

## TEARING DOWN THE STATUES, BUILDING UP THE VALUES DISCREPANCY BETWEEN BUILT AND LIVED ENVIRONMENT

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In light of the recent iconoclastic events including the removal of Confederate and Colonialist statues across the United States of America, and newly in Canada as well, one has to ask what role public spaces have in our lives and what values and emotions they pass onto society. How do images of past values contribute to building up the future ones? Or more precisely what is the relation between the built environment and a lived one?

In this paper, I am dealing with questions concerning the ethics of public space. One of my favorite definitions of this term I found so far is the one given by Richard Sennet in his book *Building and dwelling: Ethics for the City* (2018). He claims that ethics of public spaces can be perceived as a way the city deals with cultural differences. (p. 121) Those differences appear within the presence of others, which I consider the essence of public spaces. Sennet points to the influence of others (e.g., all participants of public spaces) in the context of a built environment of the city. And precisely this connection between “city’s built forms and its way of life” (Sennet, p. 121) will play a central role in this paper. My argument stems from the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, a thinker who is concerned with the notion of spatiality. She claims that public spaces could be defined as a place where citizens can be heard and seen by others. But in order to do so, the condition of having a place is necessary. Thus, as a first step I elaborate on the question, which I outlined as follows: what does it mean to have a place to appear?

Arendt describes our relation to a certain location as urgent, as something that partly defined us and plays a major role within the constitution of our identities. She speaks about the threat of rootlessness, about losing one’s home or occupation, statelessness and about the earth and world alienation. Mainly in *We refugees* (1994) and *on the origins of totalitarianism* (1951) she described the state of liminality, when by losing occupation we also lack social bonds, status, community, and

things we previously took for granted. She refers to real tangible places one can lose, like a home, and she reflects about the consequences of its possible loss. However, in the same way, she contemplates that we can lose the space of appearance, although it is not a tangible material space, but it is a space created by our own actions. In that sense, there is a difference for her between the public realm and space of appearance. The public realm as a durable built environment and space of appearance as an intangible non-permanent space created by our actions.

This distinction reveals a compelling paradox that can be spotted within public spaces, as an intersection of those two concepts, concerning the question of invisibility. When we refer to someone as invisible it is not caused by the impossibility of entering the public realm. We all (more or less) have the same access to enter<sup>1</sup> a street, a square or a park but what is at stake in the case of invisibility is the space of appearance, which is created by one's action. On that account Judith Butler points out that "the street cannot be taken for granted as the space of appearance, to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, the space of politics, since there is, as we know, a struggle to establish that very ground." (Butler, 2016, p. 13) Only within this appearance, we are capable of doing an action as an act of new beginning. But by not being heard we could not become a part of change or new beginnings and thus we are prevented from forming the reality. In that way those who are invisible, by not being heard, cease to exist. They live within the liminality of being born and recognized as citizens. In that manner Arendt draws from her own experiences and memories, when she, due to Nazi regime, lost her home, her friends, as well as the space of appearance. In the essay, *We refugees* (1994) she describes the confusion after losing a political, legal, and social status. She claims that: "Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social bounds are cut off." (p. 116)

What is still unclear from her writing is the way how (or whether) those two concepts, material space (as a public realm) and space of appearance (as a space created by action) relate to each other. I assume that although they differ in their definitions, they are not meant to be opposite. On that account, I would agree with Judith Butler (2016) as she says, "Arendt clearly presumes that the material conditions for gathering are separate from any particular space of appearance. But if politics is oriented toward the making and preserving of such conditions, then it seems that the space of appearance is not ever fully separable from questions of infrastructure and architecture." (pp. 12-13) This discrepancy, I claim, could be spotted in the role of

monuments. On the one hand, they are part of the built environment, on the other hand, they are wearers of certain values, which they place toward the public. To dig deeper into its role I consider it necessary to clarify what role public spaces (on its intangible level as described by Arendt) plays in our life.

The central notion that James Mensch connects with public spaces in his paper called *Public Space* (2007) is a public freedom. The way to understand and to live public freedom is to relate to the world and by words and deeds become part of public spaces, as a combination of space of appearance and the public realm, thus the place, where one could be heard and become visible to others. The condition of others is thus necessarily the same as the fact that "such appearance, however, requires public space." (Mensch, p. 1) So to speak, to acquire public freedom is possible only within the presence of others, because within public spaces, freedom does not depend on us but on each other. Encounters with others limit me in the same way they limit them. According to Arendt the freedom that I receive from others goes beyond my comprehension, it is thus mine yet unknown freedom. It is something that could not be planned, only assumed. When one enters the public realm one can never be sure which range of freedom others will give one. By one's behavior the limits of public freedom could be tested and enlarged. "Public freedom, in other words, is both the result and the cause of individual freedom." (Mensch, p.7) I propose that the public spaces could be considered a place where one acquires and encounters a sense of mutual relations, a space where the edges of one's definition of freedom are abraded and confronted with others and their sense, because each of the participants brings a different thing into the shared world. In public spaces, we learn how to deal with others and what our rights and responsibilities are.

What I described above is the role of public spaces in the formation of our sense of public freedom. Public spaces play an important role within our encounters with others and help us to acquire a better understanding and perception of plurality. In the first part of my essay I mostly talked about intangible phenomena related to public space such as values and interests. In any way, the aim of this paper is to elaborate on the connection between those two parts of which public space consists of - namely the "life within" and "the built form of it". The former I defined above and the role of the latter I am going to frame by the following question: What role do monuments and public art play in our lives and how do they shape and influence our identities and the ways we perceive the world?

The art within public spaces communicates

1. I refer to a current situation within western democratic society. Of course I can point to the situation in Afghanistan, where women were physically banned from the public realm, when the Taliban took over the power and established a new non-democratic regime. Or as another example could be used the inaccessibility of places by certain groups of people due to some material barriers. Such as high curbs, which can prevent people on wheelchairs or parents with baby-carriage from its access. However, for the purposes of my work I consider it more fruitful to be concerned about the discrepancy between this intangible and tangible notion of space as proposed by Arendt.

with us and has a direct impact on our lives. As Michael de Certeau (1984) describes, there exists a conditioned relation between our behavior and identities and the space we live in. Certeau points out that often the citizens take the shape of public spaces as an inevitable truth as rigid surroundings with no possibility to change. He is asking what we as citizens do with a given thing, e.g. a street, public art or a square etc. By this statement he is wondering what emotions or behavior the built environment passes onto us. (p.12) What I see as problematic in this process is the role of monuments and commemorative art in terms of its effects on those who visit the public space. I assume that we are able to judge the art within public space according to certain aesthetic categories - it is beautiful and I like it, or it is ugly and I do not like it. But are we aware of other effects that public space has on our individual and public life? Within this part of the paper I have borrowed ideas of Sandra Shapshay, who is working thoughtfully with a question of commemorative art within public spaces.

“The purpose of any work of art (schöne Kunst), for Kant (as well as for Danto) is to embody ideas, particularly for Kant, moral ideas, and to spark a free play with these ideas.” (Shapshay, 2021). I would claim that one does not put as much effort into discussing the political and moral impact of monuments when one speaks about the role of art within public spaces. Shapshay aptly points out that this impact got almost no attention from aestheticians and she aims to establish a category called monumental where the aesthetician and political influence appear as intertwined phenomena. She defines the “monumental” as follows: “monument—that is, a work of public, commemorative art—succeeds in being monumental (or eliciting a “monumental response” in a spectator) when that spectator:

*. feels a combination of awe (feeling small and humbled in the presence of something great) and ennoblement (by feeling in some way connected/unified with that great thing or what it represents) and*

*. reflects at least in part favorably upon the intended moral and political lesson embodied in the public, commemorative art.” (Shapshay, 2021)*

Power of monuments lies, according to Shapshay, first in “their political/ideological/moral content and, second, in their essentially public address.” (Shapshay, 2021). I agree with Shapshay’s thoughts, however, additionally I would like to point out the problem of exposing individual values or

interest in favor of the public. E.g. I perceive monuments, as defined above, as promoting one specific value in favor of plurality of interests which appear within public spaces. Therefore, one has to ask whether by placing the monument within public spaces the notion of public freedom remains secured. As defined above public spaces should provide us with the sense of public freedom, however within the role of the statues this fragile balance could be easily disrupted. In the case of monuments, we could speak about spatial thinking as a way of political thinking. As Shapshay claims in her article: “Monuments are prime examples of works of art that aim to express specifically political ideas; for Wolterstorff their essential social function is to honor someone, some group or some ideal, whereas for Carroll their essential social function is to “commemorate the past for the present—to recall to mind exemplary events and persons and to limn their significance to the ongoing culture.” (Shapshay, 2021).

To enter public space, to appear and reveal oneself to the others is according to Hannah Arendt a way citizens could become a part of a political world. The same way the monuments appear (as the built environment) and thus became a part of the common shared world, which Arendt calls the public realm. Although they do not speak and act, I assume that they still have a strong impact on our perception of space and in the Shapshay’s category “monumental” I see a way to better and more complexly grasp the role of public art and find new angles of moral views for the monuments and statues that surround us.

On that ground one could gain a better understanding of recent civic movements, which ended up by removal of certain statues around the world as well. Voices of those, who have not been heard for a long time, of those who have been invisible, united and appeared. They (a certain group of people) did not lose their right to use the public realm *per se*, however what this conflict reveals is a fact that they have lost a right for public freedom within them by limiting their spaces of appearance. This conflict discloses that the role of a statue, which we took as a granted, is something that has to be evaluated more carefully from a moral standpoint of public freedom and shared values.

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.” (Harvey, 2008)

David Harvey reflects the mutual relations between individuals, society and the city. The task does not lie in the mere statement, I as an individual have access to these places, but more in the question if everyone has the same possibility to use and participate. His thoughts support an active part,

the *vita activa* in Arendt's words, of using the town, the fact that we are capable of participation and creation of a city life. Reading Arendt could help one to realize that city and public spaces consist not only of its material essence but they are also defined by social and cultural interactions and shared values and interests. Harvey aptly points out that the right to the city is not measured by the mere fact that I am capable of sitting on this bench, same as my neighbor and his eighty years old grandmother. However, he, keens on awareness that individuals are able to imprint their trace into the structure of the city in a different manner, which is to create social and cultural life within towns.

Public spaces are fragile places on which we can clearly see the shared values and social ties as well, and the step out of a democracy to a totalitarian regime is closely tied with the shape of public spaces and art which are placed within. "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire." (Harvey, 2008) In a very general manner one could say that public spaces are mirrors to society which live within. But this claim is valid *vica versa* as well.

Widespread removal of monuments in the U.S and now in Canada is not a mere matter of aesthetics but more likely their political impact and values of inequality which inhabitants perceive through the colonial monuments. What I try to describe is that feeling when one is touched or oppressed by a monument which is not able to speak or to move, and yet could strongly participate in the perception of public space by creating certain emotions such as feeling small or humble. In this manner Arendt's thoughts provide a fruitful connection between the space of appearance and the public realm and enables one to acquire a new perspective towards public spaces as a place consisting of those two parts, which should be balanced in order to secure a public freedom.

"Spatial thinking is political thinking. Why is that? It is political, not because it is concerned about a specific space nor place, but since it is concerned about the world and its inhabitants." The architecture does not exist on its own, it is a part of a process, it is a form of spatial thinking. It exists within the relation to the inhabitants and to the world." ("Constructing The World, Thinking Architecture Through A Reading Of Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition". Online)

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