**EXPLORING THE PUBLIC REALM:
UNDERSTANDING MULTIPLE WAYS OF
PUBLICNESS IN URBAN AMERICA**

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This research undertakes a critical study of public places, the public realm of any society, in the American urban context. Current theories of the public space represent a notion of public that is homogeneous and a space that has universal access. Present practices in the public realm are devoid of contextual understanding of human diversity, human behavior, and evolving technology, and instead are founded in romanticism of certain historically conceived typologies of streets, squares, parks, plazas, and markets, or in singular dimension such as that of ownership. This investigation contests such universal understanding by examining closely a group of public places in four college towns: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Athens, Georgia; Lansing-East Lansing, Michigan; and Tallahassee, Florida. The study focuses on college towns because these towns represent a distinct urban condition. Each place considered in this research illustrates different representations of the public space and reveals various formal and informal ways of appropriating publicness. The study explores different ways in which public places are understood, various processes by which public places are used, and multiple forms in which public places are manifested.

(1) A multiple sorting task coupled with open-ended interviews (Canter et al, 1985; Groat, 1985) is applied to investigate the nature and organization of people's conceptual constructs related to publicness. (2) Observation of people's activities is undertaken in exemplary public places (four per case study) to reveal how people, individually and in groups, appropriate these spaces. (3) The study also analyzes the historic-morphological evolution of public places in the college towns using space syntax methods. The dynamic interaction between urban configuration, human behavior and common understanding continually shapes the growth of a city through time (Habraken, 2000). This integrative model is replicated in the four case-study college towns.

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I. Introduction

Public place is characterized by the word "public." The common-
ly founded meanings of "public" are "a place accessible or visible to the public" and "people as a whole" (Oxford English Dictionary, second edition; Warner, 2004; Sennett, 1974). Such under-standing of public posits itself with the notion of a public that is homogeneous and a space that has universal access. This research contradicts such universal understanding of public places by examining closely a group of urban public places in four case-studies of college towns: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Athens, Georgia; Madison, Wisconsin; and Tallahassee, Florida. This research considers college towns as unique places and asserts that these places demonstrate the quality of being public as heterogeneous and counter the notion of a universal public realm. Each place considered in this research illustrates different ethos of asserting publicness and qualifies publicness in a particular context. Contrary to the notion of public place as a neutral space, this research postulates that public place is a contested terrain of power relationships. The study demonstrates that in spite of being a shared territory where diverse groups coexist, public realm is constituted of places where differences are discovered, tolerated, maintained, and controlled. The attempt is to move away from the idea that categorizes space as public, private, and semi-public or semi-private. Instead it is proposed that places are public in some specific ways. The goal of this research is to investigate these particular ways of publicness.

2. Problem Statement

Traditional meaning of public realm in theories of architecture, planning, and urban design embraces a holistic and homogeneous notion of public and defines public spaces as spaces that encompass all the parts of the urban fabric and society to which the public has unobstructed physical and visual access (Lofland, 1998). If we consider the only permanent factor about urban environments to be their continual change and adaptation (Habraken, 1998), the changing roles and meanings of public realm is an essential component of the urban evolution.

2.1 Roles and meanings of public realm in evolution of cities

Presence of public spaces and their essentiality have been asserted as the universal urban trait throughout history. From the ancient Greek polis to the 14th century Renaissance city and to the present 21st century post-industrial city, transformation of public life in these spaces has reflected the continuous evolution of urban environments. The following section presents a comprehensive discussion of the role and meaning of public realm in the evolution of urban environments within the context of United States of America. The discussion is embedded within a theoretical framework of the "three urban orders" developed by N.J. Habraken and that of the "model of place" proposed by David Canter (Figure 1).

In his seminal book, *The Structure of the Ordinary*, Habraken describes "physical order, territorial order, and cultural order" as the three underlying orders in any urban structure (Habraken, 1992). According to Habraken, the first order is formed by the physical built forms. Transformation of the morphological structure of a city depicts a hierarchical system of human intervention and actions. Relationships among various agents explain the second order of territorial control. The territorial order reflects a continuous process of control of not just the abstract built forms but that of space and the behaviors contained in the space. The interrelationship of the first two orders, posits Habraken, is the result of the third order of common cultural understanding that constructs several themes and variations in different urban patterns, types, and systems. Such a human construction is about value judgment and asserting positions. These three orders establish a public realm that is heterogeneous, complex and contested.
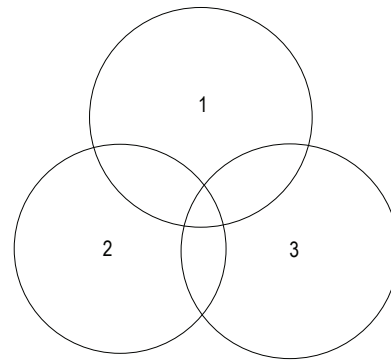
1: Meanings (values), 2: Actions (activities), 3: Environments (forms)

Figure 1. Interpretive diagram of the place model (Canter, 1977; Habraken, 1992).

In a similar vein, David Canter describes a "place" as juxtaposition of three elements: "conceptions, actions, and physical environments" in his pathbreaking book *Psychology of Place* (Canter, 1977). Considering public realm as a place that shapes the inherent structure of urban life, public realm can be understood in terms of its importance in urban culture, urban activities, and urban form. Canter's model of place describes the three essential elements found in places as conceptions, actions, and physical environment. Conception is related to the image of cities that reflect the meanings and values that people attach with places. Actions in urban environment could be analyzed through the elements of vitality and diversity. The physical environment is the urban morphology or form that becomes the stage for interpreting the images as well as for the interactions among various urban forces.

2.1.1 The cultural dimension – urban values

With respect to its cultural role and meaning, public realm can be understood as a human construction that shapes common cultural understanding and at the same time gets shaped by such conceptions. Definition and delineation of what is public is always associated with certain positions and attached to definite social values. For example, public space has always been associated with democracy and believed to be the social school of civility (Brill, 2001). Famous examples of Greek democratic values and associated public spaces, if carefully studied, illustrate hidden stories of slavery and exclusion of women. Often glittering examples of Parisian public life, if methodically analyzed, demonstrate domination of a powerful bourgeois class and nexus of royal ambitions and mercantile interests (Sennett, 1974). The constructed notion of public realm is more relevant in today's immensely heterogeneous and diverse urban context.

2.1.2 The functional dimension – urban actions

If the cultural understanding of public realm is crucial, expression of these social positions and cultural values is evident in the various actions, reactions, and interactions that happen in the public realm. This brings to the front an empirical perspective that is based on how public places are and how these places are used. Rather than idealizing public realm with some normative values or some romantic images of the past, understanding public life from the users' viewpoints is by far neglected and less studied (Carr, 1992).

From the users' perspective, public spaces can be understood in terms of three active elements: ownership, use, and control. Ownership may be the sole binding issue for legally identifying a public space from a private one. But, roles and meanings of the public sphere are subtly expressed in how these spaces are used and controlled. For example, streets might be owned by the city or the state, but streets are often used regularly and controlled by vendors or homeless people living there or by some street gangs. There is also huge debate about activities in privately controlled spaces such as shopping malls and amusement parks. Michael Sorkin argues that environments like Disneyland have addressed quintessential modern urban problems of crime, transportation, and waste through simulation and taking population away from the reality (Sorkin, 1992). The popularity of controlled private spaces with access open to the select consumers is evident in Main Street revitalization projects such as Fremont Street experience in Las Vegas and urban design projects like Horton Plaza, San Diego. Such privatization and malling of American public spaces have been intensely criticized, but at the same time focus our attention on the everyday urban aspect of these places. The successful privately owned and maintained places demonstrate glimpses of public activities, may be in a limited sense of type of users and nature of activities. But these spaces illustrate a certain kind of publicness. When the formal and idealized public sphere with universal access and homogeneous quality does not relate to our activities and daily life, the informal activities and day to day needs in such controlled and privately owned spaces with limited publicness bring these places to the center of the public sphere that frames our urban life.

Overview of literature relevant to analysis of public realm

Theoretical framework	Area(s) of inquiry	Key terms and focus of debate	"So what" question
Place model (Environment and Behavior) Canter, Habraken, Nasar, Groat	1. Study of public realm from cultural, behavioral, and physical perspectives. 2. The majority of the debate focuses around exploring the various components of public realm.	1. Meaning, action, and form indicating the cultural, behavioral and physical aspects of a place. 2. Relationship between the various forces in places producing a contested public realm.	Reinforces the heterogeneity and complexity of the public realm. Posits heterogeneity as the cause of differential manifestations of cultural understandings, controlling actions, and morphological patterns. Offers case studies from cultural and social practices analogous to acts of construction of public realm.
Everyday urbanism (Urban Design) Lefebvre, DeCerteau, Crawford	1. Relationship between the public space and day to day functions. 2. Subversion of the dominant discourse of formal public places into informal and unconscious public places.	1. Lived space: a space that is lived in images and social actions. 2. Differential space: a new space within the abstract notion of space that actuates differences and generates a counter emancipatory notion of public realm.	This debate illustrates the importance of the role of public realm in people's day to day life. Helpful in appreciating "various forms of publicness" from the perspective of everyday life.
Public sphere (Urban Planning) Harvey, Castells, Sandercock, Sennett	1. Understanding global and local forces that play critical role in the evolving complexity of cities. 2. Transformation of public realm in the evolution of cities. 3. Formation of new cultural forms and practices towards changing roles of public realm.	1. Space of flows: a transient notion of public realm that reflects the space-time dialectic. 2. Mongrel cities: a cosmopolitan public culture where different groups of people strive to living together 3. Public roles: notion of publicness as an assumed role or mask in cities to adapt to the evolving social and cultural agencies.	This discourse helps in situating the theories and practice of public realm in the context of evolving meanings and understanding what and who is "public" and what is a "public realm." This also aids in looking into public realm in multiple ways that is sensitive to the growing diversity and differences in cities.

Table 1. Matrix showing the organization of literature with respect to the theoretical framework.

2.1.3   The morphological dimension – urban forms

This discussion of the cultural construction of public realm and social uses of the public spaces invariably brings with it the third component and that is the physical form of public spaces. Michel Foucault had explained cities as "an attempt of expression of desire for the triumphant discourse of power" (Foucault, 1977). Official public places are not so obviously expressed. The significant places of power are not traditionally conceived examples of grand plazas and squares, but the Front Lawn or Oval Office of the White House, the steps of 10 Downing Street, and similar small discreet places. It is here the important decisions are taken and announced to the cameras and microphones and hence to the public though paradoxically these places are often not directly accessible to that public. Public places of today exhibit in their design and organization, physical strategies of security and exclusion. The values and actions discussed in the paragraphs above are manifested materially and expressed tectonically in such public places.

Public realm is an important part of our town and cities. This is the physical setup, an urban theater where the interrelationships occur among people and between people and various components of urban life (Short, 1998). Public realm includes many subtle elements – some expressed, some hidden, some programmed, some unintended, and all evolving. Cities and realms of public life are the results of human interaction and intervention. Physically, public realm is the site of demonstration and gatherings, is the stage for riots and festivals, and is the setting and background for mundane day to day actions and special functions. Some places are designed public places, some places have evolved into one. If parks and plazas are examples of formal designed places for public use, there are many squares, bazaars, street corners, edges, and alleys that have become spaces of public consumption and interaction without predetermined intention. Even designed public places attain different meanings and values, are used differently, and become a completely different place through processes of human appropriation.

3.   Research goals

Causal relationships between societal needs, desires, values and norms that procreate acts of appropriation embodied in the urban life produce and reproduce various forms of public realm. The transformation of public realm that is critical in the evolution of cities is of immense researchable interest. Central to these causal relationships are the following specific research questions related to the evolution of public realm:

• What are different ways people understand and use public space? What are the different aspects or elements people associate with publicness? What are important urban forces that determine the nature of public places?
• What is the role of public realm in evolution of cities? Why and how do understandings, actions, and forms of public realm influence the urban life?
• How can such understanding, actions, and forms be reflected in theories and practices of urban design?
• In the process of this inquiry, the study examines and develops four interrelated assumptions.

4.   Initial assumptions and related research objectives.

• Public realm is heterogeneous in perceptions, actions, and forms. The public sphere that frames the urban life reflects the diverse needs, desires, values, and norms of different groups of people. The plurality in human perception regarding publicness can be measured by understanding the various constructs and elements people associate with the notion of public space.
• Public realm is a human construction. The acts of appropriation that reflects multiple social values and cultural norms embedded and illustrated in the creation and control of public realm can be captured in the human imagination and realized in the human practice. The modes of appropriation can be captured in multiple facets of human actions and interactions in places.
• Public realm is a temporary phenomenon. Focusing on the transient character of the urban evolution, public realm can be analyzed in terms of spatial as well as temporal aspects. People's behavior in public spaces changes with times of the day, with days of the week, and even with seasons. Activities in public places transform depending on the surrounding context.
• Public realm is a continuous process of placemaking. It is a creative progression through which people transform the places they find themselves in into places they live in. It is an adaptive procedure through which people create, control, and maintain their lives and the spaces that frame them.

2a	Mid-west	South and South-east
University town + County seat	Ann Arbor, Michigan*	Athens, Georgia*
University town + State capital	Lansing – East Lansing, Michigan	Tallahassee, Florida

2b	Mid-west	South and South-east
1/3 ratio of student and city population	Ann Arbor, Michigan*	Athens, Georgia*
1/5 student and city population	Lansing – East Lansing, Michigan	Tallahassee, Florida

2c	Mid-west	South and South-east
University town with university developed in 1800s	Ann Arbor, Michigan*	Athens, Georgia*
University town with university developed in 1900s	Lansing – East Lansing, Michigan	Tallahassee, Florida

Table 2(a, b, and c). Matrices showing various dimensions of case-study selection of college towns.

# 5.	Research design

## 5.1	Selecting the college towns

The study considers university towns as unique and distinct urban conditions. Donlyn Lyndon (2005), in the latest issue of *Places* on "Considering the Place of Campus," proclaims that the university campus is one of the places where deliberate, purposeful construction of a "common realm" can be imagined and constructed; where purpose and vision can trump expediency. From this perspective, university towns seem a natural choice to study and explore these common places of shared vision and purpose, which is known as the public realm. The complexity with which the university facilities and population are enmeshed in the urban fabric demands careful study and detailed exploration of these towns. University towns embody many such values and ideals that any city would love to cultivate, and contain many spaces and places any city would strive to attain for its development.

In a recent study of "healthy downtowns of small metropolitan regions," college towns are a prominent few successful cases of small scale downtowns. Athens, Georgia and Ann Arbor, Michigan, two of the four case places in this research, respectively figure among the regionally known and nationally recognized successful downtowns (Fillion et al, 2004).

No.	Process	Places assessed	Questions	Outcomes
1	Informal interviews and conversation with people in Ann Arbor	General places such as buildings, plazas, parks, streets & malls in the college towns	What are some public places, buildings, or settings you use or think important?	List of public places important to people then consolidated into a list of 25 places.
2a	Free sort	25 public places	Categorize the 25 places into groups based on certain criteria.	Categories of places. People's constructs of these places. Sorting criteria.
2b	Directed sort	25 public places	Categorize the 25 places into three designated categories of publicness.	Places categorized into three groups: highly public, moderately public, and restricted public.
3	Open ended questions and follow-ups	25 public places and some other additional places that came up during conversation	What is the basis of certain groupings? What was the thought process during the sorting? What are the various criteria for publicness?	Thought process of respondents while performing the tasks. Values, elements, and aspects respondents associate with publicness.

Table 3. Interview procedure and multiple sorting task sequence involved in the study.

5.2   Research methodology

Understanding and analyzing public places through the lens of Canter's model of place and Habraken's three urban orders necessitate a comprehensive research design that addresses enquiries of these three components of meaning, actions, and physical form, which have been described in the previous sections.

5.2.1   Perception – Interviews and multiple sorting task

Discourses of environment and behavior and recent cognitive theory have established that human perception is structured in categories and cognition develops as maps of conceptual constructs rather than individual unique characterization (Bruner et al, 1956; Canter, 1969; Kaplan, 1982). The multiple sorting task is a categorizing procedure in which respondents are requested to sort elements such as building photos or names of places into categories as many times as they can based on some criteria of similarities and dissimilarities of the elements. In this research, multiple sorting task is applied to investigate the nature and organization of people's conceptual understanding about publicness and to demonstrate that there are different ways in which publicness is understood and conceptualized.

	Downtown	Outside Downtown
Outdoor	Main Street	Gallup Park
Indoor	Borders Bookstore	Briarwood Shopping Mall

Table 4. 2x2 matrix showing an example of specific place selection for observation in Ann Arbor.

5.2.2　Actions – observation

Comte, the founder of sociology and positivism, exemplifies observation as one of the four core research methods along with comparison, historical analysis, and experimentation appropriate to the science of society (Comte, A., 1856; Adler & Adler, 1998). In this practicum, the focus of using observation techniques is to understand how specific public spaces are used. Natural behaviors of the participants in these spaces are the main variables of interest. Observation of people's actions in places would aid in a systematic and purposive investigation of how certain places are used as well as detailed description of multiple user characteristics.

From the 25 places used in the multiple sorting and interviews, four specific locations are selected for detailed naturalistic observations. The selection is executed based on their frequency of getting named or picked as important places in the city during the sorting tasks and interviews. Also, criteria such as relative locations of these settings with respect to downtown (Downtown or Outside Downtown) and the enclosure characteristics (outdoor or indoor) are considered. The following is the standard example of places used in the four case-study cities.

John Zeisel (1981), in his classical work *Inquiry by Design*, describes observing behavior as systematically watching people use their surroundings: individuals, pairs of people, small groups, and large groups. This observation study focuses on how this set of public places harbors a wide range of activities and various types of public behavior. Observation methods aid in "empathetic" understanding of the settings and contexts in which participants behave. Observations are also apt in reflecting the "dynamic" interrelationships of activities in these places.

The activity categories and subcategories used in the observation are described below:

• Standing: Standing, walking, and shopping.
• Sitting: Sitting, watching while seated, engaged in formal meetings, babysitting, eating, drinking, or dining.
• Reading/ Working: Reading books or journals, doing homework or office-work.
• Playing/ Recreation: Playing games or sports, running, biking, skating, exercising.

5.2.3   Form – space syntax

Space syntax is a set of analytical computer based techniques to analyze any spatial configuration such as built spaces and urban environments. It investigates the classical spatial-social relationship, but specifically centers around examination of the crude physical form that is the morphological organization and the spatial configuration of the city. The street layout of the city is explored by analyzing the urban grid. The objective of the spatial analysis is to reveal the social dynamics behind an urban configuration. The analysis uses Global Integration, a measure of accessibility that indicates the depth of a location and easiness to reach that location from all other points of the urban system, as a key quantitative measure to evaluate various parts of the city and compare the physical variation with changes in land use and activities.

The dynamic interaction between urban configuration (environment), human behavior (actions) and common cultural understanding (meanings) continually shapes the growth of a city through time (Habraken, 2000). So, along with exploring the separate aspects of perception, activities, and form, the emphasis is also in understanding their interrelationships that generate a sense of place and that explore the public realm as a place of everyday urbanism.

6.   Findings and discussions

This study of publicness in cities is centered around the four case-studies - Ann Arbor, MI, Athens, GA, Lansing-East Lansing, MI, and Tallahassee, FL. The study is initially framed around meanings, actions, and physical form, the three aspects of place discussed in Section 5. This triad of elements also served as the basis for the research design and that of the structure of each research method described in the previous section.

The major research findings and analyses are explained below under the same three headings that have framed this research.

6.1   Multiple sorting task

The objective of the free sorting and the directed sorting tasks followed by the open-ended questions was to understand the multiple ways by which people categorize places they see and use. The other goal was to find if there is any specific issue or element that people identify with publicness.

6.1.1   Free sort

As discussed earlier, a set of 25 important places in the four cities was created from the list of 55 generally important places in each city. This set of 25 places is used in the free-sorting task. The 32 respondents from the selected four survey-cum-observation sites within each city (32 x 4 = 128 overall) sorted these 25 places into categories of their own constructs. Table 5 summarizes the various feature categories used by the 128 respondents in the free sorting task. The first of the two figure columns indicates the number of people in all the cities who mentioned a particular feature category at least once. The other column indicates the percentage of the total number of respondents who used the various feature categories.

	Category constructs	Number of people	Percentage of people
1.	Meanings/ understandings	52 (out of 128)	40.63%
2.	Actions/ control	100 (out of 128)	78.13%
3.	Environment/ physical form	48 (out of 128)	37.50%
	Meanings/ understandings		
1.1	Symbolic importance/ Identity	24 (out of 128)	18.75%
1.2	Security	12 (out of 128)	9.38%
1.3	Emotions	8 (out of 128)	6.25%
1.4	Color/ Image	4 (out of 128)	3.13%
1.5	Quality of experience	4 (out of 128)	3.13%
	Actions/ control		
2.1	Ownership	40 (out of 128)	28.13%
2.2	Type of activities	32 (out of 128)	25.00%
2.3	Type of users	28 (out of 128)	21.88%
2.4	Interaction with others	16 (out of 128)	12.50%
2.5	Use frequency	12 (out of 128)	9.38%
2.6	Access	12 (out of 128)	9.38%
2.7	Time of use	8 (out of 128)	6.25%
2.8	Mode of transportation	4 (out of 128)	3.13%
	Environment/ physical form		
3.1	Type of enclosure	16 (out of 128)	12.50%
3.2	Location	12 (out of 128)	9.38%
3.3	Age of structure	12 (out of 128)	9.38%
3.4	Material and Size	8 (out of 128)	6.25%
3.5	Nature of intervention	4 (out of 128)	3.13%

Table 5. Different categorical constructs used by respondents in free sort
in all the four case-studies.

6.1.2   Directed sort

The sorting task also included a directed sort of the same 25 places in four cities. In this case, three feature categories for sorting were given to the respondents: "highly public," "moderately public," and "restricted public." The intention is to explore how people characterize different places into a scale of publicness. The directed sorting of respondents at the four survey sites are color coded and summarized. Table 6 below is an example of such a sorting task for a group of eight respondents in Ann Arbor. The entire survey is not included in this report because of length limitations.

This coded data is used to analyze perception of the residents about various degrees of publicness in places. Specific findings from the directed sort in Ann Arbor are outlined below as a typical example:

• If we look into the directed sorting (Table 6) first thing that surfaces out of the sorting is the fact that some places are consistently and almost unanimously categorized as highly public. For example, in Ann Arbor, these places are Burton Park, Nickels Arcade, Liberty Street, Main Street, Kerry Town, Ann Arbor Public Library, and Gallup Park, which irrespective of the location of the survey site are considered highly public.
• Respondents, when asked about reasons behind such categorization, commented that these are streets and parks or publicly owned buildings which are open to access by anyone and that these are government or public properties. So, we find some equivalence between government and public in people's perception.
• There is also consistent categorization of some places as moderately public. These are places such as Liberty Street Post Office, Rackham Building, Michigan Union, in Ann Arbor.
• Reason behind such categorization was predominantly ownership and control issues. These are buildings owned by semi-public institutions such as the University of Michigan. People felt that though it is owned by a certain organization, there is a wide range of uses that assimilate various groups of people. For example, university buildings such as Rackham and Union harbor functions and activities that are attended by students, professors, and university staff as well as non-university persons like local residents and tourists.
• Issues of ownership and control are also explicit in some cases of places like Bell Tower Plaza and Nichol's Arboretum that were predominantly considered highly public, but some people categorized them as moderately public.
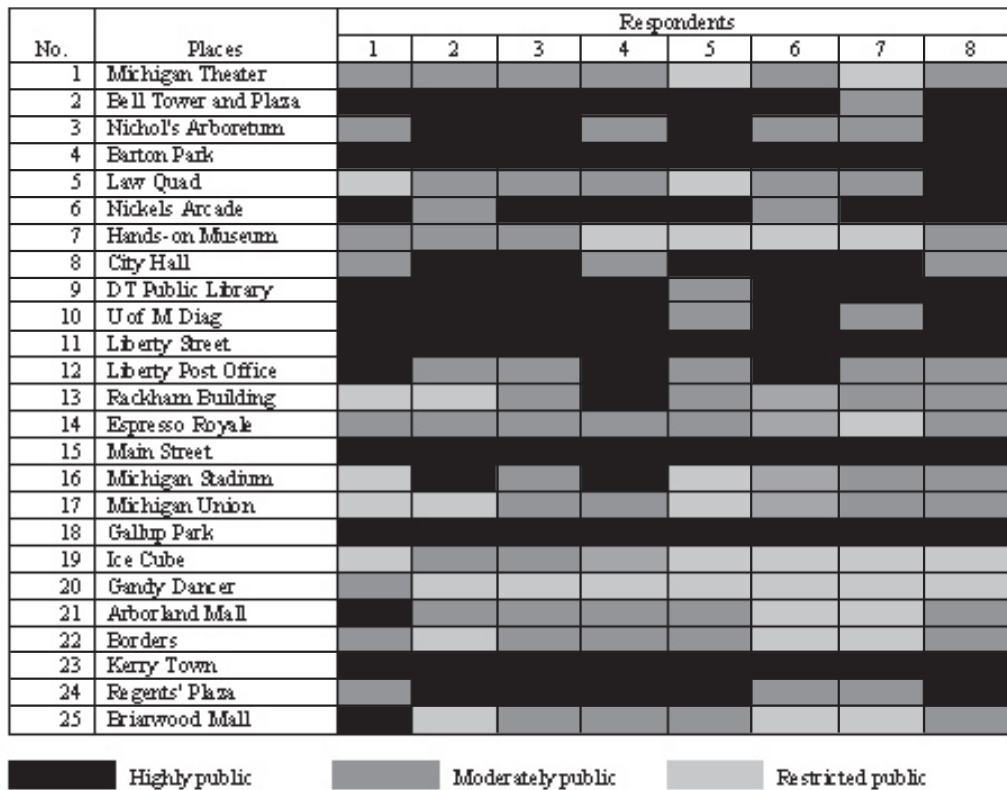
Findings from the free sort:
• From the above analysis of free sort categories, the multiple ways of understanding places are evident. It is also clear that there are some common aspects in human perception about understanding their environments. The explicit commonality is that different feature categories can be grouped into the three elements of Canter's place model or the three orders of Habraken's theory of structure of place.
• Activities and uses of space emerge as a prominent factor (in 78.13% responses) of understanding different places compared to the other two groups – values and forms.
• Within each group, certain aspects of construction are clearly more common than others. For example, "symbolic importance or identity" in "Meanings," "ownership," "types of activities," and "types of users" in "Actions," and "type of enclosure" and "location" in "Physical form" (See Table 5).
• It is interesting to note that these feature categories are integrated with the notion of publicness. Though public-private differentiation does not come up explicitly in most of the categorical constructs, we can conclude from the free-sorting task that issues related to publicness are present in human perception of places indirectly in different ways.
• It is also important to consider presence of other feature categories such as "security," "type of activities," "interaction with strangers," "accessibility," and "nature of intervention" in the free-sort categories. These aspects are crucial to be considered when we think about public life and the realm that frames it.

No.	Places	Respondents 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Michigan Theater								
2	Bell Tower and Plaza								
3	Nichol's Arboretum								
4	Barton Park								
5	Law Quad								
6	Nickels Arcade								
7	Hands-on Museum								
8	City Hall								
9	DT Public Library								
10	U of M Diag								
11	Liberty Street								
12	Liberty Post Office								
13	Rackham Building								
14	Espresso Royale								
15	Main Street								
16	Michigan Stadium								
17	Michigan Union								
18	Gallup Park								
19	Ice Cube								
20	Gandy Dancer								
21	Arborland Mall								
22	Borders								
23	Kerry Town								
24	Regents' Plaza								
25	Briarwood Mall								

■ Highly public   ▨ Moderately public   ▢ Restricted public

Table 6. A directed sorting task example from the case study of Ann Arbor.

• Specific indoor space like the Gandy Dancer Restaurant is predominantly considered as a restricted public space. Single use, indoor environment, and private ownership are a few reasons people gave for such classification.

• Most contentious cases are places which are in the borderline of moderately public and restricted public. People's perception seems to be divided regarding places such as Briarwood Shopping Mall, Borders bookstore, and Espresso Royale coffee shop. People who categorized these places as restricted public argued that these places are privately owned, cater to consumers only, are indoors, and not always accessible. Respondents who asserted the same places as moderately public and sometimes highly public thought that these places harbor multiple and over-lapping uses, there are opportunities for interaction, and these places have different experiences at different times.

• From the analysis, it is manifest that people have different reasons for understanding public places and different ways of looking into publicness. It is evident that there is no single or universal way of comprehending publicness in people's perception.
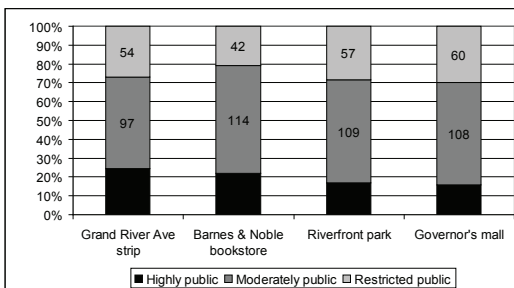
The responses from the directed sort are summarized below (Table 7). The first chart illustrates responses about publicness at four different survey sites (Main Street, Borders, Gallup Park, and Briarwood mall) in Ann Arbor. Each column demonstrates total number of responses by eight respondents in each of the four survey sites (8 x 4 = 32 overall respondents). Considering the 25 places from the generated list, each column indicates total of 200 place responses (responses of eight respondents about 25 places, 8 x 25 = 200). The column divisions indicate the percentage distribution of responses in the three given categories: highly public, moderately public, and restricted public. The raw counts of responses are also indicated in each column that sums up to 200 in each case. This chart simply summarizes the percentage of respondents categorizing each of the three feature categories across all the four survey sites. The chart is repeated for summary of all the other three cities. Such an analysis across sites aids in comparison of people's perception as well as exploring any pattern visible in the overall responses in the for case-study cities – Ann Arbor, Athens, Lansing-East Lansing, and Tallahassee.
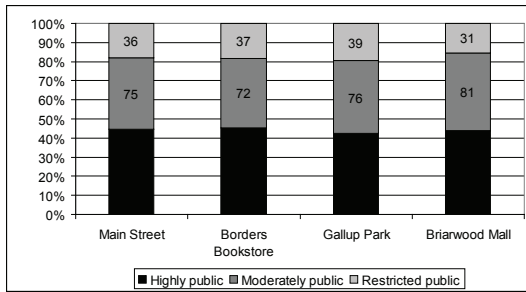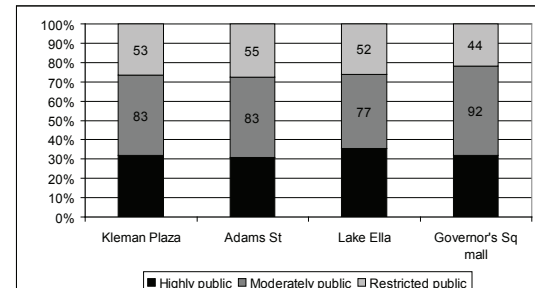
Ann Arbor, MI
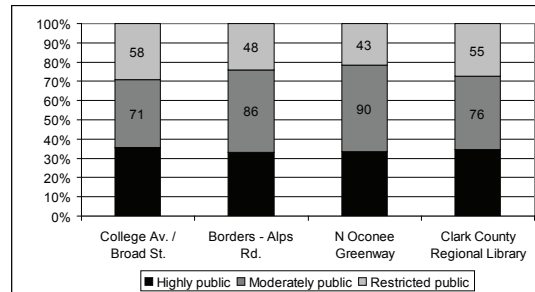
Athens, GA

Lansing - East Lansing, MI

Tallahassee, FL

Table 7. Distribution of responses for directed sort across all the four sites in all the four case-study cities.

From the values of the figures above, it is evident that the distribution of responses into three categories of public-ness is consistent across all four survey sites in individual case-study cities. This elucidates a consistent pattern of understanding public places in the perception of the residents. The pattern of responses indicates that there is no considerable differences in perceptions across the four sites which have different locations (in Downtown and outside Downtown) and which are different types of spaces (outdoor and indoor).

6.1.3   Open-ended follow-up questions

The open-ended follow up questions are useful for inquiry into reasons and factors influencing people's sorting and construction categories. These questions were asked to understand respondents' thought processes during the informal conversation and two sorting tasks. The follow up questions also generated some vital issues integral to the notion of publicness and exploration of public life. Some of the responses from open ended questions asking specific reasons of categorization have been discussed in the directed sorting section 6.1.2. Discussions with respondents in Ann Arbor during these follow-up interviews are summarized below as a typical example:

• Many of the respondents classified the perception of publicness as an experience. Quality of experience that manifests publicness includes co-presence of other people, opportunities for formal and informal interaction, and opportunities for multiple activities by diverse groups.
• Ownership and control are identified as two key issues that define publicness. It was interesting however that some of the respondents posited a subtle difference between these two aspects. For example, Nichols' Arcade, which is now owned and maintained by the University of Michigan, is a conglomeration of three or four different private properties. Control generated by regular or everyday use of space was also an important factor in people's perception.
• Attention was drawn to the fact that certain places which are public and owned by the city such as City Hall are places enforced with high security making them less accessible. On the contrary, privately owned and maintained places such as Borders and Briarwood Mall are relatively easy to access though these have high amount of surveillance. Discussion of such contradictory dichotomies of publicness in image and in action illuminated a way of looking into places, which is sensitive to how places are used.

• Inside and outside was an important factor of distinction. Though anything outdoors and open was considered to be more public, there was an array of opinions about buildings and interior spaces. Again, movement though these spaces, ways of entering these spaces, types of activities, and opportunities of interaction were important factors irrespective of public or private ownership.
• Spontaneity and rituals in everyday spaces were found important to people's perceptions. Respondents asserted that they associate publicness with activities and spaces that are part of their life. This aspect of everyday urbanism integrates the notion of publicness with actions of daily routine and looks into public places through the lens of people's everyday use.
• Along with everyday practices, the symbolic importance of a place such as image, historic relevance, and formal celebratory functions are associated with public places also. Festivals, fairs and farmer's markets are important examples of such eventful places.
• Some of the respondents commented on the temporary nature of publicness that is demonstrated in places. For example, respondents discussed how private spaces like Briarwood Mall and Espresso Royale coffee shop exhibit temporary activities and interaction that is public in many ways.
• One interesting factor that some respondents eluded to was the presence of the University of Michigan in the town and how the city-university relationship is critical in development of certain values, activities and types of places. This draws attention to specific types of cities and possible research in this direction of examining university towns.

		Site Survey A	Site Survey B	Site Survey C	Site Survey D
1	Ann Arbor	Main Street	Borders	Gallup Park	Briarwood Mall
2	Athens	Broad St/ College Ave	Borders	Heritage Trail	Athen Regional Library
3	Lansing-East Lansing	Grand River Ave strip	Barnes & Noble	Fergusson Park	Governor's Mall
4	Tallahassee	Kleman Plaza	Adams St	Lake Ella	Governor's Square Mall

Table 8. Naturalistic observations conducted in four survey sites for each of the four case study sites.

City 1,2,3,4	Weekends				Weekdays			
	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu
Site Survey A	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM
Site Survey B	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM
Site Survey C	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM
Site Survey D	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM	6:00 PM	10:00 AM	1:00 PM	3:00 PM

Table 9. Summary of observation times in all sites in each case-study place.

6.2   Observations

These four places reflect different locations with respect to the urban configuration (downtown and outside) and enclosure type of these places (See Section 5.2.2., Table 4). In each site, a certain specific area was selected within that site as the point of observation and recording. Observations were taken twice, once on a weekday (between Monday and Thursday) and once during the weekend (between Friday and Sunday). During the day of observation, four sets of observations were taken per day. The four observation times were taken considering the changing activities and users throughout the day. The four times of observations were: 10 am, 1 pm, 3 pm, and 6 pm. Care was taken to ensure that one particular site was observed at four different times and also the site was covered during various days of the week.

The objective of observation was to explore the various types of users using the site and the different functions and activities that are present. Informal pilot observation was used to identify four predominant activities in these sites: Standing, Sitting/ Dining, Sitting/ Working, and Playing/ Recreation. Along with these count measures, detailed information was recorded regarding people's age, sex, ethnicity, and type of group found. Analyses and investigation of the observation data for Ann Arbor is summarized below as a typical example:
• The charts (Table 10) illustrate that the number of people using the places at various points in time varies within a particular site as well as across all the four sites. For example, if we consider the Main Street site, we find that the number of people walking or sitting changes depending on the time of day as well as on weekday or weekend. It is also evident that at a particular point in time the percentage of people walking or sitting in Main Street is different from that in the other three sites.

•   Variation in percentage of people engaged in certain activities is accompanied by variation in types of activities themselves. For example, during weekends, people are found sitting and working in Main Street in the morning and afternoon hours whereas there was no working activity on a weekend evening. In the same vein, at a particular point of time, types of activities differ from place to place.

•   Strong variation was found in terms of group types in which people were found in the observation sites. Certain places such as Main Street and Briarwood Mall were dominated by people in groups (in twos or more) more than individuals. On the contrary, Borders was more popular for individuals. Interestingly, the variation of individuals, couples, and groups changed with time and day too. For example, the evening of a game day brought in large groups of friends and family with mixed ages and ethnicity in Main Street, which was otherwise dominated by couples and small groups.

• Variations in group sizes and associated activities force us to think about the dynamics of individual publicness and group publicness. It is possible to have a limited and restricted way of understanding publicness that is individually and commercially oriented around personal tasks, food, and shopping.

•   The presence of daily activities and some temporary special activities was observed in some locations. For example, shopping for books, having coffee, working, and reading are common daily activities in Borders. Sometimes though, it becomes the site for a special activity such as an author's book reading for a short period of time. Such special activities generate more movement and attract a wide range of activities.

•   The dual presence of everyday activities and special functions in places illuminates the issue of temporary publicness. Informal talks, talking to strangers, smiles and nods provide multiple opportunities for spontaneous interaction.

•   There is also a sense of ritual in many places. Many people know one another by virtue of coming to the same place and going through routine activities everyday. A sense of belonging, comfort and safety is created through such everyday activities.

•   Activities in privately owned places such as Borders and Briarwood reflect limited publicness. They are public for certain types of activities and certain groups of people.

•   The influence of the university was evident, especially in view of activities and presence of people in the Downtown such as Borders and Main Street. Presence of a powerful force such as the university is critical in terms of harboring diverse people, promoting multiple interactive and group activities, providing opportunities for communication and interaction, and constructing certain physical organization in places.
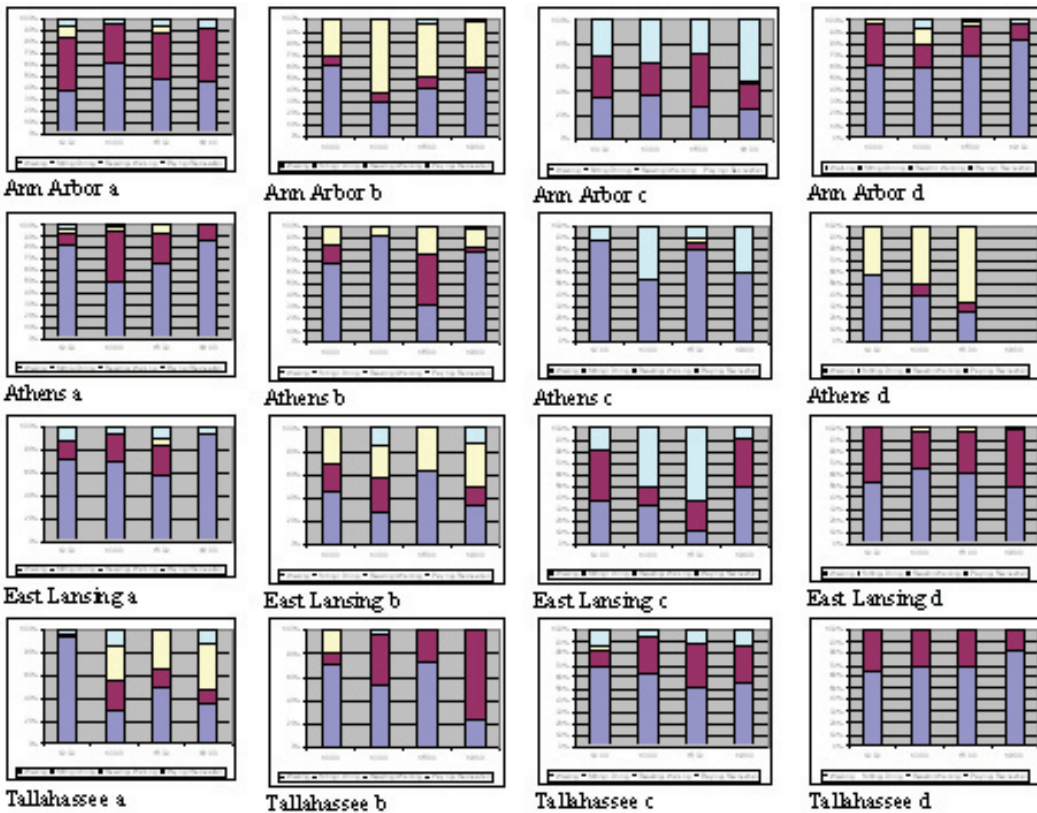
Table 10. Summary chart of percentage of various activities and predominant group behavior in four exemplar places in all the four case-study cities.

The naturalistic observations indicate a fluid nature of activities in the popular places. Each of the places studied in the case-study cities illustrates a rich heterogeneity of activities and human behaviors. Prominence of these settings develops from their inherent ability to be adaptive and ephemeral. These places nurture a publicness that is transient and temporary, and most importantly that changes and adapts to the needs of the specific individuals and groups. In other words, certain places are public for certain groups of people for certain periods of time. The argument for public realm as a temporary phenomenon is reinforced by the continual human appropriation. What defines public realm is a limit of publicness and what constructs publicness is human appropriation of that limit. The essence of public realm is constituted by this dialectic process of interaction, where the boundaries of publicness are constantly interpreted, restructured, and reconstructed through the forces of formal and informal control – individual, interactive, and institutional. Realization of the public realm is not in its definite determination, but is in contestation and conflict of what it could be, what opportunities it could offer, and what forms it could take.
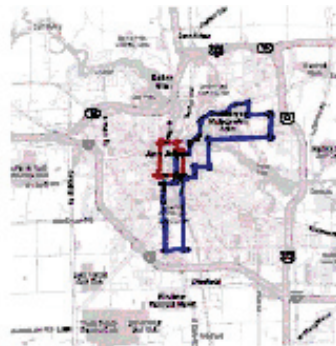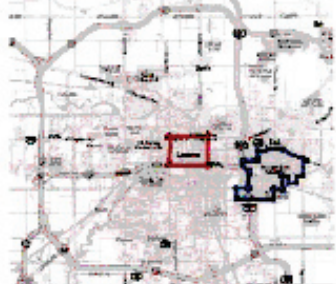
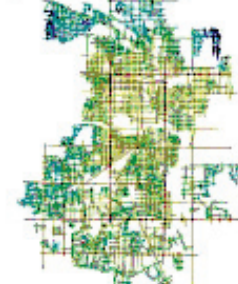(2a-1) Ann Arbor, MI

(2a-2) Integration map
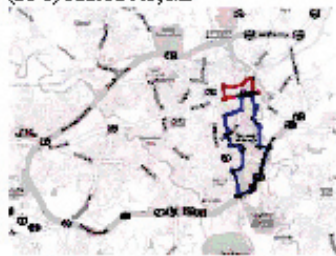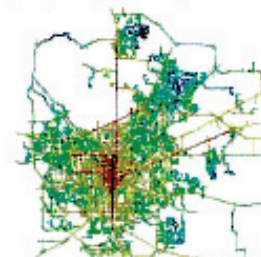
(2b-1) Athens, GA

(2b-2) Integration map

(2c-1) Lansing – East Lansing, MI

(2c-2) Integration map

(2d-1) Tallahassee, FL

(2d-2) Integration map

Figure 2. (1) Downtown-campus relationship (Red = Downtown, Blue = campus) and (2) space syntax analysis of global integration (measure of accessibility) in the four case-study cities.

6.3   Morphological analysis

Formal analysis of the four case study cities reveals a powerful pattern of city-campus relationship, a primary element in people's perceptual constructs, as illustrated in sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.3. Each city showcases a unique town-gown relationship illustrated below (Figure 2). The interface of the downtown (shown in red) and the campus (shown in blue) is significantly different in the four cities. Ann Arbor portrays an integrated campus juxtaposed across the downtown, whereas Athens demonstrates a face-to-face interaction with a common edge between the downtown core and the campus. Lansing-East Lansing and Tallahassee, though both have campus distant from the downtown, vary in terms of the distance between them. This morphological analysis is compared with the spatial analysis of the street pattern and grid structure of the four cities. Using the measure of global integration , the element of accessibility and overall connectivity is evaluated. The spatial analysis indicates integration, gradually decreasing from the maximum integrated or accessible areas (red) to the minimum (blue). Comparison suggests that tighter downtown-campus relationship (as seen in Ann Arbor, Athens, and Tallahassee) is reflected in a strong integration core of the city. The weak integration core in Lansing can be related to the campus being completely unrelated to and away from the downtown.

This pattern of city-university interaction develops the possibility of understanding universities as generators of activities and as developers. Further historic-morphological study could explore the role of university campuses in the evolution of the cities. It is not uncommon to find universities as stabilizing factors in many cities during the periods of economic depression and political turmoil. Presence and influence of the campus in acquiring land, generating activities, and impacting land use is significant, as indicated by the integration map .

7.   Conclusions

This multi-method research study (1) develops a comprehensive understanding of publicness and the public realm; (2) illustrates that the public realm is heterogeneous and that it goes beyond the preconceived typologies of public spaces such as parks and plazas; (3) demonstrates that the public realm is a human construction that is diverse based on specific values, contextual needs, and related behavior; (4) develops the notion that the public realm is a continuous process of placemaking that is created, maintained, and controlled by human appropriation. The study emphasizes commonly used and often neglected everyday spaces such as parking lots, strip malls, and coffee shops as new typologies of public spaces, which requires intense attention and design.

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7.1   A pluralistic notion of publicness

Though, in theories and practices of architecture and urban design, the classifications of public spaces are predominantly based on historic typologies, aesthetic ideologies, or uni-dimensional constructs such as ownership, this study illustrates multiple dimensions of human perception regarding publicness. From the sorting tasks, interviews, and observations, specific concepts are identified below, which influence people's perception of publicness in places:

•   Ownership: an overarching concept related to publicness in the American context. A powerful finding was that ownership was not the single element and how it is integrated with other important ideas, like use and users, influences the construction of publicness.

• Use: this is identified with activities and opportunities the space has to offer. From the users' perspective public realm can be defined with respect its relevance to everyday life.

•   Other people: closely related to the opportunities for activities, the presence of other users in space is critical in exploring publicness. Individual and group actions, reactions, and interactions are instrumental in how the space caters to different needs and diverse groups of people.

• Community: how important the space is to local people and what are the opportunities for direct or indirect participation.

• Access: finding your way and getting about. Connectivity and accessibility determine how permeable and inclusive a place is for different groups of people.

•   Identity and image: this is associated with the quality of experience in space and can be pinned down to very specific ideas, such as historic importance, uniqueness, and quality of maintenance.

•   Environment: how safe and comfortable the space is. The perception of safety, comfort, and security is integral to the quality of space and experience of publicness in places.

•   Design and appearance: looks of the space, materials used, and the interrelationships of inside and outside invoke certain feelings and emotions and involve certain degrees of interaction of people.

7.2   Public realm as a place of everyday urbanism

The study reveals the temporary nature of public realm as a place of everyday urbanism. Based on the multiple dimensions of perception of publicness and actions in public spaces, the nature of public realm develops as incidental, experiential, and situational. Another critical phenomenon in such spaces of everyday life is the blurring of boundaries between public and private, thus creating spontaneous and intimate statements about public life. Everyday urban spaces also project a place and process of dialogic conversation. The users and visitors of the spaces are unconsciously engaged in an interactive conversation through their regular day-to-day activities.

Relevance of everyday life in construction of the public spaces, in the real and the imaginal, poses a critical question – why designers don't consciously design everyday urban spaces. Architecture and urban design is still rooted in historic morphological typologies (parks, plazas, squares, markets, and streets) and architects and urban designers do not typically think beyond these default and stereotypical categories. This study argues that focus of urban theory and design practice needs a shift, from a universal formal approach to a contextual, specific, and multidimensional approach that is sensitive to heterogeneity of human perception and everyday human activities.

Understanding places from the users' perspective highlights the importance of human appropriation in places. This notion of public space empowers people to define, construct, and control publicness through their actions, reactions, and interactions. Within the formal framework of political and social ideologies and morphological typologies, publicness from the perspective of everyday actions posits an informal counterpoint that pushes the envelope of public realm and offers challenging yet exciting opportunities for making adaptive public places.
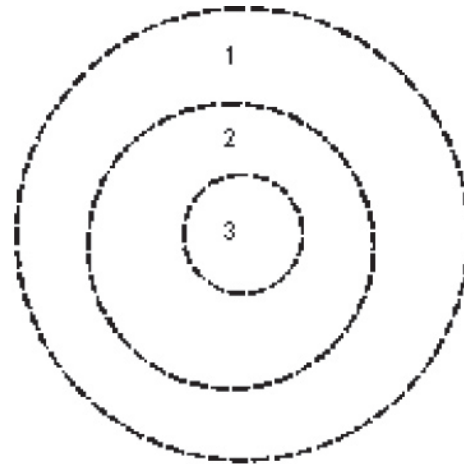
1: Meanings (values), 2: Actions (activities),3: Environments (forms)

Figure 3. Restructured interpretive diagram indicating an inclusive and fluid place model.

7.3   An inclusive model of publicness

The place-model framework used in this study is comprised of the triad of meanings, actions, and forms. (Canter, 1977; Habraken, 1992). The exploration of publicness through this lens also allows us to critically reflect on this theoretical framework itself. Prevalent notions of understanding public space from a uni-dimensional perspective such as historic meanings (values), landuse and ownership (actions), and formal typology (form) is reinforced by the distinct boundaries imagined for the three triad elements. The triadic place model is conflicting and contradictory for understanding the construct of publicness. An inclusive model of publicness (Figure 3) can be imagined with an overlapping and hierarchical notion of the triad. Such interpretation allows opportunities of interrelationships and interactions among the triad elements towards a communication system among the triad elements of place. For example, publicness from the perspective of formal typology can also be interpreted as representation of daily activities associated with those typologies. Such actions can then be read as reflections of specific values integrated with the community or the context. The underlying premise is that the human values and meanings in places include human interaction and the built and the unbuilt. This inclusive approach emphasizes the public realm as teleological (process oriented), relevant (specific), and catalytic (empowering).

8.   Future directions – towards a new theory of public space

This multi-method research study (1) develops a comprehensive understanding of publicness and the public realm; (2) illustrates that the public realm is heterogeneous and that it goes beyond the preconceived typologies of public spaces such as parks and plazas; (3) demonstrates that the public realm is a human construction that is diverse based on specific values, contextual needs, and related behavior; (4) develops the notion that the public realm is a continuous process of placemaking that is created, maintained, and controlled by human appropriation. The study emphasizes commonly used and often neglected everyday spaces such as parking lots, strip malls, and coffee shops as new typologies of public spaces, which requires intense attention and design.

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I.   Space syntax is a set of analytical computer based techniques to analyze any spatial configuration such as built spaces and urban environments. The technique has been developed at the University College London through research on quantitative analysis of natural movements in environments spearheaded by Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson and published in the Social Logic of Space (1984).

II.   The global integration values of a city are the measures of depth and accessibility of one point from all other points of the urban environment. Integration maps illustrate how easy it is to access one point or one area of the city compared to other areas.

III.   The integration maps are analytical maps representing the global integration measure of each city. The axial maps have been constructed by the authors using Auto-CAD and the syntactic analysis have been processed by the author using Mindwalk © Lucas Figueiredo.