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VIEWPOINT

Thoughts on Public Space and *Flourishing* during COVID-19

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Abstract
Public space offers the places, circuits and networks used for contact with the diverse people and different activities that make up our social and psychological world. There is 35 years of ethnographic research evidence that public space is a major contributor to a flourishing society by promoting social justice and democratic practices, informal work and social capital, play and recreation, cultural continuity and social cohesion, as well as health and well-being. During this COVID-19 pandemic, however, we are experiencing a shrinking sense of this world and the resulting isolation tears at the fabric of our lives and exposes how dependent we are on one another for well-being and happiness. At the same time the pandemic highlights the socioeconomic basis of disease vulnerability and exposure risk. Expanding the use of streets, parks and open spaces can help to reinstitute the kinds of connections and relationships that underpin a flourishing society but only if a social justice agenda is kept in mind.*

Keywords: public space, covid-19, flourishing, positive psychology, inequality

* This article includes data updated to March 2021.

Introduction

Public space offers the places, circuits and networks used for contact with the diverse people and different activities that make up our social and psychological world. During this COVID-19 pandemic with the closing of public spaces and restrictions on public interaction, though, we are experiencing a shrinking sense of this sociality. Instead we are focusing on our families and home places as we translate the numbers of cases, hospitalizations and increasing numbers of deaths into risks faced individually. The resulting isolation tears at the fabric of our lives and exposes how dependent we are on one another for well-being and happiness.

Most of my friends are suffering from isolation and loneliness because they can't go to their neighbourhood gym to workout, meet in their local café or bar to talk at the end of the day or attend services at their church, mosque or synagogue. The number of calls I make to my family and friends has increased and I treasure my online courses and meetings with students for the sense of connection they provide. I expect that the ties to friends, third spaces such as churches and cafés and local community will remain intact regardless of how long this persists as we are actively "missing them" in a palpable and visible way. But what about other spaces, including public spaces, where we meet people we do not know and create new ties and relationships?

The pandemic is also revealing the socioeconomic inequality and racism that structures the built environment particularly in terms of housing and household density, adequate health services and safe public transportation as well as the amount of public space available for being outside safely. The coronavirus hotspots in most cities are in the poorest neighbourhoods, often populated by Black and Latino residents who are also essential workers without adequate health insurance, job security or the ability to shelter-in-place as public health officials advocate. Not only is the pandemic socially and psychologically painful for low-income residents, it is also economically and physically devastating.

Fear of public space

I am concerned about the use and meaning of public spaces that are now deemed dangerous because of the possibility of coming into contact with those who might be infected. Similar to people who live in a gated community, each time a person walks outside they are reminded to wash hands, exercise physical distancing, wear a mask and avoid groups and indoor spaces. While this is certainly prudent advice, we need to ask what the long-term impact will be on the fragile ties that weave together a complex society together.

Just the daily separation of us and them (or "people like us" and "others") can become a pattern that reinforces segregation and with it less tolerance, more fear and greater prejudice.[1] What will be the consequence of fearing that others may be contagious and unknowingly cause us harm? I expect that social distancing could be a new norm, recruited for other purposes and feed into already festering class and racial anxiety, now in a "medicalized" form. And what about the xenophobia of calling it a "Chinese

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[1] Low, Setha (2003). *Behind the Gates*. New York: Routledge.
Low, Setha (2017). *Spatializing Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

virus" and recent attacks on Asian Americans simply because the previous US President associated a nation with the initial infection. Where does this kind of thinking and daily practice lead? A "booster shot" to the already increasing xenophobic, racist hate crimes and police beatings of Black men that predate the viral threat?

There are already more announcements about who should be allowed into a state or city based on whether they might be a carrier of disease. People living in Sweden can not enter Norway or Denmark because of differences in their COVID statistics and degree of openness. For a period of time in the U.S., Rhode Island and Florida police stopped and questioned New York City drivers before being allowed to enter. A few months later, Florida is the hot spot and their residents are not welcome elsewhere. Hong Kong requires a 14-day quarantine upon entering for everyone and visitors must where bracelets that record their date of arrival. There is now talk about creating "vaccinated" passports for those who were able to get the vaccine (only 9.3% in the US on March 8, 2021) leaving those who were unable or unwilling to be vaccinated excluded from a return to any kind of spatial normalcy.

All this is to say that not only is our physical, mental and economic health being challenged, but also social health that depends on ongoing interaction with people who are different in a multiplicity of ways. It is more important than ever to think about the various obstacles faced, and to not retreat into separate "clean" and "safe" places for some and "dirty" ones for others. Instead I suggest that we consider public spaces the basis for a flourishing society and address the new lessons learned from the risks and consequences of the restricted use of public space during COVID-19.

Public space contributes to a flourishing society

Public space contributes to the flourishing of individuals, communities, cities and societies. "Flourishing" refers to what are considered the essential psychological components for humans to thrive from a positive psychology perspective, although this individual-focused paradigm can be extended to include social and group well-being. Ideas about flourishing also draw upon research on universal human needs and values for a healthy and productive life.

Flourishing offers a normative perspective in much that same way that Susan Fainstein employs Martha Nussbaum's set of human capabilities necessary for the full development of the person in her formulation of the just city.[2] Flourishing goes beyond the usual standards for what urban planners and designers mean by a well-designed space, but depicts aspects of what it means to be human and an agent in one's own life. Applying these psychological attributes as a guide for design and planning public space provides a different way of imagining the built environment and its social infrastructure. Positive psychology is a school of applied psychology that studies the strengths and characteristics that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The best-known proponent of this theory, Martin Seligman, suggests that psychologists need to focus more on what allows people to flourish rather than on measures of poor mental

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[2] Fainstein, Susan (2005). Planning theory and the City. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 25: 121-130.

health.[3] Incorporating Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi define positive psychology as "... the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life."[4] Their research provides evidence that flourishing can be attributed to what they call "PERMA" that is composed of encouraging positive emotions, engagement through activities, relationships with other people, meaning and purpose, and accomplishments. Another contributor to this discussion, Tyler VanderWeele adds physical health to this list and also considers the role of character and virtue.[5]

John Kinyon and Ike Lasater offer another way to characterize optimum human functioning based on three sets of universal human needs and values: 1) well-being, 2) connection and 3) self-expression.[6] Their model includes sustenance/health, safety/security and beauty/peace/play as part of well-being; love/caring, empathy/understanding and community/belonging as components of the need for connection, and autonomy/freedom, authenticity and meaning/contribution as sub-categories of self-expression. These additional human requirements expand the original PERMA criteria.

Combined these psychological theories offer a useful framework for thinking about the importance of public space at multiple levels. I have added social justice to the list, which at the individual level is sense of fairness, but at the community and societal level is composed of other positive values such as social inclusion and belonging, representation, recognition of difference, and an ethic of caring. These dimensions extend Seligman's PERMA and Kinyon's and Lasater's human needs and values and are reconfigured to include social and cultural goals that enhance human life.

Based on thirty-five years of ethnographic research there is empirical evidence that public space contributes to this expanded definition of a flourishing society through promoting 1) social justice and democratic practices, 2) informal work and social capital, 3) play and recreation, 4) cultural continuity and social cohesion, 5) health and well-being, and 6) sustainability and urban infrastructure both in the US and Latin America. Social justice includes social inclusion and belonging, representation, recognition of difference, ethic of care and contestation and resistance. Health and well-being include physical health, mental health, safety and accessibility, a sense of security, and resilience and community pride. Play and recreation includes the socialization of children, sports and team building, relaxation, retreat and religion in everyday life, and creativity.

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[3] Seligman, Martin (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being.* New York: Simon and Schuster.
[4] Seligman, Martin and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist* 55(1): 5-14, page 5.
[5] VanderWeele, Tyler J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, USA 114(31):8148-8156.
[6] Kinyon, John and Ike Lasater (2015). *From Conflict to Connection.* El Sobrante, CA: Global Reach Books.

Culture and social cohesion include cultural identity, cultural continuity, collective memory and place attachment. Informal economy and social capital include flexible workplaces, innovative forms of work, poverty reduction and social integration of immigrants. Environmental sustainability includes biophilia, disaster recovery, urban climate control, and reduced environmental injustice and toxic pollution. Public space plays a role in each as the Public Space Research Group has been able to demonstrate. These positive outcomes are based on empirical research and ethnographic findings on the presence and use of public space at neighbourhood, region and city levels. They are substantiated by a variety of methods, from quantitative surveys to large-scale park ethnographies and micro-sociological studies of social interaction on streets and sidewalks. When viewed together they offer a powerful argument that public space needs to be protected during periods when its use and availability might be questioned because of fears of crowds and people being too close together. And yet, even when protests for Black Lives Matter filled the streets of cities throughout the world it did not accelerate new outbreaks, and instead pointed to the deep discrepancies in the treatment—including the incidence and death rate during COVID-19—of Blacks and Latinos. Public space in fact offered the streets, parks, plazas, beaches and sidewalks where people could be together safely, and provided a forum to address the underlying problems of inequality that COVID-19 uncovered.

Conclusion

Public space is the major site of social interaction, contact and connection in our society. Failing to appreciate its importance and its promise as we practice social distancing and relocate our social lives to a virtual realm puts us at risk in multiple ways - mentally, physically and politically. Without public space it would be easy to overlook the inequality and lack of resources that plague cities and instead provides the parks and streets for the struggle against racism. Public space allows for some of the safest ways for people to be with each other, whether on a leisurely walk or a swim in a lake or ocean. I suggest that we remember and continue to celebrate what we are temporarily losing to restrictions and closures and appreciate its ability to improve our lives.
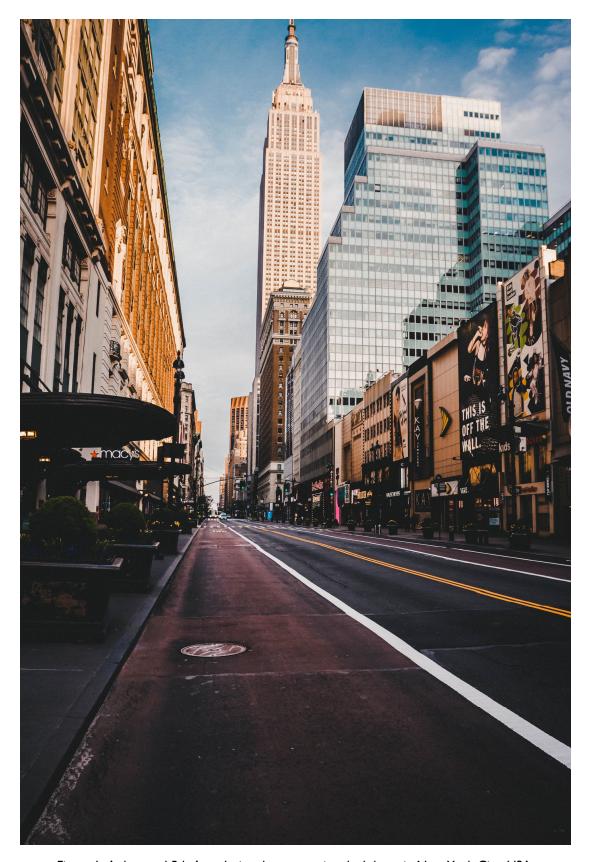
Figure 1. A deserted 5th Ave. during the coronavirus lockdown in New York City, USA.
Photo by Paulo Silva on Unsplash