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The Importance of Social Spaces

By Emil Kresl

People gravitate toward people. It's human nature to seek human interaction, yet it is also natural to feel like you just need to get away from other people for a while.

What perhaps is not fully understood is that, broadly speaking, there are really two kinds of public space, and a healthy and happy community should have a balance of both of them. A key element in finding that balance is understanding how people might choose not to socialize while they are in public. For those of us who design and build neighborhoods, towns, and cities, it's important to understand the distinction between *obligatory social space* and *voluntary social space*.

The Difference Between the Two Spaces

Obligatory social space provides people with little to no choice but to interact with other people, while voluntary social space allows people to have a variety of options for how they interact, including not interacting at all.

Obligatory social space is the lifeblood of a great city. It is one of the many benefits that come with increased density. A light-rail car where passengers must share a small space is an example, as is a crowded city street where people walk shoulder to shoulder and vendors call out to passers-by. That type of activity that surrounds urbanites on a daily basis is essential for safety, commerce, and to a degree social well-being. Without reprieve from that energy, however, many people operating in that public space find that it becomes exhausting. Obligatory social space may be inherent in dense, vibrant cities because of the activity and culture that lure people to those cities, but it is essential that a counterbalance be provided.



In Boulder, Colorado, 9th Street where it meets the campus of the University of Colorado is a bustling obligatory social space, bringing in tremendous revenue for the city and drawing international crowds seeking a rich cultural experience. Photo courtesy Catherine Cich.

The release valve is not solitary confinement or isolated domesticity — permanently drawing the blinds, securing the doors, flipping on the television. Rather, the counterbalance to obligatory social space is voluntary social space, where people may or may not participate socially on varying levels while still being out in the open. An example would be a hiking trail where you can take a walk alone, sit on a bench reading a book, meet a fellow dog-walker, or organize a group for an outing. Voluntary social space is the complement to obligatory social space, and without it a backlash results. People who can experience public space only as a place where they are forced to interact with other people will ultimately seek a means of retreat.



The mixed use development of Mueller in Austin, Texas, transformed a sea of asphalt that was once an abandoned airport into a community with an abundance of green space and trails for residents, providing them with the balance of voluntary space within close proximity to Austin's downtown and The University of Texas campus. The City of Austin is currently developing a 'Town Center' within Mueller that will offer retail and commercial areas all within easy walking distance of homes and parks. Photo Emil Kresl.

Great cities provide both types of spaces. New York City contains some of the densest of obligatory social spaces — sidewalks and subways teeming with people. Without Central Park and hundreds of other city parks, it would not be the great city we know today. That type of public space — a public park, where an individual's decision to socialize is left up to his or her personal discretion — is essential for a healthy balance in a community.

Achieving that balance does not necessarily mean providing vast expanses the likes of Central Park. As William H. Whyte points out in the film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, the way people use small plazas in dense urban areas shows how much they enjoy simply being alone while still in public. As he eloquently put it, "The most sociable plazas also have in absolute numbers the greatest numbers of individuals." Even a parklet (a park created from parking space) or a fountain can be voluntary social space.

Urban Sprawl — The Result of an Imbalance

When cities do not provide enough voluntary social space, the result is a backlash that manifests itself in urban sprawl.

It is common to point to the automobile as the culprit for the sprawl that engulfed mid-20th century America, but it is important to look deeper for the motive. In *The Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson writes of the advent of car culture in the United States: "Automotive families had neither to wait nor walk. New possibilities in shopping, living and working were opened." While the car may

have been the weapon, it wasn't the motive. Automotive mobility alone was not the cause of flight from cities. There must be a motivating factor to desire automotive mobility in the first place and, in addition to bigotry and other forms of cultural ignorance, that motivating factor was an inadequate balance of social spaces. Suburban flight was driven not so much by a desire for more private space, but by the need for a reprieve from the obligatory social space that dominated many 20th century American cities. With no access to social space where one does not feel the crush of other people, the tendency is to try to manufacture an environment that acts as a counterbalance.

But a backyard surrounded by a privacy fence is a private space that cannot address the human needs associated with public space, such as the need for social interaction. The ideal advanced by Jane Jacobs was not limited to New York City's West Village. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs tells of how "A good city street neighborhood achieves a marvel of balance between its people's determination to have essential privacy and their simultaneous wishes for differing degrees of contact, enjoyment or help from the people around." In a community that provides the high-energy, high-density chaos of obligatory social space along with a measure of voluntary social space, the need to find an escape in private space is minimized. When it comes to social spaces, chaos is good, but so is the social space that provides a reprieve from chaos.

Environments in which mobility by car is desired and in fact in many cases even required must be remedied by providing both obligatory social space and voluntary social space. To neglect this need is to enable a dysfunctional dependency that leaves residents perpetually deficient and wanting — conscious or not — of a balance.

The suburbs and exurbs are an attempt to suppress chaos. Such communities strive for order and control. Historically, many suburbs have been nothing more than bedroom communities, strictly private space developments capitalizing on the ramifications of an imbalance of social space in a city. Eventually, disconnected and isolated retail and commercial space would consume much of the suburbs as well. For some people, in the absence of any other venue, these retail and commercial areas served as social space. Social interaction, however, was not the primary objective of these private spaces, and some communities began to add public space.



As shown in this image of Jefferson Parish (suburban New Orleans), suburbs often mean an absence of any public space in which people can socialize. In areas like these, socializing would be limited to retail and commercial space — a controlled, monitored, and supervised space in which those who occupy that space are expected not so much to interact as consume. Wikimedia photo by D.B. King (CC BY 2.0).

For the most part, in suburbs that allowed for public space, the objective was voluntary social space. It was hoped that the voluntary social space, like the private space in those communities, would be tidy, predictable, and assiduously arranged. A dispassionate environment free of chaos often gives the misleading impression of security because the uniformity and homogeneity mean that anything out of that order is easy to spot and therefore, ostensibly, easy to remove. This type of environment has an appeal for many, but to realize such a goal also means the suppression of creativity, the degradation of diversity, and the end of happenstance — all things that are essential to progress, innovation, and culture.

Obligatory social space is essential to provide that community with the tools to grow culturally, emotionally, and economically, and in turn provides the benefits of dense living such as a reduced

carbon footprint, a more active lifestyle, affordability, social activity, and more time to spend with friends and family due to less time spent driving. A community that balances that obligatory social space with voluntary social space can instill in its residents personal, emotional, and spiritual well-being. This balance, it is important to understand, can come in many different forms and many different ratios, and results in an endless variety of healthy communities from small towns to big cities.

Personal Technology as a Means of Escape

Ineffectual escape from obligatory social space comes not only in the form of physical retreat, such as withdrawing into the private spaces of suburbia. There is a more subtle kind of escape that planners must be especially aware of. While an exodus of residents and businesses is an obvious indication that there may be an imbalance of social space, many residents who live in an imbalanced community may not have the option to move away, or it does not occur to them that they have such options. That does not mean that they are unaffected by the imbalance, and it does not mean that all is well.

Personal technology has enabled a new level of social avoidance and escapism. Just 30 years ago, when people found themselves in an obligatory social space, it was literally obligatory to not only interact with other people who shared that space, but to interact socially. In so doing, people developed a certain tolerance and ability to socialize, often with people from different cultures and backgrounds who had different ideas and beliefs.

Today, however, there is a crutch. Handheld game systems, iPods, smartphones, iPads — all of them enable people in an obligatory social space to retreat. Generally speaking, someone from the Great Generation on a bus or in the waiting area of a doctor's office has no qualms about chatting with other folks in that space, but younger people in that same space will often find it awkward or threatening if spoken to.

The effect will be an enormous population that has not developed the ability to properly interact with other human beings, the results of which are already more than apparent in our divisive, polarizing politics and media.

Moreover, if a balance of social space is not provided for a wide range of people, behavioral problems and all their societal ramifications will rise, as people somnambulate through their lives as an unhealthy means of coping with the imbalance.

What Planners Can Do

When planning communities, it is imperative to provide spaces that are public and yet do not make people feel captive or cornered. Offering this type of space can help people learn how to interact comfortably with one another and not feel the need to retreat. Obligatory social space requires the complement of voluntary social space where people can socialize on their own terms and not experience social interaction as something forced upon them.

At Cheonggyecheon, a public park in Seoul, South Korea, the daylighting of an urban stream formerly buried by a heavily used road transformed that city and its inhabitants by creating a vein of voluntary social space running through the community. New York City's High Line public park turned an abandoned and dangerous space — an elevated freight rail line — into voluntary social space above the hustle of the city. On the suburban end of the spectrum, Lakewood, Colorado transformed a failed shopping mall into a vibrant downtown center connected to existing neighborhoods, bringing much-needed energy and commerce to that town through the creation of obligatory social space.



The public park of Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, South Korea, is the release valve in a heavily developed city. It is a literally a river of voluntary social space surrounded by a figurative sea of obligatory social space. Wikimedia photo by Kyle Nishioka (CC BY 2.0).



The High Line, a public park in New York City, exemplifies the determination of new planners and designers to incorporate voluntary social space into our communities, especially those that are so densely developed. Wikimedia photo by La Citta Vita (CC BY-SA 2.0).

All of these projects, and many more, show that some planners are already aware of the need for balanced social spaces. As we move forward in efforts to create new communities and save troubled communities, it is paramount that we understand the benefits of employing this balance and the dire costs of failing to do so.

Where 19th century industrialized cities were a model of one end of the obligatory/voluntary spectrum, exurbs illustrate the other end. It may have been a painful lesson for our society to have gone to those two extremes, but identifying the need for a balance between obligatory and voluntary social space is an important first step. With this distinction, as we consider how to design and build communities, we can foster the creation of good public space while gauging the extremes between 19th century squalor and 20th century exurban sprawl.

By planning for denser, complete communities in which people live efficiently, obligatory social space becomes almost a by-product. In return, that social space is good for commercial interest and real estate demand. Without voluntary space, however, those benefits are unsustainable. People must be made comfortable, happy, and healthy. If that doesn't happen, they will withdraw physically or mentally.

The finer intricacies of living as a society continue to be a challenge, but perhaps the planning of a community can be made a bit easier by breaking down public space into the two categories of obligatory and voluntary. They are spaces that people are familiar with and can easily relate to. Explaining the benefits of having a balanced public space in terms that are easily understood can help us all appreciate not only the need for these social spaces, but the complex decisions involved in how we design and build our communities. The result, one hopes, is a better community and better understanding of one another.

Resources

Jackson, Kenneth T. 1985. *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jacobs, Jane. 1989. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books.

Whyte, William H. (writer and director). 1988. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (documentary film). Available online at <http://vimeo.com/21556697>.

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