

Open Space: People Space

A REVIEW BY PENNY ALLAN

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Open Space: People Space, Catherine Ward Thompson and Penny Travlou (eds),
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A cursory review of current, well-known journals of landscape architecture reveals beautiful spaces, largely devoid of people. Does this reflect a lack of regard for the way people use designed spaces or do people just get in the way of a good photograph? This is a complex issue; a survey of professional institutes' awards protocols reveals a similar bias. The United States national body, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), for example, annually awards its highest design honours for 'the quality of design and execution; design context; environmental sensitivity and sustainability; and design value to the client and to other designers'. It makes no mention of design value to the community or 'user needs', and in the 23 photos of the entries awarded for design excellence in 2007 there was only one person. The rest showed aesthetically refined but empty spaces. While no one would argue that designing places for people is one of the primary roles of a landscape architect and that a commitment to socially inclusive access, in particular, is fundamental to democracy, it does not appear to be inspiring designers to produce creative works valued by their peers. Why is this so?

In his foreword to the recently published *Open Space: People Space*, the well-known United States landscape architect and historian, Laurie Olin, traces the history of the discipline's difficult relationship with the social sciences. We are haunted, he says, by the 'ghost of discredited political and social agendas that had disastrous results in the twentieth century', resulting in a dysfunctional relationship between research and practice, and an associated lack of commitment by designers to creatively engage with social issues.

The OPENspace Research Centre at the Edinburgh College of Art, Heriott-Watt University, was established in 2001 to strengthen that relationship. The recently published *Open Space: People Space* is a product of the Centre and its themes represent its current research interests. The editors, Catherine Ward Thompson and Penny Travlou, claim that 'empirical research on the use of public open space has the potential to refine good design practice'. They have invited a range of 'experts' to explore the interface between policy, research and practice as a way of encouraging creative dialogue between the disciplines responsible for delivering universally accessible public space. Eight of the eighteen contributors, including the editors, are researchers at the Centre. The remainder represent a diversity of professions with a common interest in environment and behaviour, including Ken Worpole, John Zeisel, Jahn Gehl and Terry Hartig.

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The book is organised around four key themes: policy, the experience of exclusion, design and research. Each themed section contains three or four chapters by a range of contributors, many of whom contributed to the eponymous conference in Edinburgh in 2004. While the editors suggest that the book will appeal to planners, social scientists, health policy makers and people working in the social services, they are particularly interested in appealing to the designers of public open space.

Highlights of the themed sections include Worpole's essay 'The health of the people is the highest law' in the first section. His essay is a history of political interest in the relationship between outdoor recreation and public health, with an extremely useful and extensive – if Eurocentric – collection of references to best-practice policy in the United Kingdom. In section two, Judy Ling Wong, director of Black Environment Network, describes a cross-sector approach to encouraging the 'vast missing contribution' of ethnic groups in open space in Britain. Section three addresses design issues, focusing on innovative methodologies for understanding the use of public open space. Particularly interesting is the post-occupancy evaluation of Kid's Together Park in the United States. The authors, Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco, develop a theoretical framework based on the concepts of territorial range development, behaviour setting and affordance, and a 'multi method research strategy' (a combination of mapping, filming and interviews) to gather data using GIS software. They assess the findings against the framework to arrive at some interesting conclusions. The evidence and conclusions (based on a complicated 'zone attractiveness index' developed by the authors) will be useful for policy makers and planners determining distribution, funding and management of open space networks.

The final section relates to new theories and methodologies. Peter Aspinall, Associate Director of the OPENspace Research Centre, establishes the framework for this section and perhaps the *raison d'être* for the book in his chapter, 'On quality of life, analysis and evidence based belief', when he describes 'general research issues which have arisen from conversations and observations at research conferences in relation to landscape architecture and environmental design'. These issues include a 'confusion' regarding what constitutes research and an 'unease expressed (by designers) about the need to prove things'. Aspinall sets about addressing these issues, ending his essay with a flourish on the second to last page with:

$p(H/E) = 0.9 \times 0.5 / (0.9 \times 0.5 + 0.5 \times 0.3) = 0.45 / (0.45 + 0.15) = 0.75$, and it follows that $p(\neg H/E) = 0.25$

This is unlikely to make designers feel more 'at ease'. In fact, at this point, I stopped reading altogether.

Perhaps the issue here is that social theory is at its most useful when it provides data, and is at its most suspect when it applies that data to create universal truths. The visual assessment process is a good example. Based on empirical evidence, and particularly preference-based evidence, visual assessment and the ultimate conservation or destruction of landscapes in the face of development was based until quite recently, on the fact that some landscapes had been 'proven' to be

inherently more scenically 'beautiful' than others. Better research, more refined formulae and more specific legislation do not automatically encourage a creative dialogue between policy, research and practice. Most frustrating to designers and, paradoxically, antithetical to good design outcomes is the inflexibility that often occurs in the hands of those with the best intentions for inclusive access. Legislation tends to stifle creativity and good design practice, prescribing fixed outcomes rather than principles or processes, forcing designers on the back foot with public officials who can often be more interested in the rule rather than the spirit of the law.

Despite the editors' ambitions, this book may not appeal to a designer wanting quick access to the book's key issues. There are no inspiring colour photographs (except the cover), 'toolkits' or design principles such as those found in *People Places* (Clare Cooper Marcus, 1990), *Places for People* (Jahn Gehl, City of Melbourne, 2004) or *Public Places Urban Spaces* (Carmona, et al, 2003) that might be immediately useful. However, because of its structure as a collection of essays, it offers a breadth and depth of insight that is difficult to achieve in a single-author publication and it alerts us to the nuances of exclusion in a way that has the potential to change the way we think about open space. It encouraged me, for example, to think more deeply about the methodologies associated with some of the current strategies for urban space revitalisation, typically focused on measurements of pedestrian volume and activity, rather than social and cultural diversity. The often-celebrated revitalisation of Barcelona's public spaces, for example, could arguably be described as gentrification rather than revitalisation, with whole communities forced to leave their neighbourhood in the face of rising property prices. The same could be said for many inner city 'upgrades' around the world – plans for the suburb of Redfern in Sydney come to mind.

Ward Thompson and Travlou have gathered together 'in one volume a range of perspectives on what constitutes good design for socially inclusive public space and what research there is to support this'. Within this context, the book makes a significant contribution to the current body of policy, research and practice, and is particularly useful because of its multiple points of view, the breadth of its vision and the currency of its research. It will be an asset for those wishing to understand the challenges and practice of research in greater depth or the complexities of the planning and management of socially inclusive open space.

The book is less convincing when it focusses on design, because the parameters are too narrow. It assesses design purely from a research perspective and a number of key questions remain unanswered particularly from a designer's point of view. Perhaps a design focus would encourage us to see access 'not as a concession but as the gorgeous norm'.¹ It could also address the complexities of implementation and the challenges of integrating universal access as part of a coherent design response. More research might encourage better universal access, but does not necessarily result in well-designed open space (a point perhaps reinforced by the omission of access as a category in ASLA's design awards judging criteria). Perhaps it is up to designers to make the next move.

1 muf Architects website: <http://www.muf.co.uk/>