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Toward an Architecture of the Public Good

Tom Spector

The San Francisco Federal Building, designed by Morphosis (with SmithGroup Architects) and completed in 2007, likely heralds a new age in public buildings in the United States at a time when the concept of “public building” needs a reboot (Figure 3.1). The result of a “unique combination of avant-garde formal autonomy and political engagement” (Lavin 2007, 106) whose appearance was largely justified by sustainability objectives, it exemplifies an approach that stands to help the architecture profession overcome its relegation to the status of “weak service provider,” in educator Sylvia Lavin’s dismissive turn-of-phrase in a critique of the building (Lavin 2007, 106). Many in the field of architecture are pinning their hopes on sustainability to provide both a formal agenda and a strong moral mission for contemporary architecture, but this is unlikely to be a complete solution because sustainability is better thought of as a means than as an end in itself. After all, there is no logical conflict between a building’s being both perfectly dreadful and sustainable. Its sustainability credentials certainly have not insulated the Federal Building from controversy over its imposing yet mute appearance on Mission Street. The liabilities of the approach to form making illustrated by the Federal Building suggests that for the profession to overcome its relative powerlessness in the construction economy, a more inclusive public good served by architects engaging in their core activities of designing buildings and spaces for human use is worth exploring. But what is the content of the public good? How is it achieved?

Lavin (2007), unimpressed with this line of thinking, would have it that Morphosis’s approach creates opportunities for newfound relevance. But perhaps a more generalizable source of guidance to both penetrate and operationalize the concept of the public good can be found in the registration laws familiar to American architects that break this good down into the tripartite of protecting the “public health, safety and welfare” (NCARB 2016, 11). As this requirement plays out in practice, architects are charged with such negative obligations as not physically endangering people with our buildings, not making them sick and not flouting community development standards. But is there no positive side, no creative side, to advancing the public welfare?

Part of the problem with answering this question affirmatively is that, since “public welfare” is hardly less vague than “public good,” this third term mostly goes unremarked in practice. And so it seems that, even though a few “do-nots” can be culled from the concept of “health, safety and welfare,” what the phrase has mainly served to do is to call attention more sharply to what is lacking in our understanding of what serving the public good means.
The largely pro bono or in some way subsidized design practices by such entities as the San Francisco–based Public Architecture, the now-defunct Architecture for Humanity, and the many individual initiatives by architecture firms around the world that do good works and generate considerable publicity for doing so have begun to provide proven creative outlets for architects’ public spirit. These entities’ works serve the public good much as lawyers’ do: as something that must be achieved outside the boundaries of for-profit practice. The shortcoming of this approach, however well-meaning and welcome it may be, is that it marginalizes the pursuit of the public good as merely an ameliorative use of the profession’s excess capital. It’s wonderful if you can do it, but if you can’t, that’s okay too. If we want to be able to make the stronger assertion that the architecture profession’s limited market protections are necessary to enable its crucial role in advancing the public good, then we need a conception of practice for which this outcome accrues as a direct result of everyday architectural practice and not as something done on the side, when we want to, and as a gratuity. But before we can even assert the existence of such a service to the public good in order to establish a better foundation for the profession’s ethical legitimacy, we need a better understanding of just who is the public, and what is its good.

The Concept of the Public

The public is a problem. Or, rather, our understanding of just who or what is the public is a problem. Today, in the United States at least, we tend to identify the public as something that has always
existed and that is roughly synonymous with “everyone” or with the government. “Public land,” for example, belongs to the people through the intermediary of the U. S. government. But historically none of this is true. In its telling by Jürgen Habermas, the thinker who has done more than anyone to theorize it, the modern concept of the public arose in the Enlightenment as a “realm of discussion unaffected by social hierarchy” (Mah 2000, 163). Or, as philosopher Charles Taylor tells it, “the new public sphere” functioned as “a discourse of reason on and to power, rather than by power” (Taylor 1995, 265). In some ways, our contemporary identification of the public with the government is a victory for the concept. That we now largely associate the public, especially in terms of property rights, with that which we all own in common through the government is a reflection of the public sphere’s successes in promoting the institution of both universal suffrage and equality of rights. But in an important way this association is also an indicator of defeat, because it provides evidence of the waning of the public sphere’s critical capability, a capability originating in the coffeehouses in London and the salons in Paris as a self-organized realm capable of opposing reason to the inherited privileges of the aristocracy and the dogmatic moralism of the church. Through reason, both sources of unreason could be resisted and a modern space could be fashioned in which the rising bourgeoisie could assert itself. Thus the invention of public spaces belonging not to the king or to the church but to citizens, the invention of the art market, in which cultural achievement could be debated and purchased; and the gradual reintroduction of democracy itself after a 2000-year hiatus. But if the public realm is the government, then the bourgeois public’s critical role becomes absorbed in bureaucratic processes. Thus, as Habermas has observed, “Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant” (Habermas 1989, 4).

Thinking of the public as a stand-in for “everyone” is no more satisfactory. Even though the Enlightenment was guided by the concept that one’s status as a human being counted for far more than one’s inherited social status, to allow the public good to be guided by what everyone can agree upon is to set the bar quite low. Most of the time the public is rife with contestation. How are we supposed, then, to make decisions for the benefit of everyone when everyone does not agree on what is in their best interests? The bourgeois public described by Habermas allows for and even encourages this contestation, as long as it takes the form of rational dispute guided by the force of the better argument.

The Erosion of the Public

The bourgeois public—self-organized, nonhierarchical, guided by reason, critical of authority—is a great starting point for crafting an architecture serving the public good. But we need to know what we are up against and why the public has lost most of its critical force in recent times. What began in the seventeenth century as an intermediate realm between state and pure domesticity among an emerging reading, bourgeois social class has, in recent times, become progressively less a self-organizing place of resistance and more a childlike beneficiary of welfare state solicitations and consumer of capitalistic displays calculated, in a process Habermas terms “refeudalization,” to generate widespread acquiescence. This transformation has occurred because, as it developed, the bourgeois vision of open participation became progressively clouded in the nineteenth century by the unfair reality of an underclass apparently unable to penetrate into the public realm—a reality that was overturned only by radically democratizing the admission standards. According to its own logic, the idea of a bourgeois, literate public realm was obliged to expand or else show itself as less than egalitarian. This logic led to the inevitable expansion of the voting franchise in the United States from landowners to all free men, to all men, and finally, to all adults. This necessary expansion entailed the unfortunate side effect that, as it expanded democratically, the public lost its potential for critical self-appraisal and critical opposition to state authority: “The principle of the public sphere,
that is, critical publicity, seemed to lose its strength in the measure that it expanded as a sphere and even undermined the private realm” (Habermas 1989, 140). Expansion of the public to the point where there is no one in power on its outside means that criticism has to be turned, to some large degree, in on itself. The public realm must divide itself to retain its capacity for rational criticism.

But this expansion and flattening of its critical capacity are not the only source of its current dormant state. Most forms of civil society, of which the bourgeois public is the most politically engaged form, have been in retreat since their high-water mark shortly after World War II. Robert Putnam, in the book *Bowling Alone*, has amply documented the decline in recent decades in all sorts of informal organizations: bowling leagues, civic organizations, garden clubs, alumni organizations, churches and more are all shrinking. Richard Sennett’s *Fall of Public Man* charts the seeds of decline even earlier, to the late nineteenth century.

Latter-day capitalism has played its role as well. Thus, Rem Koolhaas’s assertion concerning the demise of public life that “everything has turned into shopping: Airports, museums, theme parks, even universities, libraries, and churches. Cities themselves are morphing into gigantic malls” (Ockman 2002, 77) fits Habermas’s diagnosis perfectly. Even if it were possible to reclaim a significant public realm, one capable of critical resistance to power, neoliberal economics would call into question the purpose. According to this view, an intensified private realm of leisure and consumption is the desired end result, so it seems, for which the bourgeois public realm described by Habermas was only a way station.

This economic interpretation of the good life has thoroughly inundated other, more politically engaged, conceptions of the good. It has, in particular, fastened the demise of the republican concept of democracy in favor of the liberal interpretation. In a republican democracy, personal initiative and self-improvement serve a greater public aim of participatory self-government, which is seen as the essential requirement for and expression of liberty. This republican conception of citizenship has been replaced in capitalist democracies by the procedural, liberal democracy. The liberal democracy operates, instead, on the assumption that the most important prerequisite for liberty is the right to be left alone; the most liberty is therefore secured by government that adopts a neutral framework to the activities of its constituents and lets each decide for himself or herself the ends worth pursuing. “On the liberal conception, by contrast (to the republican conception), liberty is not internally but only incidentally related to self-government. Where liberty consists in the opportunity to pursue my own interests and ends, it may or may not coincide with democratic government” (Sandel 1996, 26). The liberal conception regards the republican view with suspicion, casting doubt on the idea that an engaged electorate can be produced without cajoling and coercing people to participate and that coercing participation is a peculiar concept of freedom. Republicans believe that demanding participation is a small price to pay for the good of true self-government.

To accelerate the retreat of the public realm, the philosophy of utilitarianism, which maintains its dominance on the public imagination through cost benefit analyses and similar justifications for decisions affecting large numbers of people, provides an ideal moral justification complementary to liberal interpretations of the good. Utilitarianism is an outlook that cherishes, above all, “states of feeling as the source of all value in the world” (Hampshire 1978, 2). The state of feeling usually identified as most worthy of cultivation is happiness. By privileging happiness as the ultimate good toward which all moral actions aim, utilitarianism provides further justification for the liberal and economic interpretations. This is so because the idea of happiness is virtually unintelligible as a public good. Happiness is something ordinarily experienced by individuals; group happiness, to have any meaning at all, is only the sum of individuals’ happiness. Utilitarian outlooks favor the idea of architecture as a good that enables certain experiences that increase the overall happiness in the world, and this leads back to the conception of architecture as a consumer good maximized in a society as free as possible from the narrowing, distorting influence of government.
The idea that actions and material goods are ultimately justified by their ability to increase the experience of happiness in the world parallels the hierarchy observed by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore that as capitalism matures and standards of living improve, consumption moves from material goods to services, to information, and lastly to experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1999). This observed hierarchy provides empirical justification to utilitarian claims of the primacy of the experience of happiness. Happiness, or the perception of well-being, turns out, after all, to be exactly what people ultimately seek, once they have satisfied basic bodily needs. Bentham was right all along about the fundamentals of pleasure and pain. Michael Benedikt argues that architecture, too, has been swept into the justification of design actions through appeals to experience:

> Although rather few architects today are interested in perpetuating the classical-historical pastiche that Postmodernism first favored, many are still interested in the proposition that all buildings . . . ought to provide exciting and memorable encounters, albeit with trendier shards and curves or luminous twisted volumes crammed with electronic paraphernalia. Follow this trend and extend it, and ultimately we must arrive at a new general understanding of architecture—to wit, architecture as experience.

*Benedikt 2001, 85*

Benedikt is concerned that the supremacy of experience as the ultimate aim undermines the pursuit of authentic architecture. The creation of new realities and the reflection of reality back on ourselves are a traditional goal of architecture that gets lost.

While the liberal and utilitarian views seem to abet the withering of the public realm, newly emboldened libertarian conceptions even call into question whether such a thing as a “public good” can really exist. The somewhat ironically labeled public choice theory disputes the validity of the distinction between individuals seeking their own gain and something called the public pursuing a distinctly different set of goods. The public will, according to this conception, is not some mysterious, transcendent force for doing good in the world. It is nothing more than the sum of individual actions, and individual actions are primarily motivated by self-seeking ends. The division of the physical world into public—that is, government-owned property—or pseudo-public—that is, owned by for-profit enterprise—is the result.

Public choice theory justifies the incursion of the private realm of economic man into the political by arguing that the attainment of something other than the sum of individual goods is not possible; and that the political realm is incapable, therefore, of improving mankind’s lot over and above that which can be achieved by the rewards and penalties of the market. “Logically, if economic man maximizes self-seeking behavior in the economic realm, he also pursues selfish gain in social and political life. But where markets are self-correcting, politics is self-infecting” (Kuttner 1996, 333). Politics is self-infecting because it only introduces inefficiencies into market mechanisms; it cannot correct them. If politics is incapable of doing anything but redistributing goods in ultimately self-defeating (because skewed and inefficient) ways, then the associated public realm that makes politics possible is best minimized.

The cumulative effect of the logic of laissez-faire economics, procedural democracy and subjective philosophies of the good is to discourage the exploration for new interpretations of facts and values for public benefit. Classical economics instructs that nonintervention in market mechanisms is the speediest route for people to obtain what it is they want, liberal democracy holds that government is incapable of defining the good without coercion, and subjective philosophies of the good intimate that the good can be found only by looking inward. At every turn, the idea that the good can be sought via public forum in rational argument is discouraged or dismissed. Facts are seen as value-neutral by these conceptions, and values are seen as incapable of rational exposition (due to
their origin in subjectivity), and therefore pointless for public debate. Indeed, the very idea of public
debate becomes suspicious as inherently manipulative; “deliberation is taken to be mere logrolling,
ever legitimate consensus-building or problem-solving” (Kuttner 1996, 338).

And yet, even the public realm’s most strident enemies seemingly cannot do without it. As phi-
losopher Charles Taylor observes, “The public sphere is a central feature of modern society. So much
so that, even where it is in fact suppressed or manipulated, it has to be faked. Modern despotic socie-
ties have generally felt compelled to go through the motions” (Taylor 1995, 259). This is so because
a functioning public sphere does much to self-justify social and political legitimacy.

The New Pragmatism in Architecture

The low fortunes of the concept of the public are a sad spectacle, but they do provide an opportunity
for architecture to have some significant revitalizing effect. Recognizing the force of neoliberal eco-
nomics on the production of public space (or what passes for it these days), and largely unimpressed
with the marginal improvements made possible by pro bono work, a new unsentimental pragmatic
attitude toward the public good has asserted itself in the architectural academy. Not wishing to be
taken in by mere nostalgia for a time that never really existed, Sarah Whiting expresses with ill-
disguised disdain that

Lament-drenched, postlapsarian narratives about a lost public sphere . . . invariably feed futile
“retrieve and recover” missions that share success/failure rates with other contemporary mis-
sions based on myths. The public sphere in the US has, from its inception, been tied as much,
if not more, to business than to its presumptive origin in government or some variant of public
organization.

(Seagal et al. 2008, 102–107)

Whiting uses the term bottom line public spaces (BLPS) to identify public and pseudo-public spaces
created by business interests. She thinks these have long been and are likely to continue to be the only
public spaces created in the United States. BLPS “dot the entirety of American urbanism and are
very likely the only hope for public space that we will see in the near future” (Seagal et al. 2008, 106).
This new pragmatism toward the public realm seems to see only two choices, as Dana Villa observes:
“It is the choice between a politics of mourning and a politics of parody, a politics that remembers
the res publica and a politics engaged in the endless subversion of codes” (Villa 1992, 719).

This determination to adopt an unsentimental attitude toward the Habermasian concept of the
public realm questions not only its efficacy but also its legitimacy. Margaret Crawford argues that,
like the ancient Athenian democracy, which in reality was based in multiple exclusions, the bour-
geois public sphere “began by excluding women and workers” (Crawford 1995, 4). “Moreover, the
requirements for rational deliberation and a rhetoric of disinterest privileged middle class and mas-
culine modes of public speech and behavior by defining them as universal norms” (Crawford 1995,
4; Fraser 1993).2 This argument, developed out of an influential essay by Nancy Fraser, is beside the
point. The point of the bourgeois public sphere is not contained in its origins, which were indeed
imperfect, but in its logic—and its logic was and still is centrally about the worth of the individual
and the ideal of egalitarianism. And while much of the concept of the public has always had a
distinctly idealistic content—Harold Mah calls it a phantasm (Mah 2000, 153)—in this particular
instance history actually bears out its ideals. The public realm actually did transcend its bourgeois
origins to widen its inclusivity to include all rational adults capable of its participatory requirements.
In the United States it actually was receptive to civil rights claims in the 1960s. And most recently
it continues to be responsive to appeals to LGBT rights. One hopes that the feminist objection here
is not the self-abnegating one against rationality as being a province of the male intellect. There is nothing distinctly masculine about the exercise of one’s rationality nor about patiently listening to, discussing and considering each other’s arguments.

Crawford’s examination of the informal public realm of Los Angeles takes it as a nonstarter that the actions of architects do anything at all to create, reinforce or redirect a public amenity. Instead, she concentrates on street vendors and other “bottom-up” refashions of a public space out of government-owned (e.g., streets and sidewalks) or privately owned property (e.g., parking garages). “The emergence of these new public spaces and activities in Los Angeles, shaped by lived experience more than built space, raises complex political questions about the meaning of economic participation and citizenship in our cities” (Crawford 1995, 9). In the search for genuine grass-roots public spaces, how is it possible that all the buildings that architects have a hand in making to create the urban environment are left completely out of the equation?

The expansion of the private realm has led to severely diminished expectations of the public and, by extension, of what architects can do to beneficially influence it. The pragmatic determination to avoid nostalgia for a time that never really existed leads, ultimately, to the serious proposition by Dana Cuff that the public be rebranded merely as infrastructure:

“communities”—particularly those located in suburbs—undermine anything resembling a coherent, cosmopolitan expression of collective identity. In contrast to these fragmented, local associations, designers must now try to wring a form of public architecture from those lowly infrastructures that transcend the local—sewers, storm water channels, power grids, highways, and rail lines.

(Cuff 2012, 62)

And so it’s come to this. The prime opportunity remaining for architects in economically advanced Western societies to creatively engage the public is the sewer system. At least there is no further to fall.

**The Spatialized Public**

Why must the public be imagined in terms that are only tangential to architecture when philosophers, historians and sociologists have been quick to see that the concept of the public has always had a spatial component? For Hannah Arendt’s beloved ancient Greeks, it was intimately bound up with the agora. For Habermas, though first and foremost a social construct, the budding bourgeois public had its coffee houses, salons, reading clubs and art exhibits. But contemporary theorists generally see the idea as existing within a discoursal space first and a physical space afterward. That is to say, the operations of a bourgeois public depend on establishing a “space of resistance,” or a “critical distance.” It is understood as a “realm” that individuals can enter, inhabit and exit. “Historians have rhetorically ‘spatialized’ the public sphere, conceiving of it as a space or domain of free expression and argument that is accessible to any social group” (Mah 2000, 154). According to Charles Taylor, a public space is “a kind of common space . . . in which people who never even meet understand themselves to be engaged in discussion, and capable of reaching a common mind” (Taylor 1995, 265).

The bourgeois public occupies a different rhetorical space from the ancient polis. Whereas the discussants among the members of the polis understood themselves to be preparing for a decision by the very same people doing the discussing, a modern public is self-consciously extrapoliitical; it is addressed to power and not in itself an exercise in or a preliminary rehearsal in political power. This extrapoliitical character of the modern public is not a lack but rather a positive feature. This feature allows the public to deliberate, ideally, “disengaged from partisan spirit” (Taylor 1995, 265). It provides an outside check on political power, which did not exist in ancient times.
This discoursal space easily elides into a conception of three-dimensional, open, urban space among historians and sociologists as much with architects. As much as we heard about the “internet revolution” during the Arab Spring, or the Internet’s role in the Occupy movement, it was not until bodies place themselves in urban space in Cairo, Istanbul or Wall Street that the critical capability of opposition movements is realized. But unfortunately open urban space is rarely the architect’s creation. It is what is left over from the creation of buildings—and so once again the architect’s contribution to the public good occurs mostly in the margins. The upshot is that a public good derived from architecture is always spoken of as something tangential to architects’ core activities. It’s what happens in the interstices and around buildings, but the potential role of buildings themselves in creating and reinforcing a vibrant public realm is neglected. Thus, it is entirely reasonable, from this perspective, that both Margaret Crawford and Stan Allen would see more creative potential for shaping contemporary public space in the work of landscape architects and in the emerging field of landscape urbanism than in the work of architects (Segal et al. 2008, 106).

Buildings such as the San Francisco Federal Building that erase all signs of human habitation within or sense of human scale without are disregarding the public’s need to mentally inhabit context in order to make sense of it and, more pointedly, to be able to intuit the existence of well-meaning humans at work within its government buildings. The metallic screen covering the south wall could hardly speak louder of impervious, faceless, panoptic bureaucracy. The people inside, if there are people inside, can survey the public, but the public can have no sense of the building’s inhabitants. This disregard for a government building’s public face makes sense if there is no significant public to face. In yet another sign of the fallen fortunes of the concept of publicness, this observation has largely escaped mainstream architectural criticism. Though a neglected idea today (Blondel was promoting this in the eighteenth century as the concept of caractère), a building’s public face and form can contribute mightily to the public’s sense of ownership, belonging and orientation (Grignon and Maxim 1995, 33). Indeed, as Lavin asserted in a well-known essay on Quatremère de Quincy,

mechanisms that encouraged and required standards both of literacy and legibility were built into and enabled the very notion of a public space. And while paradigms of cultivated taste and of architectural legibility have changed since the eighteenth century, their use as evaluative criteria in assessing the publicness of architecture, and of the spaces it defines, remains almost uncontested.

(Lavin 1994, 192)

Uncontested and yet, also, apparently, too dowdy to be of any creative interest (Figure 3.2). The blankness and superhuman proportions of the Federal Building stand in stark contrast to another government building, San Francisco’s City Hall, only a few blocks away. City Hall, with its hierarchical neoclassical composition building on a central rotunda, provides all the elements missing at the Federal Building. Members of the public, even those not schooled in classicism, can read the façade and the form for visual cues. One can well imagine where the important offices are, where council meetings are held, where to enter and what windows to protest outside of, all signs of which are deliberately erased in the Federal Building. San Francisco City Hall bespeaks of the grandeur of local democracy: the Federal Building reads as a technological instantiation of the leviathan justified in the name of sustainability. The “paradigms of cultivated taste and architectural legibility” have been lost here, but hopefully not for all time. Perhaps this example can serve as a caution to pay attention to architecture’s public face as one component of serving the public good. When architects start regularly asking themselves, “What in my design helps further the public good?” untold opportunities will arise that can now be only hazily envisioned.
Figure 3.2  San Francisco City Hall.
Photograph by author.

Notes

1 Rafi Segal and Els Verbakel, eds. with Stan Allen, Marcel Smets, Sarah Whiting, and Margaret Crawford, “Architecture and Dispersal,” in “Cities of Dispersal,” Architectural Design 78, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 102–107, 103. In the same interview Stan Allen expresses this perception: “I think to start with we need to be skeptical of this vague notion of ‘public space’. Public space is a concept that is on the one hand hardly ever defined with any degree of specificity, and on the other never questioned as to its value. That’s a dangerous combination” (102).

2 The Nancy Fraser essay is from “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Bruce Robbins, ed., The Phantom Public Sphere (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

3 Cuff (2012, 62) will begrudge the following: “Of course there are still city halls, parks, courthouses, libraries, and schools, and these continue to materially render what we share. Today, these buildings are portraits of efficiency and utility, dressed in an aesthetic that could be called ‘thriftwashing,’ a thin coat of architecture that expresses a priority on economizing, whether or not the building is actually cost-effective.”

4 “On the basis of the new authority given to rational argumentation, the objects of critical discourse, such as painting, music, and architecture, themselves became autonomous disciplines, exchanging their traditional ritualistic function for a new status of commodity” (Grignon and Maxim 1995).

References
