

Dialogue, ambivalence, public space

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Abstract

Public space is neither a fixed thing, nor a stable concept. This paper applies the term ‘dialogue’ as a conceptual basis for the idea of public space as something that changes according to multiscalar and overlapping contexts, with use and discourse. The concept of dialogue is developed from the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin whose related notions of ambivalence, polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival and chronotope are used to support a dialogical understanding of public space. The paper develops this understanding by creating a parallel between Bakhtin’s dialogism and the Barking Town Square by muf architecture/art (2004-2010). Through this parallel reading, the paper suggests that design proposals for the public realm are valued propositions that suggest a particular transformation of aesthetic, ethical, social and political relations through the ordering and transformation of spatial relations. No design, no conception, and therefore no dialogue creating public space can be neutral—but inevitably takes place within a fraught dialogical context inseparable from individual positioning and responsibility. The question of boundary maintenance thus arises inevitably, and the paper examines a range of such problematic demarcations, including between public and private, typologies and flexible criteria, immediate and social contexts, and ideals and reality. Given dialogue’s condition of ambivalence and incompleteness, the paper argues that the inherent contradictions to the concept of ‘public space’ are its very conditions for existence.

Keywords: dialogue, ambivalence, incompleteness, public space

To cite this article:

Kenniff, T. B. (2018). Dialogue, ambivalence, public space. *The Journal of Public Space*, 3(1), 13-30.
DOI: 10.5204/jps.v3i1.316

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.
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Introduction

The 2008 European Prize for Urban Public Space was attributed to the Barking Town Square, a project by *muf architecture/art* in the East London borough of Barking and Dagenham. In the reports following the announcement of the winner, the jury's chair, architect Manuel de Sola-Morales, is quoted saying that the jury wanted to *valorise 'not a design, but a process, a methodology that seeks to combine the old with the new, the private and the public and the citizen's relation with architecture'*¹ Explicitly distancing itself from public space as a physical thing, the jury encouraged the notion of public space as a boundless territory which responds to and creates new typologies, as action, as well as a discursive field whose polyphony is orchestrated by a design project. This paper will periodically come back to Barking Town Square - the subject of a fieldwork-based case study by the author between 2009 and 2012² -, but for now the Square serves as a case for Sola-Morales' argument that *'all urban space is more or less public'* (Angles, 2010: 25). The Square is a space-time marker for the 2008 European Prize discourse that saw the concept of 'public space' becoming diffuse and begging the question of its definition. This discourse highlighted the fluidity of the concept of public space and its multiple ambiguities: those between material and social, public and private, and the design object and its production. Public space as a design preoccupation has always been fascinating because of the overlap between a discursive public realm (communication, politics) and a physical public realm (material configurations). Furthermore, the idea of public space is continuously marked by the blurring of public and private boundaries, strict theoretical denominations that tend to dissolve with actual use and reveal internal contradictions buried within the concept.

To start any discussion, the word 'public' has to be situated in a particular context to acquire any precision. Considering the 'public realm', an extensive field that blurs discourse with spatial organisation, social and political theorist Jeff Weintraub points to the impossibility of formulating a *'grand dichotomy'* with public/private. Weintraub highlights four conflicting and overlapping paradigms for the dichotomy, and states that the distinction is nevertheless useful if only because its terms of reference, 'public' and 'private', inevitably imply meaning and our society is structured along the ambiguity of these terms (Weintraub, 1997: 37). Defining public space raises similar issues where the reliance on a precise division between public and private can only be contextual and partially accurate. As Weintraub notes, the concept of 'public space' is further problematised given the fact that the city is both the object of study and the metaphorical source of many of the key concepts of Western social thought and political theory (Weintraub, 1997: 26).

Calling Barking Town Square a *'freely accessible and pedestrianised public forum'* (Fraser, 2012: 20) signals a particular conception of public space that ties the project with an archetype of Western urban and political form rather than its immediate context. The

¹ Sola-Morales is quoted in Serra, C. (2008, April 30). 'Espacio público sin maquillar', *El País*, p. 48. The original Spanish reads: *'Hemos querido valorar en este premio no un diseño, sino un proceso, una manera de hacer en la que lo que se busca es combinar lo viejo y lo nuevo, lo privado y lo público y la relación del ciudadano con la arquitectura.'*

² The study involved 60 interviews with designers, developers, politicians, council officials and local residents, workshops with residents, multiple visits to Barking including week-long stays in one of the new residential buildings framing the site, and participation in a range of public activities in Barking Town Centre. For a discussion of research methods and dialogism, including those used in the case study, see Kenniff, 2011.

public character of such a Square depends on a range of factors, including time of day, opening hours, weather, bylaws, civic order, commercial activities, inter-subjective relationships, etc. Elsewhere, I have previously described how the identity of Barking Town Square emerges from a series of relationships as space-time figures, or chronotopes: those of London and Essex, Barking and Dagenham, Old and New Barking, Town Centre and Town Square, as well as chronotopes within the Town Square, in which distinct parts contribute to the assemblage of the whole (Kenniff, 2013). In this sense, the 'public space' of Barking Town Square relates to what political scientist Margaret Kohn describes as a '*cluster concept*' whose definition is multiple and sometimes contradictory and captures the public-private hybridity of social space in both its relational multiscalarity and its public character (Kohn, 2004: 11). Here, I propose that it is these ambiguities that define public space as a design problem.³

The paper builds on the contradictions of public space before developing a conceptual framework based on the concept of 'dialogue' that responds to and makes sense of these contradictions. This framework is constructed through the work and the legacy of linguist, literary critic and thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Bakhtin's work, spanning diverse areas of the humanities and arts and synthesised as dialogism (See Todorov, 1984; and Holquist, 1990), is particularly relevant to the study of public space, especially when considering the ambiguities described above. Bakhtinian dialogism frames immediacy, presence, corporeality, indeterminacy and incompleteness, as well as establishing conceptual links between language, speech, space and time. The dialogic, in this sense, is both an ontological and an aesthetic principle that, in contrast to the dialectic, offers no synthesis. In this paper, some of dialogism's principal concepts (dialogue, ambivalence, carnival, chronotope and heteroglossia) serve as foundation for our conception of 'dialogical public space'.⁴

³ For a specific description of muf architecture/art's project for Barking Town Square and their design process in relation to dialogism, see Kenniff, 2016.

⁴ Brief descriptions of Bakhtinian concepts used in this paper (in alphabetical order):

ambivalence = The result of the conjunction of opposites in *dialogue*, and whose encounter points in two directions simultaneously (*both/and* rather than *one/or*). Ambivalence is a crucial notion because it underpins the whole of *dialogism*: the *ambivalence* between self and Other, utterance and language, monologue and dialogue, fear and laughter, sacred and profane, etc. For a discussion of '*dialogic ambivalence*', see Zima, 1981.

carnival / carnivalesque / carnivalise = A temporary public situation predicated on laughter and *ambivalence* brought forth by the conjunction of opposites. Carnival laughter aims at the temporary overturning of ideals, fears, the sacred, and structures and figures of authority. From the point of view of *carnival*, strict oppositions (dichotomies) lose meaning. See Bakhtin, 1984b; LaCapra, 2003; Lachmann, Eshelman & Davis, 1988; and Zima, 1981.

chronotope = A spacetime unit of analysis that '*makes narrative events concrete*' by '*materialising time in space*' (Bakhtin, 1981: 250). *Chronotopes* can be symbolic (the square), historical (a particular period), or refer to, in our case, the process of writing or of design (the author's own timespace markers, or the project's place in time).

dialogism = The system of thought based on *dialogue* that, in its Bakhtinian version (as opposed to the dialogism of Martin Buber or Emmanuel Levinas) and for the scope of this paper, encompasses *ambivalence*, *carnival*, *chronotope*, *heteroglossia* and *polyphony*.

dialogue = A mode of relation and encounter between entities that supports that the encounter between them cannot be superseded or transcended synthetically. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the dialogic principle is that '*it is impossible to conceive of any being outside of the relations that link it to the other*' (Todorov, 1984: 94).

From symbolic types to fields of interactions

Because of blurred boundaries and ambiguous meanings attributed to the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’, public space eludes, perhaps like no other design problem, strict classification and typology. Attempts at classifying public spaces according to types usually produce longer lists fated to be edited in the future, expanded and adjusted to the ‘*evolution of public life*’ (see for example Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992: xi). The problem with classification and typology, however, is that they eventually fail to grasp the full complexity of public space and, as architect and planner Matthew Carmona (2010) writes, the approach tends to produce an infinite complexity of types. As a possible solution, Carmona emphasises the tendency to move away from rigid classification toward more flexible evaluation criteria. He applies four: three are from Margaret Kohn, ownership, accessibility and intersubjectivity, with the fourth being management. Although Carmona’s classification of urban spaces follows the idea of social space oscillating between the truly public and the truly private, it also begs the question of whether categorisation is ultimately inevitable even when dealing with flexible criteria, since we might keep fixing variables to understand a place according to a particular social concept, time, or value while continually relying on the polarity between uncertain and problematic notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’.

Attributing a specific type to a place is trying to fix something that cannot be fixed. This attribution fixes meaning, but the meaning will change with the use of the place, its management, the connections it fosters, its perception in the local community, and with time. The typological expression ‘town square’, for example, attributed early on to the project for a public space in front of Barking Town Hall, has invited a constant debate between the projection of civic ideals and the reality of social life within Barking Town Centre. The debate can be heard in every attempt by local authorities to give a clear civic identity to the project and the place *vis-a-vis* the noise of local residents and users performing and producing spatial configurations or loose identities for it that are patently equivocal to the official discourse. A flexible (rather than a typological) model, however, recognises that ‘public space’ may have more to do with experience and use than regular forms or physical/spatial archetypes like squares and streets. Flexible criteria have their own problems but do seem like the most promising approach to the problem of defining public space as a socio-material construct while engaging the full complexity of spatial production.

In the case of Barking Town Square, conversations with local residents, politicians and designers reveal the social and material ambiguities of public space. While most public reactions imply a physical public realm as a particular location (partly owing to the formulation of the question), they also imply cross-overs between physical and social aspects of the public realm: public life, meeting strangers, crowds, speech, etc. In workshops and interviews, the expression ‘public realm’ (routinely used in the UK to identify a project of public space) rarely referred to an abstract public sphere of political and social interactions isolated from the physical world, and rarely implied ‘public space’ existing beyond and apart from public and social life. In some instances, the expression

heteroglossia = Linguistic stratification and diversification. Every speech act works toward *heteroglossia* and against the homogenising tendency of a ‘unitary language’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 272) by inflecting language with tone, genre, position and affectation.

polyphony = A plurality of equal and unmerged voices within the same subject, object or event. *Polyphony* points to an ambivalent relation between a unified whole and individual parts. See Bakhtin’s work on Dostoevsky’s *polyphonic* novel (Bakhtin, 1984a).

was used multiple times by the same person to describe different concepts, or objects.⁵ This type of ambiguity, implying both physical and social elements, expresses the idea that working on public space projects implies making propositions about the organisation of society.

The relationship between physical, spatial and social aspects of public space must be framed appropriately. Criteria beyond the physical properties of place are relevant to how we conceive public space. It is no longer appropriate to understand public space as a purely physical aspect of cities, a given stage for the enactment of human interaction (Crang & Thrift, 2000: 3);⁶ nor is it appropriate to extend a set of typological locations and settings to support new aspects of social life (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001: 16).⁷ Rather, 'public space' can be understood through Henri Lefebvre's work as both physical and social, a production of human society, where morphological elements express specific social production processes, and a reciprocal production of social behaviours through space (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Paquot, 2009). And nor can public space be conceived without addressing theoretical models for which human and non-human aspects have reciprocity and share agency; the city as an enactment of socio-material and socio-technical assemblages of *'heterogeneous actors, material and social aspects'* (Fariás, 2009: 14). Geographer Ash Amin argues the same about public space saying that the concept should include the total dynamics, human and non-human, of a public setting (Amin, 2008). From these positions, which derive in part from assemblage theory and actor-network theory, we can take the necessity of treating human actors and human constructs (language, culture, norms, structures, design, technology, etc.) reciprocally with actors exterior to (or not immediately tied to) human beings or culture (ecosystems, 'nature', weather, other living beings, substances and materials, etc.), as well as material/immaterial relationships, new technologies, digital and virtual spaces. 'Public space', then, moves irrevocably from the physical thing to the thing in becoming, from the type to the field: Seeing public space in this way, as an enactment or a performance, suggests that *'there is no archetypal public space, only variegated space-times of aggregation'* (Amin 2008: 9). The scope, here, is enormous, but the above lines of thought bring up the necessity to develop models that address the complexity of public space or, put differently, that address the fields of interactions from which public space emerges.

Voice and dialogic ambivalence

As will be developed below, Bakhtinian dialogism offers a promising way of dealing, in part, with this complexity by focusing on human actors (their actions and behaviour)

⁵ An architect who worked on Barking Central, the mixed-use regeneration project that includes Town Square, referred to the public realm as: the freely accessible built environment (*'...The more you put on the site, the more you could pay for the public realm...'*), the realm of information accessible to any UK citizen (*'...Every planning application has to be put into the public realm...'*), and the space of social interaction (*'...The principles of the public realm are...routes here, big space here, big space there, something tall there, library and police station here, and allowing things to knit through.'*).

⁶ Crang and Thrift propose that space has to be understood as process rather than a given abstract category.

⁷ Hajer and Reijndorp write that thinking about public space at the turn of the millennium is determined by the intuitive notion that public space must be specifically located: a square, a café, a park. For them, the pervasiveness of this notion means that new and different manifestations of the public sphere are at best overlooked and at worst ruled out of being public at all—a position echoed by Manuel de Sola-Morales in the attribution of the 2008 European Prize.

while opening the possibility to read discourse and intention in the organisation and ordering of various spatial contexts. What ties human actions and spatial contexts together in 'dialogue' is 'voice' and ambivalence. Not solely the voice of the person, but the communicative capacity of any entity⁸ and the way this 'act' actualises both a specific local context and a generic social context. In the case of Barking Town Square, the paper looks at how speech acts and discourses parallel the material (physical, spatial) project for public space as sets of 'voices' that come into interaction, agreement and (or) conflict.⁹ A public space like Barking Town Square should be understood as a product specific to its particular local context, culture, and political organization. It is a particular enactment or assemblage in space and time, a produced space, or process, rather than an architectural 'thing'. The meaning we attribute to the Town Square, or to any other place, is then accredited to its production, resulting from a dialectical relationship between objects and social practices. This is an important step in developing the background for a dialogical theory of public space, because it sets up a question about the relationship between space and dialogue and the accounting for myriad contributing actors. It would be impossible, for example, to dissociate Barking Town Square from the official views of the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation and its development production processes and biases from the clearly conflicting public use of the Square as a rallying point by rioters and looters during the 2011 London riots.¹⁰ But the scale and content of these views conflict only if we see public space as a given fixed entity.

The kind of telescopic reach described above between the scales of territorial agency and strategy and immediate local action enfolded in the production of public space illustrates, once more, the complexity of any attempt at classifying public spaces. Categorisation at any time leads to a fragmentary understanding of public space. It should always be possible to understand public space as a momentary production whose design, social, political, cultural, and (or) financial aspects overlap definitive boundaries. Ideal projections of and aspirations for public space are thus constantly challenged or affirmed by use and experience. Drawing an analogy with geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja's description of the socio-spatial dialectic (Soja, 1980), it is possible to say that ideal public space and real (lived) public space involve, underpin and pre-suppose each other; they reciprocally, continuously express and affect each other. The meaning of any public space, then, is worked at in the problematic—and non-synthesisable—relationship between authority and experience, and between ideals and their real counterparts. The fact that this relationship cannot be synthesised is one of the fundamental principles of the dialogic: 'dialogue' means an ambivalent relation between entities that are neither subsumed into nor transcended by the encounter. Public space, in other words, acquires form and meaning dialogically. The next sections of this paper address this proposition.

⁸ Bakhtin criticises the tendency of logically (structurally) defining all relations between entities and the necessary 'depersonalization' of the process. He, instead, hears 'voices in everything and dialogic relations among them' (Bakhtin, 1986: 169).

⁹ The particularities of Bakhtinian dialogism and Barking Town Square are two markers, therefore, for the scope of this paper, its potential and limitations in addressing the full complexity of public space. The aim, here, is an initial exploration into what 'dialogical public space' could mean so that it may eventually complement and lead to further productive encounters with other models for public space.

¹⁰ The London Thames Gateway Development Corporation was set up by the UK government between 2004-2013 to oversee the urban development of a portion of the Thames Gateway area (including Barking Town Centre and the Lower Lea Valley, the 2012 Olympics' site). Its CEO, Peter Andrews, in a personal interview recorded in 2010 a year before the London riots, claims that an 'ideal public space' has to be 'well-funded, orderly, economically viable and convivial'.

Dialogic public space

In 2009–2012, a period of consultative fieldwork in Barking revealed confusion amongst participants about the notions of ‘public space’ and ‘public realm’—blurred boundaries and reciprocity between social and physical aspects appeared in the use of the expressions generally (for different purposes and with different meanings) rather than in their specific use. There was rarely confusion as to the intended meaning of each expression when used: my interlocutors knew what they meant when using one expression over another. Speakers moved between physical, social and political elements depending on the dynamics of each conversation. This does not mark confusion as to the actual meaning of the expression but rather exemplifies the broadness of the concept itself whose signification changes according to its use, in the context of the exchange. The use of concepts must be placed in the context of dialogue whether it is the conversation between persons, or the conceptual ‘dialogue’ between things. This paper develops a response to the problem described above by examining it through Bakhtinian dialogism. This theoretical development takes a path through (i) the relationship between ‘dialogue’ and the notion of a discursive public realm, (ii) the spatial dimension of Bakhtinian concepts and, finally, through (iii) a proposed model for an aesthetics of public space in which dialogue and space mutually produce each other.

A grotesque public realm

Bakhtin’s dialogism, as an aesthetic and ethical principle, stresses the significance of voice, presence and corporeality while acknowledging the contingent and relative nature of being and cognition. From earlier work on art and aesthetics (Bakhtin, 1990; 1993), through exploration of the novel (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984a; 1984b), and to later work on language and the humanities (Bakhtin, 1986), the acting and speaking subject is presented from a dialogic, ambivalent position: sacred and profane, full of faults and potential, in constant relation to an ‘other’, begging for an answer back, incomplete. These general lines of Bakhtin’s dialogism make his thinking relevant to the modern model of a discursive public realm. This model, given form by philosopher Jürgen Habermas in the early 1960s, supports the idea that public space is generated by dialogue—diverse discourses, languages, linguistic spaces, meanings—rather than being a given setting for dialogue (Habermas, 1962). Bakhtin scholar Ken Hirschkop suggests that the immediate relevance of a Bakhtinian critique of the public realm lies in this very shift from conceiving public space as ‘*a space in which a certain kind of communication could take place*’ to a ‘*space generated by a certain kind of communication*’ (Hirschkop, 2004: 51). More precisely the Bakhtinian critique of the discursive model of the public realm builds on the work of, for example, critical theorists Nancy Fraser (1992) and Joan Alway (2000) who test the model for its handling of difference, projected ideals and evacuation of real ‘bodies’. Using Bakhtin, critics have sought to test and expand the Habermasian model on ethics and rhetoric, difference, grotesque corporeality and the intricacies of speech acts (see Nielsen, 1995; Garvey, 2000; Gardiner, 2004; Hirschkop, 2004; Roberts, 2004; 2008).¹¹ Habermas’ own response to his critics makes a brief mention of Bakhtin in recognising the political importance of ‘*plebeian culture*’ in shaping the public realm (Habermas, 1996: 427). The Bakhtinian public realm is one where dialogue takes place asymmetrically between subjects who are imperfect, whose speech confounds high and low culture, and

¹¹ The Bakhtinian critique of the discursive model of the public realm follows similar lines as the critique, during the 1980s, of ethnographic authority in anthropology (see Weiss, 1990).

whose actions are inseparable from their earthly, physical bodies: a ‘*politics of impurity*’ (Thornton, 1994: 92, quoted in Gardiner, 2004: 40).

Spatial dialogics

What we may infer from the above is an understanding of public space based on the idea that the relationship between dialogue and space is equivalent to the relationship between social practices and space. In this case, dialogue has to be developed as a concept that describes social, cultural and political relationships located in and producing space. Two seminal papers mark the development of a dialogical (Bakhtinian) conception of space. The first, by geographer Mireya Folch-Serra, explores ‘landscape’ as something constituted of multiple ‘voices’ with ideological character (Folch-Serra, 1990). The second, by Julian Holloway and James Kneale, also geographers, describes the spatial qualities of all Bakhtinian concepts, from self/other relations to the chronotope (Holloway & Kneale, 2000).

My suggestion here is to use these two papers as a basis to develop the concept of dialogical public space. At the onset, this notion means that (i) any conception of public space is a non-neutral and ideological conception marked by *polyphony*, and that (ii) the spatiality of the concept encompasses the myriad scales at which public space is produced, enacted or performed.

For Bakhtin, the relationship between dialogue and public space is one of ambivalence between fear and laughter and between authority and its challenge. Publicly enacted in space, this ambivalence takes the form of carnival (Lachmann, Eshelman, & Davis, 1988). It was the grotesque human body of the middle-ages (that Bakhtin read in the pages of François Rabelais’ novels) that embodied this ambivalence as opposed to the mathematical and ideal body one of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. As Holloway and Kneale note, this conception of the body was closer to ‘the body of the people’ for Bakhtin than any other, and in more than one sense. The general reality of bodies—gross, deformed, smelly, loud and subjectively incomplete—was metaphorically represented in ‘carnival’ as the other side of official culture (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 80). That is, social relations and their subversion(s) were acted out in the space of carnival.

The relevance of Bakhtin’s concepts is less in their overt connections to public space through the medieval public square of Rabelais and the carnival, and more in their inherent spatiality. This observation is the crux of Folch-Serra’s and Holloway and Kneale’s conceptions of dialogical space. For Holloway and Kneale, this spatiality is characterised by two differing conceptions of context: one material and phenomenological-and the other one social. Because dialogue is such a diffuse concept that touches on space at multiple scales, what follows below traces a path through the singular and the collective, close and far, and touches on various fields including psychology, philosophy and geography.

The relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’ constitutes the basis of Bakhtin’s thought on subjectivity and identity, a relationship that is always spatial because it is predicated on the non-repeatability of being as an event and the uniqueness of each person’s location in space and time. What Bakhtin emphasises is the importance of the particular place from which observations are made (Folch-Serra, 1990: 266). Hence, the positional relationship between the one and the other is what determines the meaning of an observation. The same applies to utterances or deeds which are situated and shaped by relationships to others. ‘*The work of signification or meaning*’, Holloway and Kneale report, ‘*always occurs as part of a dialogue between (at least) two utterances*’ (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 76). Meaning

is worked at rather than given. The important point is that *'space matters because the outcome of a dialogue depends on where it is stated'* (Folch-Serra, 1990: 266). The meaning of a particular utterance depends on the position of the person standing in front of me, sitting behind a desk, upon a stage—always outside myself—and its relation to other utterances in the dialogue, and their respective position(s). This first, immediate, material and phenomenological spatial context is contrasted by a second, social conception of context. For Folch-Serra, the utterance, apart from being constitutive of immediate dialogue, communicates social dialects and contextual positions: class, gender, family, region, etc. (Folch-Serra, 1990: 260). Holloway and Kneale similarly suggest that any utterance given by a speaker expresses a particular world-view, social interest or positionality through its particular speech genre. Their diversity, in competition or in conflict, is called *heteroglossia*. Hence speech genres come to define 'position' as *'the placing of the speaker in an ideological terrain'* (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 77). So the meaning of the utterance also depends on its position with respect to a wider social context given by particular speech genres. Each speech genre, in turn, presupposes, or predicates, and produces a particular space. A politician's speech on the stage of Barking Town Square during its inauguration ceremony (Fig. 1) and conversations on Main Street punctuated by slang (Fig. 2) are characteristic situations in which speech genres and space mutually affect each other in defining social context.

Holloway and Kneale suggest that the gap between the material/phenomenological and social conceptions of context is resolved by understanding social context as the third element between 'self' and 'other' a dialogic double-movement where each context affects and is affected by the other; a simultaneous pushing and pulling that happens in a given situation between the subjective and the social. This pushing and pulling is theorised by Bakhtin as a set of centripetal and centrifugal forces moving between homogeneity and heterogeneity. *'Dialogue takes places between the centrifugal forces of subjectivity, which are chaotic and particular, and the centripetal forces of system, which are rule-driven and abstract'* (Folch-Serra, 1990: 261). The ambivalence of dialogue between centripetal and centrifugal forces is what bridges the gap between the social and the phenomenological contexts. Hence, Holloway and Kneale can argue that heteroglossia is spatial because it acts on the (spatial) relationship between concrete (physical) speakers. They conclude that *'the social terrain of heteroglossia can be argued to be a socio-spatial landscape... If speech genres carve up the social then they can also be seen to carve up space'* (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 79). Dialogue, then, produces space, and, applied as a concept it can reciprocally uncover the particular production process of this space. The boundary between understanding space and understanding dialogue about space starts to dissolve when we understand that each presupposes and underpins the other. This is what Folch-Serra implies when she describes landscape as a *'repository of heteroglossia'* both *'graphically visible'* in space but also *'narratively visible'* in time (Folch-Serra, 1990: 258). The analytical tool that supports this statement is the chronotope whose spatial implication is perhaps the clearest of all Bakhtinian concepts. The chronotope is based on the relationship between space and time as defined in Bakhtin's relativist view of space (in which 'difference' originates in the simultaneity of various points of view). What the chronotope allows is to momentarily fix the dialogical landscape so that it may be understood as a series of (consecutive) space-time situations on which stabilising and destabilising forces are acting. The chronotope, therefore, is a notion that supports the concept of 'dialogue' by specifying particular moments and tendencies of the latter's spatiotemporal structure. In Bakhtin's thought, the chronotope is introduced as a key to uncovering the spatiotemporal structure of

texts, from immediate to historical markers, literal to symbolic (Bakhtin, 1981). Chronotopes are characteristic of particular speech genres whose relationships to space and time are intertwined with their own ideological positions. So the wider social context, the production, of a particular space is inscribed in its chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981: 250). For Folch-Serra, this means that to investigate dialogical landscapes through chronotopes always leads to the human voice. Reading time into space, either the space of self/other relations, the space of social relations, or the socio-spatial landscape of heteroglossia, thus uncovers the particular positions of a dialogue that is 'never a neutral exchange' (Folch-Serra, 1990: 258).



Fig. 1. Barking Town Square phase II opening ceremony, September 2009.



Fig. 2. Blake's Corner, Barking's main commercial intersection, 2010.

Public space production is marked by ambivalence, oscillating between stabilising and destabilising forces. The space of Barking Town Square is multiple, and points to people sitting on benches, walking its lines or to organised events. It points to boardroom budget decisions, political projects or to a set of plans approved by a planning authority. This ambivalence and multiplicity, as we will see next, is also at the root of a dialogical conception of public space.

Public square aesthetics

The above spatial dialogics, constructed from Bakhtin's writings, can be specified further with regards to public space in their intricate ties to the figure of the medieval public square and to medieval carnival. As previously mentioned, it is through these that the ambivalence and complexity of space acquire public, and eventually political, meaning. Literary critic and feminist scholar Pam Morris writes that Bakhtin draws from the medieval carnival '*the inversion of power structures, the parodic debunking of all that a particular society takes seriously (including and in particular all that which it fears)*' (Bakhtin, Voloshinov, & Medvedev, 1994: 250). Carnival laughter and folk humour then become paramount in de-stabilising the 'seriousness' of power structures (Kujundzic, 2002). Laughter, parody, the inversion and subversion of official culture introduce an ambivalence of boundaries and categories. In a more general definition, Michael Gardiner notes that the carnivalesque draws our attention to the underlying sociocultural forces that continually subvert our received commonsensical notions and habitualised viewpoints, and to encourage a renewed awareness of the hidden and all-too-often suppressed potentialities that lie within '*the dregs of an everyday gross reality*' (Gardiner, 2004: 42)¹² Historian Dominick LaCapra emphasises that it is on the public square that Bakhtin observes this drama taking place—this is where carnival is enacted, where bodies encounter each other in their gross reality, and where languages (tones and speech genres) come together dialogically (LaCapra, 2003: 41). The public square, rather than a mere container, becomes synonymous with and the principal spatial figure of heteroglossia. It is in the square that we recognise the potential for every utterance and every speech genre to 'carnivalise' official language, that is, to destabilise official culture. Thus, every speech genre is reconceived as a spatial performance of social relations which takes place in a particular place¹³ and whose practice stirs the emergence of a polyphonic space where performance and space/place mutually produce and announce each other. Following this idea, Holloway and Kneale suggest that, if we draw on Bakhtin, it is a mistake to focus on the temporary inversion of spatial, social or linguistic hierarchies, but we should instead be looking at the '*ways that Carnival constantly attempts to undermine these monologues in all spaces*' (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 81). Carnival is the 'other' of everyday life, but not its antithesis. Each is steeped into the other and the two cannot be dissociated from each other (Gardiner, 2000: 65). That is, the same ideological undertones and power struggles that the carnival makes apparent in the balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity are similarly present in everyday life. So while the carnival appears inappropriate in certain cases where sociopolitical authority is not reversed or openly parodied, we can nevertheless look at these cases through the lens of everyday life and arrive at similar conclusions: Every utterance, every action performed in the everyday implies a potential and relative 'carnivalisation' of official culture that is located in and productive of a particular space.

¹² As a warning, however, cultural studies professor Lutz Koepnick notes that while Bakhtin's carnival has been accepted by scholars as a liberating and counteracting force other negative modes of carnival are possible. He notes that Walter Benjamin observed that in fascism, carnivalesque practices are co-opted as a '*tool of pseudo-emancipation*' to stabilise authoritarian rule. The fascist spectacle '*utilizes the subversive moment of the popular dimension; it transposes carnival's power of transitory displacement, reversal, and cathartic outlet into a project of synchronization and national renewal*' (Koepnick, 1999: 70).

¹³ Bakhtin identifies this spatialising of speech genres through 'billingsgate', a speech genre he associates with the market square, in which commercial and popular languages mix (See Bakhtin, 1984b).



Fig. 3. Bench at Town Square, 2012. During design development and according to Liza Fior (muf architecture/art), the local council was allegedly nervous about the addition of benches as they might encourage loitering.



Fig. 4. Town Square, 2010. The balustrade designed by muf architecture/art around the planted areas is meant to signal 'do not pass' to adults while letting children through. The designers were concerned, however, that garbage was often found among the gardens requiring dedicated care.

The word 'potential' is crucial here because we run into the issue, raised by Ken Hirschkop, that we cannot grant that every speech genre, or every action has ideological content, consciously or not, in relation to public space (Hirschkop, 2002: 176).¹⁴ Bakhtin's view of the public square is an idealised version of heteroglossia where individuals come together to speak and act as such without being abstracted into citizens or publics or

¹⁴ The same is supported by Amin (2008) who argues that action in public space is pre-cognitive and therefore relatively free of a wider social context.

having to shed all *'differentiating identity'* (Hirschkop, 2002: 179). What we may grant is that the relationship between ideal public space, heteroglossia and individual actions is one that is characterised by varying social and individual contexts. Emphasis has to be put on the act and how it is positioned (and understood to be) between the centripetal and centrifugal forces that shape the space. Once we conceive of public space, we are indeed giving value to these relationships, to these particular actions, and to this particular space, which is an ideological terrain. This is why dialogue and heteroglossia, with respect to space, have to be conceived first and foremost as part of a framework for understanding rather than representing public space. Otherwise, they are reified into ideals and the potential for dialogical public space is lost.

Anything but a neutral field

We are now in a position to bring together the characteristics of a dialogical conception of public space. Space, imagined dialogically, is the continuous interaction of a multiplicity of voices. It is never given but, rather, produced through this interaction. It is changing and uncertain. Qualifying something as 'public' participates in this production while, in parallel, fixing the complex process taking place. Any spatial production to which we would give the label 'public' is therefore difficult to categorise, for it eludes strict definitions and (or) classifications, as discussed earlier in this paper in the context of the ideological background to any conception of public space. Public space is anything but a neutral field. It harbours contradictions and is constantly contested, pushed and pulled between stabilising and de-stabilising forces that act on projected ideals and enacted counter-ideals. In this sense, any design project located in the public realm is charged with meaning, acting both on the physical properties of places and the social organisation of publics. Typologies and categories, words like 'public' and 'private' become utterances the meanings of which are contextually developed in both immediate and social dialogue within/between the multiplicity of 'voices' found in speeches, bodies, objects, actions, spatial practices and relationships. These dialogues acquire colour by particular genres that imply and produce their own space. Their collection, in the 'public square', we may give the name 'spatial heteroglossia'.

It is somewhat problematic to write about a dialogical definition of public space when this paper suggests the very impossibility of correctly defining the concept of 'public space' at all. Like any flexible definition, 'publicness' has to be identified as an oscillation, a variable. Here the movement between 'social' and 'public' is important, as the latter should stake a claim toward the political that the former lacks. If social space is the space between 'self' and 'other' (as per Holloway and Kneale, 2000), it can be said to acquire public, and thus political, qualities when its polyphonic production shows a tendency toward heteroglossia. The voices that make social space public are destabilising, 'other', unpredictable, even though they, or the speakers, may be publicly known. They are the voices that, through instability, contest, negotiate, push and force readjustments toward a potential (but never given) stability.¹⁵ It is this condition of an oscillation (variable double movement) between

¹⁵ Political thinkers Chantal Mouffe, Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri have warned against the political ideals of 'dialogue'. Mouffe argues that the concept of dialogue, because of its ideals of openness and incompleteness *'is unable to come to terms with "the political" in its antagonistic dimension'* and to the sometimes undemocratic end of its own process (Mouffe, 2000: 129-130). Casarino and Negri suggest that dialogue is too tied up in *'liberal hegemonic discourse... as a means of negotiating and reconciling differences among various and sundry identities'* (Casarino & Negri, 2008: 2). These critiques are why heteroglossia

the stabilising and destabilising opposite forces on the spatial field, which defines the public qualities of dialogical space. The double movement is the mechanism of the carnivalesque as both the process of and the potential for subversion of any spatial production and is present in both the extraordinary and the everyday. The mechanism concedes that all production of space is fraught, caught between competing monological and dialogical forces. The relationship between authority and everyday life is fully acknowledged and both are allowed to co-exist and compete: The one, the 'other', and the dialogical relationship between them all matter, so that it may always be possible to read power and authority, and their challenge in space.

A crucial aspect of this reading of public space is the inescapable non-neutrality of taking part in dialogue. For Bakhtin, the subject acts from a place in spacetime that is unique to themselves and cannot be negated, or what he calls our '*non-alibi in Being*' (Bakhtin, 1993: 40). If we understand the public realm as something constructed and produced over time by polyphony, then the positioning of actors in spacetime through chronotopes can similarly be understood as an affirmation of undeniable ethical positions. '*The answerable act is, after all, the actualization of a decision—inescapably, irremediably, and irrevocably*' (Bakhtin, 1993: 28). We may not always find structural meaning behind every actor's deed, but we may understand each relation between actors as set by respective answerable positions in the process of public space production.

The conception of public space presented above cannot be developed, therefore, without locating dialogue in space and time. Every expression of public space points to chronotopes further stabilised or destabilised according to the dialogues that constitute them relative to historical time as well as everyday experience. The expression 'town square' has generic historical connotations as does its use in the contemporary city. Similarly, no conception of 'public space' can operate without acknowledging temporal aspects (e.g. access restrictions, seasonal uses). The issue of scale also becomes important here to ensure correct location of each expression of public space. While over a period of ten years we can claim that Barking Town Square is a public space with respect to the evolving practices that ultimately take place there, are allowed and curtailed, we can also claim that temporary use of the Square for a protest always generates a public space which, at the scale of that particular event, is distinct from the previous.

Conceiving public space dialogically does not rid us of any problematic conceptions based on strict boundaries, typologies, or ideals discussed earlier in this paper, but it does ensure that the continued use of any such in dialogue (and design) can be properly contextualised and given due agency. It also means that a dialogical model can co-exist with and complement other models that take the socio-material as their foundation by acknowledging and tempering dialogism's anthropocentric foundation, while simultaneously ensuring the human voice is included in the equation with all its faults, affects and ambivalence.

cannot be a reified ideal but a tool to understand difference in space. Similarly, while heteroglossia goes a long way to make social space public, it cannot be said to be political in its own right: the subversive process of carnival is necessary so that we are faced with a destabilising tendency that requires the confrontation and renegotiation of established ideals. In this sense, we can read the appearance of dialogical public space in a similar way to geographer Doreen Massey's conception of an emerging public space: Of spaces that are not rhetorically defined as public but are contested as such, Massey writes: '*The very fact that they are necessarily negotiated, sometimes riven with antagonism, always contoured through the playing out of unequal social relations, is what renders them genuinely public*' (Massey, 2005: 53).



Fig. 5. Public speaking at Blake's Corner, 2010.



Fig. 6. 'Read-aloud' activity by Central Library staff at Blake's Corner, 2010. Although the Central Library is situated at Town Square, the event's organisers chose Blake's Corner for their outreach activity.

Conclusion

Every conception of public space involves a dialogue between design and use and therefore requires a certain policing of boundaries—between the official branding of a town square and its unofficial occupation, between ways to behave and not behave in public, between the care for planting beds and their use as trash receptacles, or in the very concept developed by the designers of Barking Town Square between the 'civic' and the 'feral' analogically juxtaposed as square and forest (Fig. 3 & 4). Generally, we might suggest that a principal boundary exists between a conception of 'public space' that is

civic, clean, safe, open, representative, convivial, and a conception that, without being the opposite, involves the negotiation of these terms. More specifically, thinking of public space dialogically suggests that any (and all) boundaries are rather fluid and porous, that public space is continuously produced by the interaction of a multitude of different voices, intentions and (or) actions. Boundary maintenance does exist, but 'public space' has to be understood as the result of an interaction that stabilises and (or) destabilises boundaries, distinctions and limitations.

Design proposals (as all conceptions) for the public realm are valued propositions that suggest a particular transformation of aesthetic, ethical, social and political relations through the ordering and transformation of spatial relations. No design, no conception, and therefore no dialogue creating public space can be neutral. The question of maintaining boundaries between 'self' and 'other', immediate and social contexts, the social and the political, authority and its undermining, and ideals and counter-ideals, arises inevitably since these, now by definition non-neutral, dialogues that 'make' the public realm and public space are the projections of something that, in effect, never fully corresponds to reality.

In the case of Barking Town Square, I agree with most local residents saying that if someone is looking to reach others, then nearby Blake's Corner (Fig. 5 & 6), not Town Square, is the logical place to be. In this sense, the idea of designating a Square for this purpose is part wishful thinking because the assumptions and values that support it are not necessarily reconcilable with concrete reality or this time in history.¹⁶ As a wish-image in the eyes of its designers and political and financial backers, it has to be maintained and manufactured against socio-spatial production that might devalue it. But it is also as a wish-image that Barking Town Square should stand apart and be recognised since its being raises questions of purpose, function and meaning more acutely than similar projects by attempting to be a model town square.¹⁷ By extension, this manifest condition—the relationship between the ideals projected by the chronotopes of the Square at all levels and the realities of the Square's use and maintenance—is exactly what defines public space as an ambivalent dialogue.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal whose generous and thorough comments helped clarify and re-organise this paper.

¹⁶ As one informant from the Greater London Authority comments, the location of the Town Square feels 'slightly manufactured' because it runs up against the natural morphology of the town. It also runs up, we might add, to the actions of individuals and publics. The public actions I witnessed in the Town Centre were for the great majority located around Blake's Corner, the main commercial intersection of the town, 100 meters away from the Town Square: political candidates handing out leaflets, religious groups speaking out (Fig. 5), library outreach activities (Fig. 6), a clash between supporters of the far-right British National Party and young black men chanting 'no hate in Barking' during the lead-up to the 2010 elections, or British National Party candidate and elected official (at the time) Richard Barnbrook riding a horse on St George's day of the same year.

¹⁷ 'A Model Town Square' was the title of the 2007 exhibition celebrating the opening of phase I of the Barking Town Square. The exhibition was curated by architectural critic Kieran Long with muf architecture/art.

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