THE MORALITY OF URBAN PUBLIC LIFE:

The Emergence and Continuation of a Debate

Lyn H. Lofland

In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs remarks:

Reformers have long observed city people loitering on busy corners, hanging around in candy stores and bars and drinking soda pop on stoops, and have passed a judgement, the gist of which is: "This is deplorable! 'If these people had decent homes and a more private or bosky outdoor place, they wouldn't be on the street!'"[1]

A somewhat different but related message is to be found in the oft-repeated homily I recall from my youth:

Fools names and fools faces are always seen in public places.

I want to use Jacobs' wry insight and the message of that little piece of "folk wisdom" to chart a path through the enormous country formed by the topic "public life in the city: past, present, and future." I shall pay particular and focussed attention to the moral tensions and debates that, at least for the past several hundred years, and at least in North America and Northern Europe, have been the recurring companions of that public life.

Before I can meaningfully get to this matter of public life and moral tensions, however, I must lay some conceptual and definitional groundwork. I am going to propose that it is useful to conceive of the city as a settlement form that provides three different "kinds" of social psychological space: the private, the parochial, and the public realms of urban life.

The Three Realms Of Urban Life

My definitions of "private" and "parochial" realm are borrowed and adapted from Albert Hunter's work: my definition of the public realm is more clearly my own. Following Hunter, then, I will define the *private realm* as characterized by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks, and the *parochial realm* as characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities."[2]

The *public realm*, in contrast, is defined as non-private sectors of urban areas in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another. That is, while it is not quite accurate, it is nonetheless fair to say that the private realm is the world of the household and intimate network; the parochial realm is the world of the neighborhood, workplace, or acquaintance network; and the public realm is the world of the street.

Using these definitions, then, and conceiving of the city as a collection of social psychological spaces, we can see that the city differs from other sorts of settlement forms (for example, the tribe, the village, the small town) in at least two important and highly interrelated respects.

First, the city is characterized by a diversity of social psychological spaces. In the city, one can often locate the equivalents of the tribe, the village, the small town. That is, tribes, villages, and small towns consist primarily of the social psychological realms of the private and the parochial. The city, in contrast, contains private and parochial realms but is not limited to them.

Second, the city, in addition to possessing private and parochial realms, a characteristic that it shares with other settlement forms, generates a unique kind of social psychological space: the public realm. This realm, as we can infer from the way it is defined, is made up of the public places or spaces in a city that tend to be inhabited—and I underline "tend to be"—by persons who are strangers to one another or who "know" one another only in terms of occupational or other non-personal identity categories (for example, bus conductor-customer). In short, cities have public places that, because of their stranger-filled and apersonal character, are simply unlike, in a social psychological sense, the public or communal areas of other settlement forms.

All of this leads me to a final definition. When I speak of the "public life" of cities my referent is quite restricted. I am not talking, for example, about economic and political life broadly conceived, but am referring only to the interaction, to the sociality or sociability, (which may, of course, be of an economic or political character) that occurs within the public realm.

Now, if we accept these distinctions, if we grant their utility as working analytic tools, it becomes possible—though granted,

in only a very rough sort of way—to sort among cities, or among city areas, in terms of the patterns formed by the relations among the three realms.

For example, one might note that a crucial difference between pedestrian-scale cities, such as San Francisco, and automobile-oriented cities, such as Houston or Phoenix, is that the former have robust public realms, the latter, less well developed ones. Similarly, one could argue that in parts of many American cities, the private realm flourishes but the world of the parochial realm, the world of "commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks located with 'communities,' " is truncated. Manifested as neighborhood community, the parochial realm is radically anemic.

As another example, Donald Olsen's argument in *The City as a Work of Art* [3] that nineteenth century London was far more "domestic" than were Vienna and Paris in the same period can be translated as saying that in these latter cities, for whatever reason, the private realm took up a smaller portion of the "life space" of its inhabitants than it did in London.

Or, as a last example, one can contrast the worlds of varying segments of the populace of, say, eighteenth century London, by noting that elite females were heavily restricted to the private realm, while working and lower class men and women, and middle and upper class males (such as Samuel Johnson) spent a great deal of time in the parochial and public realms.

The Pre-Industrial City and its Transformation: The Strengthening of the Private and Parochial Realms

What I want to do now is review a major historic shift in the relations among these realms that occurred in the cities of Europe, particularly Northern Europe during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and then discuss the moral debates that this shift made possible. As an aside, I'll just note that while the shift can be observed to a degree in the cities of North America, their births primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes them better exemplars of the outcome of the shift than of the shift itself.

A cardinal characteristic of the preindustrial city—wherever located—is the fact that a significant portion of its social life occurs in the public realm. That is, social life and public life overlap in the preindustrial city to a degree unmatched by any other city form.[4]

I don't know whether this arrangement was supported by cultural values extolling the moral superiority of being "out and about" in the public realm, but even in the absence of such sup-

port, our urban ancestors didn't have much choice in the matter. Like their tribal and village counterparts who lived in "communities" whether they wanted to or not, preindustrial city dwellers, given the technology available to them, lived in the public realm out of necessity. Let me provide a few examples of why this was so.

With a largely illiterate population, and lacking a technology for the broadcasting of pictorial messages, if news were to circulate in the preindustrial city, it had to do so by moving among co-present human beings via the spoken word. A single person communicating to many others simultaneously proved, of course, more efficient than one-to-one communication; thus the very widespread institution of the town crier. To find an audience, the town crier went into the city's public realm; to hear the news, announcement, and pronouncements, the city's populace did likewise. Similarly, without telephones or telegraphs and, again, with a largely illiterate population, most personal messages had to be delivered personally. To communicate to anyone outside of one's own household, one had to leave that household and walk through the public realm until one reached the home or workplace of the message's recipient.

Note that I said walk. Elites, who represented a very small portion of the total population, could afford litters or horse-drawn conveyances that allowed them to encase themselves in cocoons of privacy and thus insulate themselves from the public realm—just as modern affluent Westerners do by means of their private automobiles. But most people, in moving from one place to another in the city, had to walk and they had to be both in and of the public realm when they did so.

Not only the movement of messages required one's presence in the public realm; for everyone but elites (all of whom had servants and some of whom had quite advanced plumbing systems) the securing of water and the disposal of garbage and body wastes did so as well. The necessity to be in the public realm was true for a myriad of other activities: shopping, political action, entertainment, religious devotion, and so forth.

Add to this the fact that again, excepting some elites in some places, private space was crowded, even by the standards of the time. For many people, to be in the public realm was to be warm instead of cold, cool instead of hot. It was to breathe air, however bad, less fetid than the air of one's private quarters. It was to move into space, however teeming with people, less cramped than home. In sum, the preindustrial city was overwhelmingly characterized by the dominance of public life.

However, as that complex of events and conditions and phenomena and actions and choices we choose to encapsulate by the term "Industrial Revolution" began to unfold, new possibilities for enlarging and strengthening the city's private and parochial realms emerged.

Two characteristics of late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century cities were especially relevant: innovations in forms of transport allowed these cities to be much larger in area than their preindustrial ancestors, and innovations in construction and communication technologies allowed these cities to enclose many more activities than had cities of the past. To put it briefly, these two characteristics—enlargement and enclosure—together made possible the separation of workplace from residence, made possible the development of highly specialized and large work places (e.g., factory districts), made possible the development of homogenous and large areas of residence (e.g., working-class neighborhoods), made possible the siting of much round-of-life activity within the place of residence or neighborhood, and, eventually, with the introduction and widespread personal ownership of the automobile, made it possible for an individual to connect pieces of widely dispersed space without the necessity of actually being, in any socially meaningful sense, in the intervening spaces.

It truly became possible for large numbers of late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century city people, as it had not been possible for preindustrial city people, to spend significant portions of their lives entirely in the private and/or parochial realms. As this possibility emerged, so did debates about where city people ought to be—debates, to go back to my opening comments, about getting people "off the street," about whether only fools' "names and faces are seen in public places."

Domestic Intimacy, Community, and Urbanity: The Assault on the Public Realm

During the past few hundred years, the debate over the morality of life in one or another of the realms of city life has pitted the private and parochial realms—the worlds of domestic intimacy and community—against the public realm—the world, we might say, of urbanity.

Neither the origin nor the terms of the debate have come from celebrators of the public realm. Instead, there has been an assault on the public realm by those who define the private and parochial realms as morally superior. To oversimplfy just a bit, home and neighborhood have united to oppose street.[5]

Let me try to give you some of the flavor of this assault on the public realm by describing briefly three of its numerous themes, three themes that seem to appear, by the way, regardless of when or where one looks: "unholy" and "unwashed" presence, indiscriminate and inappropriate mixing, and irresponsible or even sacriligious frivolity.

The theme of "unholy" and "unwashed" presence asserts that the public realm is the home of "the wrong kind of people"—however "wrong kind of people" may be defined. Eighteenth century London's defenders of domesticity warned women to stay at home in part because the streets were filled with men, but even more importantly, because they teemed with the contaminating presence of the "lower orders" of both sexes. In nineteenth and twentieth century New York, "proper" men and women were encouraged to stay out of the public realm because of the disgusting ethnic character of its denizens.

The theme of indiscriminate and inappropriate mixing asserts that, in the public realm, various types or categories of people whom a deity, or nature, or tradition, or whatever, had intended to remain forever separate are allowed—God help us—to mingle. Critics of the newly emerging cafes and cabarets pointed with disgust to the fact that they allowed virtuous women to be in the same room with women of "easy virtue." Worse, these public institutions—as did movie theatres and dance halls—actually or potentially brought together men and women, persons of the working, middle and upper classes, blacks and whites, Southern and Northern Europeans.

The theme of irresponsible or even sacriligious frivolity complains that in the public realm the unquestioned virtues of sobriety, industry, rationality, diligence, are not only challenged, they are discarded. Two examples from criticisms of public realm institutions will, I hope, suffice to make the point.

Describing the vision of the masquerade held by its critics, Terry Castle writes:

At the classic eighteenth-century masquerade...a distinctly ungenteel liberty was the goal: liberty from every social, erotic, and psychological constraint. In this search after perfect freedom—a state of intoxication, ecstasy, and free-floating sensual pleasure—the eighteenth century masquerade demonstrated its kinship, however distant, with those rituals of possession and collective frenzy found in traditional societies....Ecstatic rituals transport their participants into another world, in which time and space are magically altered. In its most fervent stages, the masquerade held a similarly labile and convulsive power. With its scenes of manic, impetuous play, the masquerade often seemed to contemporaries to induce a kind of hallucinatory state: a collective ilinx.[6]

Writing about critics of Coney Island, John Kasson sounds a similar refrain:

The response of James Gibbons Huneker (to Coney Island) is especially interesting. What disturbed Huneker...was precisely the surrender of reason, even of repression that Coney encouraged. From this perspective, Coney's topsy-turvy entertainments and fantastic architecture were not harmless pleasures but evidence of cultural delirium. Unreality is as greedily craved by the mob as alcohol by the dipsomaniac; indeed, the jumbled nightmares of a morphine eater are actually realised by Luna Park.

In articulating these opinions, Huneker was not merely voicing idiosyncratic fears, but expressing concerns frequently advanced by the leading behavioral scientists of the period. According to the dominant school of American psychiatry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the genteel virtues of sobriety, diligence, thrift, and self mastery, safeguarded not only family and society but sanity itself. By encouraging sensuous self abandon, then, Coney Island in a very real sense promoted lunacy.[7]

If you will review in your mind recent media discussions of such matters as homelessness, the wisdom or foolhardiness of locating "upscale" establishments in "downscale" areas or the "unseemly" behavior of youthful audiences at rock concerts, you will find that these themes are still very much with us. The worlds of domestic intimacy and community challenge the world of urbanity just as much today as they did in eighteenth century England or nineteenth century New York.

Prospects For the Public Realm

The vital question, in making assessments about the state of public life today and predictions about public life tomorrow is this: to what extent can we say that the champions of domestic intimacy and community have won the debate they themselves engendered and framed?

We don't know the answer to this question and answering it must surely be very high on our research agenda. My very tentative guess is that while the enemies of the public realm have not yet registered a definitive win, they are currently far ahead, particularly in North America, but in some parts of Europe as well. I offer two kinds of evidence to suggest that this is so: the character of the residential built environment, especially in North America, and an emerging form in the built environment of public places in North America and Europe.

Residential Areas and the Public Realm

I want to make three points about the scale and design of residential areas and public life.

First, to the degree that the urban landscape is being shaped by large-scale housing developments—and in the United States this is certainly the case—larger and larger portions of that landscape seem to contain little, if any, public realm at all. Claims of a central city renaissance and the enthusiasms of some urban planners notwithstanding, the dominant urban settlement experience in the United States is suburban and seems likely to remain so.

The suburban landscape favors the private and, possibly, the parochial realms over the public. Once the requisite parks and playgrounds (for supervised neighborhood-centered recreation), community halls (for sedate neighborhood gatherings), and malls (for controlled consumerism) are in place, suburban developers/designers have shown no interest in building in a public realm—in creating locales that would contribute to a lively public life or encourage public sociability. In Britain, Milton Keynes, can stand as the epitome of planning exclusively for private lifestyles and, to a lesser degree, parochial interests.

Second, even where the public realm exists (as in sections of older, high density cities), the location and arrangement of housing areas and, increasingly, of work sites preclude many persons from encountering it as a normal part of their round of life. Automobile usage is both cause and consequence of the scale and location of much post-war housing and, of late, office complexes, particularly in North America. As such, automobile usage has been transformed into automobile dependence. For many North Americans, the normal round of life consists of moving from one's suburban park-like neighborhood, via private automobile, to one's suburban office park and back again. Only one's consumer demands force one to enter the public realm and then, only in its most sanitized and highly controlled form: the suburban enclosed shopping mall.

Third, even those who savor the pleasures of public life, may find them inconvenient or dangerous to pursue. In his book *Steppin' Out*, Lewis Erenberg describes the lively nightclub "scene" that flourished in New York City in the 1910s and 1920s.[8] Drinking was an important element in the scene, of course, but more crucial elements seemed to have involved the pleasures of public sociability, including brief encounters with strangers, many of whom were unlike oneself in class, ethnicity and lifestyle. The vitality, indeed, the very existence, of this scene was importantly linked to the fact that the New Yorkers who participated in it did not rely on personal automobiles for transport. When they went home, they walked or rode a trolley or other public conveyance.

In contrast, the situation of the urbanite living within the dispersed settlement pattern of the North American post-war city seems almost designed to preclude participation in such a scene. Limited public transport, the scale of housing tracts and thus the distances between a nightclub district and home, and, most crucially, the very high speed highway systems which link the various parts of the metropolis make public sociability involving drinking a very dangerous pleasure, indeed.

The Design of Public Places and the Public Realm

My second piece of evidence that the champions of domestic intimacy and community are well ahead in the debate is the phenomenon that Mark Francis might call the "undemocratic street,"[9] that Mike Brill has described as "bourgeois bou-tiquesville,"[10] and I have called the "counter-local." That is, many recently created public and semi-public spaces seem designed specifically to appeal to persons like this correspondent to the San Francisco *Chronicle*:

A previous letter writer is quite correct when he says, "We must find alternatives to the endless proliferation of automobiles." Unfortunately, the only way this will ever happen is by reducing the inexorable (they say) tendency toward increasing population in the area. I, for one, despise riding on public transit, even BART, because I am forced to be in the midst of strangers whose behavior I can neither predict nor control. When public transit runs from my door to my destination (or within a block of it), provides me with a private, lockable compartment, is there when I want it, and costs no more than driving, I will use it. Until that magic day we must accomodate the automobile or travel like cattle. I prefer the auto, thank you.

From Covent Garden to Ghiradelli Square; from the newly built hotels in New York's Times Square area, whose lobbies are on the second or third floor, to the Gallerias sprouting up in every metropolitan center; from the widely acclaimed new "downtown" of San Diego to the Downtown Plaza area of Sacramento's K Street Mall; from Utrecht's shopping mall to Milton Keynes' covered city center, we are creating purportedly public spaces that are only marginally in the public realm.

These creations proclaim loudly that criticisms of the public realm are valid but the problems pointed to by critics have been solved. The solution has been achieved by ensuring —through design and through the action of security guards should design prove insufficient—that such spaces will not be "contaminated" by the presence of the "unholy" and the "unwashed," will not be scenes of indiscriminate and inappropriate mixing, and will not allow irresponsible, and certainly not sacrilegious, frivolity.

But this is mere speculation, and the question at issue is too important for that. To know if, and the extent to which, champions of domestic intimacy and community may be said to have won the debate over the morality of public space—won it, not only in the hearts and minds of contemporary urbanites, but in the physical structure of our urban areas as well—we need serious research—a lot of it. Assuming all is not lost, we also need to discover whether it is possible to design public places that are truly in the public realm, and to design them in such a way that even persons like our correspondent to the San Francisco *Chronicle* will be enticed to enter and convinced to tarry.

Notes

1. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

2. Albert Hunter, "Private, Parochial and Public Social Orders: The Problem of Crime and Incivility in Urban Communitites," in G.D. Suttles and M.N. Zald (eds.) *The Challenge of Social Control: Citizenship and Institution Building in Modern Society* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1985).

3. Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

4. The argument that the public spaces of pre-industrial cities constitute the public, rather than—as might be imagined—the parochial realm, is developed in detail in my book, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). In bare bones form, the argument is that the population of preindustrial cities was too large, too hetrogenous, and too mobile for high levels of personal knowing to develop among their citizens.

5. Serious response from defenders of the public realm seem not to have appeared until rather recently. The literature of this response includes Jacobs (1961) and two books by Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage, 1970) and *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

6. Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1986).

7. John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

8. Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

9. Mark Francis (1987), "The Making of Democratic Streets," in Anne Vernez-Moudon, *Public Streets for Public Use.* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987).

10. Michael Brill, "Transformation, Nostalgia, and Illusion About Public Life and Public Environments" Keynote Address, 18th annual meeting of EDRA, the Environmental Design Research Association, Ottawa (1987).