

CLAIMING public SPACE: a (pre)amble to democratic design?



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enclosure of the commons

Current trends in the United States seem to be an attack on much of the social, democratic and environmental progress made during the 20th century. The Patriot Act, so-called environmental regulations such as the Clean Skies and Healthy Forest Initiatives, and discussions of privatizing Social Security, are retreats from the Federal government's role in safeguarding intellectual freedoms, protecting the natural environment, and providing social safety nets.

Our cities, towns, and neighborhoods are deteriorating because of this abdication of government and shifting of available resources to the chosen few. **The gap between the wealthy and poor is widening**, social services are being eliminated, **civility is on the decline**, and those on the wrong side of the economic divide are left to fend for themselves. As evidenced by the ballooning U.S. deficit, compounded by regulatory malfeasance, the idea that public resources are being used efficiently and fairly could not be further from the truth. **The marketization and increasing privatization of public resources and social life** is eroding this generation's sense of responsibility for, and even its capacity to contribute to equity and democracy in the 21st century. Concerns for social justice and environmental resources seem to be beyond the capacity of any one individual to change, but at the same time impact the quality of life of millions of people around the globe. For those who care deeply about these issues **what will we do about these trends?**

Envisioning citizenship, scaling participation

Given that historical forums such as the town hall or city council meeting do not express the dynamism and diversity of social life and communication, **new forms of association are needed**. If association expresses the right to be public, then what are the opportunities for citizens today? How can professional communities contribute to free and open dialogue across borders of sovereignty, place, and culture? As design is the expression of human intent in the material world, **an important role for the architecture and planning professions will be to develop tools to envision intentional citizenship** as a strategic and reflexive form of engagement.

Some argue that a mobile and networked society has led to increased isolation and placelessness. However, others identify the potential of affordable web-based technologies as an opportunity for engagement and empowerment. **Can new, flexible tools bring democracy to scale** that allow for the sharing, innovation, and dissemination of participatory strategies, technologies, and practices? By contrast, how will we bridge the digital divide between the poor, the elderly and the rest of us? The possibilities will require a careful consideration of both the limits and possibilities of technologies offered up as a response to the current crisis.

A preamble to democratic design?

The dissemination of knowledge and promising practices across boundaries of space and time are urgently needed. This will require contributing knowledge, shared narratives, and personal testimonies about the possibilities for democratic design. To build this information commons will involve the creative engagement by many and will demand openness in dialogue, debate, and dissent. As an initial proposition, envisioning citizenship is a possible strategy towards this goal. This will entail developing and sharing design literacy and communication-based approaches to empowering practitioners and citizens alike. **As an unfinished project, claiming public space by citizens represents a form of design intelligence** -- an evolutionary process that will give expression to tomorrow's spaces of engagement.