entitled owner and manager (Blackmar 2006).

In fact, the notion of public space is perhaps better captured by the social sciences. Here two separate conceptions have been until now leading an almost independent existence. In political philosophy, the concept of the public has drawn an important inspiration from the notions of the Greek agora and the Roman forum, taken as ideal models of public arenas where the public affairs of the city are discussed among an assembly of equal citizens. For Hannah Arendt (1958), our western civilizations have only gone down since this golden age of democracy. However, for Jürgen Habermas (1989) building on Immanuel Kant's work, forums of public discussion have re-emerged in the 18th century under the guise of the bourgeois salons, thus re-enacting a public sphere, of course less situated in space than the agora, but able to question and challenge the actions of the monarchs and the state. However, this

enlightened democracy doesn't rest on the physical public spaces of the city. It is contained in private meeting rooms. The only foray into publicly accessible space has been through the cafes and, more recently, on the more visible but still placeless pages of the Internet. Can gathering places, from plazas to cafés, be considered public according to this definition?

Sociology has paid more attention to the physical venues of the city and the daily interactions of the citizenry. More than the possibility for a debate or a discourse, public space is measured according to its accessibility, both physical and psychological (Joseph 1998). This notion enlarges significantly the scope of places considered public to any space accessible to individuals, provided access is not based on some membership. Thus, in addition to the classic spaces, such as streets and parks, a vast array of spaces of mobility, such as transportation facilities (train and subway stations, airports, highways, parking lots) or spaces of mass consumption (shopping malls for the most part) can be analyzed according the criterion of sociology. Accessibility is what guarantees the free circulation of persons and goods. It is also what allows the emergence of collective representations wherefrom images of the city are produced.

The challenge today for planners and researchers on public space, lies mostly in the difficult encounter of these two main visions of public space defended by the social sciences: the public sphere and the publicly accessible spaces. The first one can be summed up by the concept of the conversation and debate whereas the second one is best said as a question of mobility. The first one raises the important and ever pressing question of participative democracy, whereas the second one lends more attention to the idea of individual liberties, notably under the form of a "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1968; Mitchell 2003). Both of these approaches also touch upon the question of the form of the city and its representations both for inhabitants and visitors, in terms of a quality of life, but also in the realm of entrepreneurship and city management, under the pressure of urban competition.

2. The challenges of public space for urban planning

After this very broad overview of the scope of spaces and disciplines involved in the study of public space, I propose to review several questions raised by distinct forms of public spaces in France and in the USA: the street, the commercial center, the café and the square, the train station, and finally, the park. The "street" will help us examine the relationship between public space and the form of the city. Commercial centers raise the question of accessibility and will help us discuss the limits of public spaces managed by private owners. With train stations we will explore the link between mobility and public space. The café and the square will illustrate two specific forms of communication, the conversation and the demonstration, that will link the political and philosophical dimensions of public space with the field of planning. Finally, we will use parks to discuss design projects as "public problems" and the role of citizens' participation in the design of the city.

2.1. Public space and city form, the return to the street

Probably one of the most enduring symbols of public space, the street has been a consistent object of attention of architects and planners ever since the recognized failures of the politics of post war reconstruction. Jane Jacobs (1961), a New York City community activist was among the first critics of modernist architecture and planning. Writing about her neighbourhood, Greenwich Village in Manhattan, she insisted on the importance of the built environment in the social well being of the area. She identified four criteria that architects and planners should consider crucial. Buildings should show a mix of primary uses; the built blocks should be small and they should represent a diversity of ages; there should be a high concentration of population. The aim of these was to help the city retain the diversity that makes it liveable for everybody. Incidentally, they also embody a specific built form that can be interpreted as a "return to the street" and the dense city form, as opposed to the "open spaces" of modern development, or the endless and homogenous repetition of suburban housing tracts best exemplified by Levittown in Long Island, in the Eastern suburbs of New York. Jacobs' book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was published in 1961 and stands as a pioneer work for architects and planers who advocate for better public spaces today, meaning spaces that foster en enjoyable social order. It wasn't

however until several decades later that her call was followed by practitioners.

At the same time Jane Jacobs was insisting on the important consequences that the design of public space had on the social order of communities, Kevin Lynch, another American, established a link between the built form of the city and the representations that people have of their environment. In his study of people finding their way in Boston, he established a list of five important elements that helped individuals build their "image of the city" (Joseph 1998; Lynch 1960): paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. Paths, the first element, represent the streets, sidewalks and other spaces of circulation. It not only shapes perception but also constitutes the very realm from which those perceptions are built. This study thus showed that public space was the principal element from which people derive their representations of a city. It wasn't however until later on that municipal administrations started to realize the potential that this knowledge represented in a context of national and international competition for investment, inhabitants and tourists.

In Europe, another movement started in the 1960s in Italy raising the question of the compatibility of urban preservation with urban development. The basic argument developed, notably at the city of Bologna, a communist municipality, was that rather than building new dwellings at the periphery to house the poor populations of the city center and demolish the old housing stock, planners should identify the connections that bring together this working class and its built environment. Once these were understood, a process of renovation that preserved constructions as much as possible was implemented with a large participation of the inhabitants. One of the chief problems in the old center was the lack of open spaces that had been filled up over time. Cervellati (1981) showed that urban preservation and renovation could not only re-house most of the inhabitants of Bologna, but also restitute a range of open spaces, from private courtyard to public spaces. These spaces were very different from the open spaces of suburban housing projects supposed to welcome the displaced residents of the city. They looked like streets, plazas and courtyards, but in their essence, they were thought of as a projection in space of a model of social organization that brought together a built landscape and its way of life, thus avoiding the risks of museification and gentrification, so common today in western cities.

In France, the 'return to the street' was not effective until the 1980s when the laws of decentralization gave city mayors control over urban development. Until then, the design of public spaces had been the exclusive domain of traffic engineers who where mostly concerned with the management of automobile flow. This reshuffling of powers prompted a high number of projects aimed at renovating urban centers and initiated the competition between cities to attract companies and inhabitants. The time elapsed since the 60s allowed the three aspects of public space mentioned above to coalesce in an integrated practice taking into account the use of space (Jacobs), the image of neighbourhoods (Lynch) and preservation. One of the main arguments, developed by planners and elected politicians, is the improvement of "quality of life". This trend gave rise to an urban design movement called the 'projet urbain.' The architect Christian Devillers (1994) coined one of its main mottos in France: "To design is to give back space to uses." Contained in this formula is the idea that public spaces should be busy trough an ability to accommodate various kinds of functions. Mostly carried by architects under the patronage of the ministry of equipment and housing, the 'projet urbain' proposes a reinterpretation of the classic 19th century city form under the shape of the block and the street. The difference with the Italian movement lies in a specific attention to urban composition, much in line with the tradition of the Beaux-Arts. It identifies the street and road pattern as the most perennial city feature, more so than the lot structure or the built environment. This movement thus considers public space as a crucial element in urban design as a generator of the built form and not a leftover of development. Interestingly, it is in the relationship between the role of circulation and the role of distribution of access to buildings that the proportions of a harmonious street must be found. The projet urbain thus establishes a formal hierarchy between the avenues, boulevards, streets, alleyways, passages and squares that constitute a basic vocabulary of urban design (Mangin and Panerai 1999). Many projets urbains have taken place in previous industrial areas and have transformed them into new neighbourhoods. In Paris, the *ZAC de Bercy* is often presented as one of the most successful examples, inscribed in the fabric of the city through a street pattern that respects its history (Chadoin, Godier and Tapie 2000). The question remains, however, if these designs

actually preserve, along with a city form, a diversity embedded in the history of the city, or if they contribute to an ongoing and now well documented tendency towards gentrification (Bidou-Zachariasen, Nicolas and d'Arc 2003; Smith 1996).

3.1. The street goes to the suburbs

Today in Europe and the USA, the challenge of planning lies not so much in the old city centers, where space is scarce, but rather in suburban areas submitted to rapid development and where public authorities have less control over its form. In 1991, Joel Gareau (1991), an American journalist, published a book that sounded like a fatalistic account of the new cities emerging in suburban areas He called them 'edge cities.' Their main characteristic was that they were entirely dependent on car traffic and organized according to a loose functional geographic division. Nowhere in these new cities could one find a landscape approaching the street or a square, rather, Gareau says, "In edge city, about the closest thing you find to a public space - where just about anybody can go- is the parking lot." (p. 52)

American designers have tried to react to the ills of suburbanization: waste of space, car dependency and lack of socialization (Putnam 2000). But old cities suffer from a bad reputation as a dangerous environment. Thus, rather than renovate older urban wastelands and follow Jane Jacobs' call for the practice of "infill", developers have preferred to take their projects to the suburbs and recreate there the community life denied both in the city centers and suburban tract developments. The trend has taken two main forms that are worth distinguishing for the types of public spaces that they generate: gated communities and New Urbanism.

On the one hand, a large amount of the new housing production is marketed as safe havens protected from outside dangers. They are called gated communities (Blakely and Snyder 1997). They are private housing developments built inside a wall and guarded by private security. Proof of ID must be shown at the gate. These developments are thought of as the ultimate privatization of the urban realm. Indeed, the streets, or rather the roads, for these settlements are all car-oriented, belong to the owners' association. Gated communities originally started as enclaves for the elderly and the rich. They thus embodied a sense of community located in space that could make them look like villages. However, researchers have shown that the feeling of fear pervades social relations even within the community (Low 2003). Thus social ties are often restricted to a minimum. Gated communities seem also to reinforce in their inhabitants the wariness towards the outside world. They tend to limit their outings to places that are also considered socially homogenous such as upper-class shopping malls.

The other trend is called "New Urbanism" by its proponents (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 2000). The project is explicitly to build an environment that fosters community bonding and limits urban sprawl. One of the main ideas is that inhabitants should walk to shop and work as much as possible and thus transform the streets and squares into places of neighbourly sociability, while saving energy. New Urbanism is the bringing together of both the American dream of the individual house and the need for community and imperatives of sustainable development. The most common critic however is that, despite the effort, very few inhabitants work within walking or even biking distance of their house. In fact, a study has shown that car use in these developments can be even higher than in the new cities of the 60's (Forsyth 2002). Consequently, rather than addressing the ills of suburbanization, New Urbanism contributes to the sprawl that it is trying to limit. Another consequence is that the streets of these villages are not as lively as they should. They are only rarely visited by strangers and transformed into exclusive spaces.

These trends have had an interesting influence on French urban planning. They serve as an inspiration towards more security and more community that can be observed in new and old housing developments (Legoix 2006). In suburban housing projects, public space is often cut into small parts and partly privatized as individual yards and gardens. Circulation paths are narrowed down to well recognizable forms such as the street or the alleyway (CERTU 2007). But gated communities and New Urbanism point at a misunderstanding of the dual social dimensions of public space. By only attempting to recreate the community dimensions, they overlook the urbanity of public space. The street is not only an object representative of urban form and tradition; it is

also a symbol of social relations made out of a mix of local ties and anonymous relations. The first idea evokes the shared space of a community and is often referred to with the word "conviviality", whereas the second talks about access to anybody and a civil or respectful copresence. It is mostly this first aspect of public space that designers have chosen to adopt today in order to repel the "placeless" developments of suburbia or of housing projects (Shaftoe 2008). As a consequence, the design has been often guided by symbolic representations of a supposedly lost urban life best exemplified by the concept of the "urban village" or the "downtown" (Isenberg 2004). If in dense cities, villages can be urban, it is more difficult in suburban areas. This trend thus marks a reinforcement of the community dimensions of neighbourhoods that could be considered independent fragments of the city. Are the streets still the epitome of public space?

4.1. Public space and sociability, commercial centers as the new public spaces

Some have decided to take Gareau's claim seriously and to verify if commercial centers and their parking lots are the new public spaces of the suburban western city. In the US, this critic has been mostly carried out by sociologists who see in the "mallification of America" a loss of authentic spaces (Hannigan 1998; Zukin 1995). Surveillance and technologies of control in commercial centers sort the population and force them to behave in a way that is all oriented toward a consumerism not conducive to encounters and debate (Lofland 1998). The public sphere dimension is thus excluded from these environments. However, in suburban territories dominated by car traffic, commercial centers still represent some of the most accessible spaces for a wide variety of people. Despite control by private guards, access is usually granted to everybody, with the notable exception of homeless, drunken persons and beggars. We will return the question that this exclusion raises.

According to Erving Goffman (1971), public spaces are the realm of unfocussed interactions between anonymous strangers. The chief rule is one of "civil inattention," which helps people grant one another the right to be present and go about their own business. Inattention is not complete indifference, as it requires a set of rules aimed at easing interactions. Indeed, strangers have to cooperate in order to walk and not bump in one another. This is what Lyn Lofland (1998) calls "cooperative motility." In addition, passers-by are also available, under certain circumstances for a "restrained helpfulness", such as giving the time or directions. They are also engaged in what she calls an "audience role prominence" which sets up the people as spectator of the urban scene, fulfilling the condition of public visibility necessary for a public space. According to these criterions, parking lots and galleries of commercial centers can be considered public. Samuel Bordreuil (2000), a French sociologist, studied unfocussed interactions in a large shopping mall near Marseille, France, and found that basically the same rules of conduct apply as in the more classic streets. Regular patrons of stores and their workers also sometimes managed to establish familiar relations, especially in the cafes and restaurants.

Elijah Anderson (1999; 2004), working in the Reading indoor market of Philadelphia noticed that the commercial atmosphere of the place established a basic equality among shoppers that was able to restrain the usual racial judgments observed on the city streets and forced everybody to a cosmopolitan civility that helped people revise their own prejudice. Watching the scene while retaining your judgement is one of the characteristics that make public space an "environment for social learning" and notably push one to behave civilly toward diversity. This "folk ethnography" is a competence that individuals learn in the most diverse spaces of the city and that helps them get along.

The exclusion of "undesirables" from commercial centers is the limit to their complete status of public space. If the diversity that people learn to interact with is controlled, "sanitized" and devoid of any risk of unsettling encounters, the learning and civility that is produced is necessarily contained within a restricted definition of who the members of society are. More and more, commercial centers cater to specific income brackets, which means that a class selection operates seamlessly to separate the population and reproduce in the commercial realm the divisions already observed in the residential one. So where are the true public spaces?

5.1. Public space, public service and mobility: train stations and right to the city

Public transportation in France is more and more successful in attracting users. However, the capacities are limited and traffic is reaching its maximum. Policy discussions see well the economic interest in developing the transportation infrastructure. Oil can be saved and pollution can be drastically reduced. They see less well how the public spaces of transportation are an important factor in regulating both the form of the city and its social order, two aspects of public space already evoked. Are they true public spaces?

Regarding city form, train and subway stations are powerful tools of urban development. They foster a high density of housing and commercial use in their immediate vicinity and thus contribute to the emergence of streets that are more trafficked than the ones in purely residential developments, thanks to a diversity of functions and passers-by. Unfortunately, stations are not numerous enough to counter the sprawl of urban areas, further and further away form the dense city centers. In fact, recent studies even suggest that the combination of stations and parking lots contributes to the growth of suburban areas. It seems that only a dense network of public transportation, such as a subway system combined with an efficient bus network can guarantee economies of energy and offer public spaces accessible to all.

On the social front, it seems that if we consider accessibility the main and sine qua non criterion, few spaces remain truly open to everybody. Recently, train stations and their immediate environment gained a new visibility as the last accessible spaces. Of course, subway and train tickets are not free. However, in addition to travelers, several categories of users that often find it difficult to take place elsewhere, such as homeless people or undocumented migrants use the stations. These environments thus constitute good learning grounds for travelers who need to cope with a diverse population and acquire the skills to navigate complex social and spatial realms. They are truly cosmopolitan. In recent years, a number of stations in France have been built or renovated and integrate shops, cafes and restaurants adding a commercial dimension that brings them closer to the malls previously mentioned while not being as selective.

In France, The SNCF (National train company) and the RATP (Paris Subway Company), launched in the 1990s an ambitious research program aimed at exploring the role that train stations play in the social organization of the city. This program was parallel to a renovation program that aimed at opening the stations onto their urban surroundings and conversely let the city in. Gare du Nord (Northern Station) in Paris, was studied by a team of researchers lead by Isaac Joseph (Joseph et al. 1995), the most prominent French theoretician on public space and transportation. They showed that accessibility was not only dependent on the material conditions, such as pricing and the physical layout of the stations, but also on the mobility skills of citizens. Physical handicaps (wheelchairs, strollers…) combine with mental biases and render certain paths not only unusable but also invisible for many. This research contributed to develop in France an ecological perspective on public space. It means that accessibility is a combination of individual abilities with an environment's spatial organization. The interaction can be described as "affordances" that people are able or not to pick up for use in a course of action (Gibson 1979). This theory has had direct consequences for the most visibly handicapped populations whose access to the city was greatly improved by a policy of adaptation of public spaces to wheelchairs, such as the construction of ramps, elevators, etc. It also raised questions for individuals whose abilities are less obviously determined. Strangers who do not speak local languages have a hard time reading signs or understanding public announcements. Is it possible that they refrain from using the subway? In the same way, is it possible that specific people find the subway too dangerous, either because of the possibility of accidents or the fear of mugging? If this is so, are spaces of transportation still representative of the general population of a city?

Design, maintenance and security are all aspects of train stations that are under the responsibility of public administrations. Accessibility thus raises another question. Should public space be conceived as a public service? Some scholars go further and equate public space with a "right to the city." This expression was originally circulated by French philosopher Henry Lefebvre (1968) who was advocating for a better control of inhabitants over the production of their own daily spaces. Recently the right to the city has taken a more

prosaic dimension focused on the sheer physical possibility of accessing and remaining in certain spaces by specific categories of the population. Don Mitchell (2003), an American scholar, has shown how the design and maintenance of numerous city centers reclaimed by business districts are often aimed at keeping away unsightly presences. Homeless persons, but also migrants, are thus denied the last place available to sleep. This points at a control of space that, by limiting physical bodily presence, restricts the very possibility of being anywhere in the city, the possibility of being anybody at all. On the other hand, spaces of mass traffic still generally offer that right in its dual dimension. They are the means of transportation that take people from point A to point B and thus guarantee them the freedom to circulate in order to satisfy needs. They are also the material spaces of copresence that let people take place and thus display a full persona in a collective environment.

Perhaps, train stations are the exact opposite of the community. They are not locales for political discussion because they are not places to stop and rest. They may give urbanites a good view of who their fellow denizens are but are they the best places to voice concerns?

6.1. Public space and democracy, plazas and cafes, respite and communications

Two other public spaces could be a better embodiment of the communicative function of public space. The café, as a place of encounter, conversation and debate, and the square as a place of political gatherings, rallies and demonstrations.

The café was already mentioned as a heritage of the enlightment, a place of socialization freed from the constraints of the work place or the tyrannies of home (Sennett 1970). It is, according to Oldenburg (1989), a "third place," where people can be in a familiar environment, open to the street and regulated by social norms not entirely dominated by a community. Recently, in urban planning, cafes and restaurants have been valued as an asset to animate public space. Terraces notably bring to the sidewalk a conviviality that is taken as a measure of success of a public space. Why is it so? One obvious answer is that terraces are signs of economic vitality. They offer respite and refreshments to people on their way and thus display an interest in a neighbourhood by both investors and patrons, which attracts other stores and raises real estate values or helps resist disinvestment. Another answer is that cafes manage to bring together the community dimension and the anonymous dimension of the city. They are spaces where to talk about private and public matters and they are accessible to anybody. They can become community centers for special event and benefit from occasional patrons. As places of discussion, cafes are regulated by the principle of "publicity" that according to Habermas (1989) generates a "public sphere". It means that the rhetoric used by discussants must be understandable and acceptable even by clients who do not necessarily identify with the speaker. Cafes can thus become a learning ground for politics, a place where community activists improve their ability to address a public.

The Square, also a place of gathering, does not work in the same way. Rather than a discussion, the main communicative tool is the spectacle, either in the form of a formal actor/audience format, such as when a concert or a cultural event takes place, or in the form of a political demonstration for all to see in the city and sometimes in the nation. Artists and street vendors often work the squares of the city. They enrich the spectacle, offer basic food and, by the same token, transform themselves in public characters who watch over the street (Tonnelat 2007). Can they be considered public servants in the same way as public transportation workers?

Demonstrations often waiver, in the writings of scholars, between crowds and publics (Park 1972; Tarde 1901). As crowds, they are viewed as an indistinct and often unpredictable mass driven by contagious rumours. As publics however, they come to represent a body of individuals brought together not only by a shared and spreading concern, but also by a mutual visibility itself graspable and distributed by the media. The demonstration is thus one of the best illustrations of the encounter of the "public sphere" (in the form of the media) and the accessible public space. It is indeed the very visibility of groups of people in a symbolic space that becomes the event, which is then distributed by the media. Not the other way around. In other words, the "public sphere" represented by the Internet, newspaper and television is all the more efficient that there is already a conjunction between a physical space and a cultural or political event that can be put

into images and circulated (Wolton 1992). As places of expression of dissent, public squares, especially historic places, are often heavily controlled by police and design strategies that aim at reducing the possibility of gathering or crowding (Low 2000) or that tend to favour cultural events over political ones.

7.1. Public space and participation, urban parks as design projects

Demonstrations illustrate contentious ways for a public to express itself, especially when other places of discussion and negotiation are unavailable. But public space can also be viewed in a more cooperative way as a means to bring together, at the local scale, inhabitants, users, managers and elected officials around the discussion of specific problems. Public parks, for example, are in high demand in urban environment. They embody the presence of nature in the city. They offer respite from the daily agitation. They encourage the practice of sports and recreation. Less well known is the fact that parks are places of heavy socialization (Jolé 2005). In fact, less than a retreat away from the crowds, parks are often places were social contacts are numerous both among regulars and among occasional visitors. This social dimension of parks makes us consider that, just like the café, they are usually very local places, used and occupied by inhabitants of surroundings blocks. But more so than cafes, they are also open to anybody, from poor to rich, from inhabitant to visitor. Users display in parks an ability to distribute and share space that does not only depend on the work of public employees to enforce civic rules. Users show definite skills at conflict resolution, skills at using or not using design features in ways they were conceived for, skills at negotiating with the administration about the functioning of the park (hours, cleanliness, radios…) (Low 2005). These observations make us say that parks are already co-managed by users and employees. Could these skills be used to improve the design of public gardens? Recently, the city of Paris commissioned a team of landscape architects to design a new 4 hectares park in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. Wary about the difficult social situation of the neighborhood (poverty, crowdedness, drug dealing…), it asked that a team of sociologists help the designers in order to make sure that the new park would not suffer from degradations and violence after its opening. As members of the team, we tried, my colleague, Yann Renaud and I, to identify the conflicts that inhabitants were wary about and to set up discussion groups to prepare for their resolution (Renaud and Tonnelat 2008). This work was based on uses already observed in other parks and in the previous wasteland and on the skills that they implied (Grosjean and Thibaud 2001). The group discussions were aimed at recognizing these skills and transforming them into inputs for the design project and the management of the park. This experience is only one among others but it shows that a public space can also emerge as a public question via its design and maintenance, which largely determine its accessibility. Thus a way to bring together the communicative and the spatial dimension of public sphere is not only through contentious uses of space but through an attention to public space as a public service that can be thought of as a collective project by inhabitants and administrators alike (Dewey 1954).

3. Conclusion

Public Spaces encompass a wide array of spaces, from old historic centers to suburban developments. Their form, uses and maintenance raise a host of important questions regarding urban planning from the local to the metropolitan scale. If they are considered today as assets for urban renewal and new developments – economic incentives, public health and well-being, image of the city, mobility, conviviality – our opinion is that the need and the success of public space is before anything else predetermined by its ability to bring together two main and necessary quality upon which all the rest depends: accessibility and communication. Of course, as we have seen, each of these criterions can be declined in various degrees, from exclusive to open to all, and from communitarian to anonymous. It is in the ability of elected officials, designers, managers and users that the right dosage resides and that larger issues can be collectively addressed.

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