

## Public Space and COVID-19: Contraction, Expansion, and Adaptation

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### Abstract

COVID-19 has hit cities hard. With the closure of places of work and learning, third places, places of leisure and consumption, and more, the pandemic has diminished our territories and contracted public space and public life. But a keen observation reveals a more nuanced picture. In many neighbourhoods, an interesting phenomenon of reclaiming much neighbourhood space for public use is evident. The repurposing of residential streets, sidewalks, parking lots, and other modest public spaces in neighbourhoods shows an expansion of public space and sociability. This expansion is also that of agency. The elimination of events and programming and the cordoning off of standardized equipment has left public space in an unembellished state of bareness. Space is available for citizens to make public. This pandemic has revealed our desire for publicness of the everyday, our ingenuity to use spaces for public life, and what is possible in our cities and in our public spaces.

**Keywords:** public space, neighbourhood, agency, adaptation, COVID-19 pandemic

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We have been asked to keep a social distance, not bring people (aside from the family or ones we reside with) into our personal space. We have to operate from our homes and stay largely within our neighbourhoods. For most, this has meant that we cannot share space with close friends and even some of our families. COVID-19 has taken away our access to much of public life and sociability, whether it is in our third places, workplaces, mundane spaces of mobility, learning places, or places of leisure and consumption. Coffeeshops, cafes, bookshops, restaurants, barbershops and salons are shuttered; most offices, other than essential, are shut; schools and universities are locked; retail stores, malls, theme parks, sports arenas and other places of leisure and play are closed. For many in the urban cores, the pandemic has essentially brought everyday life to a halt — commuting in public transit is hazardous, public spaces that are open are crowded, and even walking to get some fresh air doesn't permit a safe distance. The most obvious perception, in these times of the pandemic, is the shrinking of territory — a contraction of public space and public life. While this is generally true, the specific realities on the ground are more nuanced. Observing the lives of people who live outside of the hyper intense urban areas—the centre city and the urban core—reveals an interesting phenomenon of reclaiming of much neighbourhood space for public use.

### **Contraction, expansion, or adaptation?**

Even though the majority of US population lives in cities, a vast number of these urbanites reside in mid- to low-density neighbourhoods from the charming historic streetcar suburbs to the non-descript exurban neighbourhoods. The lived experience in these neighbourhoods is quite different even with the same constraints. Residents feel the same limitations on their lives but for those who have to stay home, the space of the neighbourhood—what sociologists call parochial space (different from public space)—provides a support system that, at least in part, delivers an alternative. In many of these neighbourhoods can be evidenced a remarkable range of repurposing of space on residential streets. With little use of the vehicle, driveways have become gathering places; pedestrian space is no longer limited to the meagre sidewalk and the pavement is a space to walk, bike, have conversations and active play; street junctions, cul-de-sacs, and parking lots are places for happy hour; the linear typology of the street is now easily morphed into gathering space—a path to place (Figure 1). Different people have adapted to the situation differently. Although centre city neighbourhoods face many challenges due to limited space, street use for play, gathering, and socializing is not uncommon (Figure 2). In the terms introduced by Osmond (1957, cited in Hall, 1966), the streets have transformed from sociofugal to sociopetal spaces. Mitchell (2003, 35) reminds us that “a space is made public when, so as to fulfil a pressing need, one group takes space and through its actions makes it public.” In the absence of unlimited urban territory, neighbourhood residents have taken the space within reach and are using it to make it public. This adaptation is an expansion of public space.



Figure 1. Public (and some private) spaces in streetcar neighbourhoods, such as Clifton in Cincinnati, Ohio, are used for gathering, socialization, walking, biking, active play, and many other means of public life. Source: all photographs by author.



Figure 2. Even though centre city neighbourhoods, such as Over-The-Rhine in Cincinnati, Ohio, have limited space, street use for play, gathering, and socializing is not uncommon now. Source: all photographs by author.

### Expansion of agency

The expansion of public space has another important dimension to it. This expansion is also that of agency. With the stay-at-home and social distancing orders, we are staying away from the hyper-designed, themed, and programmed private, quasi-public, and public spaces — shopping streets, shopping malls, theme parks, sports arenas and more. Even in our city parks and other urban open public spaces, there are no active events, and all programming is suspended, there are few directions to follow, and standardized equipment is out of bounds — the bareness of public space is made visible (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The bareness of urban open public space in major city parks is visible, such as in Washington Park and Smale Riverfront Park in Cincinnati, Ohio. Events and programming are suspended, and standardized equipment is out of bounds.

Source: all photographs by author.

This transformed public space may not be unmanaged, but it is certainly unguided. What is left over is a raw and unembellished state of space. For this short period, the grip of capital on public space has been loosened and space is left on its own for citizens to make public. Agency has been transferred to the people. This available public space presents itself as a near-blank canvas for people to interpret and use space as desired,

within culturally acceptable norms. The adaptation and agency are visible in the occupancy of space (Figure 4). Children's use of space is exemplar. With play equipment sealed, swings removed, water turned off in city parks, and the six-foot social distancing barrier in place, children are finding ways to invent play equipment, create play opportunities in the spaces available. On neighbourhood streets, with automobile traffic reduced, biking has provided an ideal combination of physical distance and freedom to move; street pavement has become a place for soccer; and sidewalk chalk is become a regular art activity (Figure 5). Children's territory has widened as they are able to actively use street pavements along with sidewalks, neighbourhood parking lots, driveways and more. But the perception of territory is not only spatial, but it is also temporal. With more eyes on the street, children are spending time out at various times of the day and for much longer than usual.



Figure 4. Agency has been transferred to the people. This available public space presents itself as a near-blank canvas for people to interpret and use space as desired, within culturally acceptable norms. The adaptation and agency are visible in the occupancy of space, such as in examples above of Burnet Woods, Washington Park and streets in Clifton in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Source: all photographs by author.



Figure 5. With reduced automobile traffic, neighbourhood streets are ideal for biking, sports, and even sidewalk chalk. Source: all photographs by author.

### The typological switch

Taking a broader citywide view shows a typological switch in the occupancy of public space and several other spaces of public life. With several quasi-public and public spaces closed, partially closed, or inaccessible, many are embracing the more open-ended and loose public spaces such as neighbourhood streets, natural urban parks, trails, and woods (Figure 6). Neighbourhood residents have become aware of the value of local streets and sidewalks as these have become the most used public spaces for family walks, children's play, exercise, or just for getting out to get some fresh air. Going out with the family means going to the everyday neighbourhood public spaces instead of shopping malls or theme parks. Although our current situation may seem dismal, we must not ignore the value of this adaptation of space where we have to be forced to shed the dependency on consumption in using public space.

### Hope for future

As public space scholars know, and examples from around the world in times of the pandemic have shown, there is not one public. The many publics have an equally varying set of needs, varying resilience, and varying ways to enact resilience. It is evident that not everyone can partake in this new expanded public space. The social disparities are stark. The stay-at-home situation can be mitigated by those who have access to their own private open space or nearby public spaces such as sidewalks, streets, parks, and woods. But stay-at-home orders can be insufferable for residents who live in neighbourhoods with housing that has little private open space, a limited access to public space due to inadequate public spaces, or unsafe conditions due to crime or traffic, or poor condition of public spaces. For some, this time has translated into finding the (forced) time to enjoy being outdoors while for others it has meant suffering through a lockdown or taking serious risks.



Figure 6. Many are using the more open-ended and loose public spaces including neighbourhood streets, natural urban parks, trails, and woods, such as Sharon Woods, Eden Park and Clifton in Cincinnati, Ohio. Source: all photographs by author.

The pandemic has taken many lives, caused devastation to economies that has brought so many families at the brink of economic collapse. This is not a time to romanticize the current situation. We do not want to stop going to work, we do not want to lose our third places, we want our services to be available again, our places of learning to open, we want access to spaces of leisure and consumption, and more. Yet, there are lessons to take away from the changed circumstances and heeding to these lessons may prepare us better for the future. Public space serves the many political, social, and economic purposes. In the current scenario, there are two long-range benefits of public space to public health. The everyday physical activity provides benefits that are crucial to public health, particularly in countries where obesity is a major problem. Not only does being outdoors lower the risk of coronavirus transmission, being active also translates into reduction of other life-threatening diseases. More importantly, the expanded use of neighbourhood public space leading to social interactions provides socio-psychological benefits helping alleviate social isolation that researchers have found to cause

depression and impact early mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017).

This pandemic has shown that we desire publicness of the everyday — socializing, conversations and other interactions with our neighbours and others, and we have the spaces and the ingenuity to use these spaces for public life. A vast amount of public space in cities is, in fact, parochial space — residential streets, neighbourhood parks, play areas, community gardens, community centres, and numerous non-private spaces in neighbourhoods. These spaces may not be the foremost public spaces to enact political action, but these are valuable spaces that form the social glue in our societies and help us live healthier. What we would hope is that through the current processes of contraction and expansion we are able to adapt and generate an augmented public space.

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