

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/145702/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Aelbrecht, P. 2022. Book Review: Public Space Reader, Edited by Miodrag Mitrašinovic and Vikas Mehta, New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, 480pp., £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780815385042. Journal of Urban Design 27 , pp. 388-390. 10.1080/13574809.2021.2009182

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2021.2009182>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Public Space Reader

Edited by Miodrag Mitrašinic and Vikas Mehta, New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, 480pp., £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780815385042

The Public Space Reader compiled by Miodrag Mitrašinic and Vikas Mehta is a welcome addition to public space literature. It is the first attempt to bring together seminal texts and new contributions from both established scholars and practitioners as well as cross-disciplinary perspectives and comparative views from different cultural contexts. Although literature on public space is one of the most developed areas in urban design, this reader shows that it continues to be an evolving field, requiring wider ranging scholarship.

At first look the Public Space Reader appears like many earlier such readers, collecting key texts and documenting the main theoretical perspectives on the subject. However, unlike earlier compilations of public space literature, it offers a wider coverage of the subject and, according to its editors, is a first attempt to 'decompartmentalise' public space. It is structured into nine thematic sections which reflect the multidisciplinary, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional dimensions of public space: philosophical, political, social, legal, material, visual, symbolic and management. In doing so, the editors recognise that public space is a 'cluster concept' that cannot be adequately understood through a single lens or via one perspective, and therefore, these different dimensions must be appreciated together if we are to grasp the complex and changing nature of public space.

To avoid rigid categorisations, potential overlaps, tensions or contradictions between different disciplinary perspectives, scales and dimensions, the editors have developed the nine thematic dimensions around the following key concerns: 1. public space conceptualisations, 2. public space as a site of encounter, 3. public space's role in democracy, 4. public space as a site of activism, 5. public space governance and management, 6. public space and its evolving relationship with art and culture, 7. public space as social infrastructure, 8. experiential dimensions of an expanding public realm and new approaches to its evaluation, and 9. global and comparative perspectives on public space. Its structure and contents are not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive but do reflect the key questions and issues that have driven the production of knowledge in this growing field since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The first thematic section 'The state of the question' is concerned with longstanding questions about what constitutes public space both as a theoretical as well as a social and political construct, and its associated concepts of public sphere, public realm, public domain, and public space. It includes not only seminal texts from Arendt and Fraser which argue for public space as a political space, and Low and Smith who establish the grounds for spatialising the public sphere, but also more recent texts namely from Crawford and Kingwell which cover new intellectual ground and demonstrate the always evolving nature of public space and the ongoing efforts to define and redefine it.

Section 2, 'Diversity and inclusion in public space,' addresses one of the most pressing debates of public space as a site of encounter. It wants to answer challenging questions. For example, how can public spaces accommodate increasingly diverse 'publics', and promote wider diversity and inclusion? These are topics of interest for many public space researchers from different disciplines concerned with power relations in public space related to informal socioeconomic practices, gender (Day), racialisation (Staples) and class (Ruddick, Zukin et al).

Section 3 looks to two parallel debates 'The Just City' and 'The Right to The City' led by Fanstein and Lefebvre respectively, which have distinct ideologies and agendas but complementary aims. Both focus on the politics of inclusion vs exclusion and the ongoing efforts to achieve a more equitable and democratic city. The selected essays address the core issues underlying these debates: the increasing privatisation of public spaces and its implications on civil liberties (Kohn); different kinds of social justice in public space (Low and Iveson); spatial and distributional justice of public resources (Boone); and public policies and programmed spaces which use public space as a catalyst of social reform and transformation but underlay commodification (Berney). This section concludes well with Don Mitchell who argues that the struggle for reclaiming public space is the struggle for social justice and ultimately 'The Right to The City'.

Section 4, like the previous, also addresses the ongoing struggles for the 'right to public spaces', but does so through a more contemporary lens. It focuses on recent events and attempts to reclaim public space in the face of increasing commodification and privatisation of public infrastructure. These include: the use of public space as a medium for reinvigoration democratic institutions (Knierbein and Hou; Torre), public space movements which created a culture of public space of resistance using social media (Del Vicente; Del Signore and Riether), and the role that the spatial and morphological characteristics of public protests play in encouraging or facilitating them (Franck and Huang; Hatuka).

Section 5 addresses the 'governance and management of public spaces', two increasingly important factors determining their use and perception, particularly in the wake of a significant reduction in public sector expenditure on both the provision and maintenance of public spaces. This section addresses a wide range of trends in public space management from state-centred, market-centered and community centred (Mitrašinovic; Carmona, de Magalhães and Hammond); the recent proliferation of Business Improvement Districts (BID) which have become attractive pro-growth governance models for public spaces (Zukin); the creation of a new category public spaces called 'privately owned public spaces' also known as POPs, a popular mechanism to incentivise developers to create open spaces (Kayden); the increasing use of exclusionary devices in public space management (Flusty); and, the use of community task forces as inclusive governance mechanisms (Van Heeswijk).

The following Section 6 then addresses the role and meaning of 'public art in public space'. This is a topic well documented in the growing body scholarship on public art that has emerged since the 1970s, but continues to raise relevant questions on the role of public art in enabling political engagement and making public space the realm of politics (Deutsche and Mouffe); the tensions that this poses to urban design practices that pursue public art that is useful and beautiful (Miller); and, how art can include the 'speechless', disadvantaged communities, and make them visible (Wodiczko and Potrc).

Section 7 on 'public space infrastructures' takes us to another debate about public space as an expansive field encompassing not only traditional public spaces (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht) but also all other types of spaces – networks (Urban Task Force), systems (Ana and Pedro Brandão), and infrastructures (Drake) – available in the public domain that people are claiming through their everyday practices of interaction and communication (Certeau).

Section 8 on the 'experiential dimensions and evaluation of public space' addresses a recent concern among public space researchers and practitioners over the experience of public space as a determinant factor of its quality, and a reflection of societal issues and conditions of equity and civic rights. The selected texts address ongoing issues such as design quality vis-à-vis publicness (Sola-Morales), the domestic qualities of public spaces that shape micro public life (Koch and Lathan); the role of virtual public space in activating physical space

(Hampton, Livio and Goulet); and, the quest for measuring and evaluating public space (Mehta) and its publicness (Varna and Tiesdell).

The last Section 9 addresses the need for comparative perspectives on public space, as public space becomes a topic of concern worldwide. It also recognises the challenges associated with producing comparative studies that are inclusive of manifold cultural and geographical specificities, a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations, and the evolving nature of public spaces. Of relevance here are: the work of the UN-Habitat which has been a key player in the development of a transparent global framework for defining public space (Anderson) and literature that raises awareness of the different issues faced in public space development across the world from Latin America (Irazabal), Europe (Madanipour) China (Li) and India (Edensor), reminding us of the importance of supporting inclusive and responsive development processes.

Overall, this Public Space Reader delivers well what it promises. It touches all the core issues of public space research and brings together the key authors in the field. This is something to commend. However, it could have benefited from more insights from emerging scholars to ensure that the discussion does not stay only with the elite and of more urban design literature to address the issues facing public spaces practices today, and the role of urban design in shaping their future.

This Public Space Reader is nonetheless a useful and comprehensive primer for understanding the ongoing issues facing public space scholarship. Its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary analysis will benefit a wide range of academics, students and practitioners engaged with public space research and practice. It will also have significant appeal to a wider non-academic readership, given its topical subject matter.

Patricia Aelbrecht
Public Space Observatory Research Centre
Geography and Planning School, Cardiff University.