The reusability of public squares

four contradictory demands in the wake of sustainable urban development

Kärrholm, Mattias

Published in:
Lo Squaderno

2026

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

The reusability of public squares

Four contradictory demands in the wake of sustainable urban development

Mattias Kärrholm

I have been studying public squares in Lund and Malmö over the past twenty years (e.g., Kärrholm 2005; 2015; 2017), often focusing on how their uses have changed over the decades.[1] Looking back at these studies, I have seen how the squares of these two cities increasingly have turned into crowded pedestrianized areas for extraordinary events and weekend or evening entertainment, rather than catering for more mundane needs (Van Melik et. al. 2007: 28 f.). The development of regional retail areas and the increase in internet shopping have meant that public squares are steering away from everyday goods and services (Weltevreden et al. 2005; Delage et. al. 2020; Barata-Salgueiro & Guimarães 2020). Not least in central public places, we see how a slow process of de-retailization is coupled with the catering for temporary visitors and tourists, often leading to quite cluttered design solutions affording e.g., short meetings, refreshments and digital services.

Reusability is a fundamental characteristic of public spaces: public spaces are meant to be appropriated, yet must constantly resist permanent appropriation (Brighenti 2010). In this sense, traditional public squares and spaces are also true examples of circularity: they are built structures that have accommodated changing needs over decades or even centuries. In recent decades, particularly in response to calls for *sustainable urban development*, it seems as if public squares are expected to meet a range of new demands that sometimes risk undermining their cyclical and reusable nature. Based on my former studies, I will here bring up four such demands on our public squares, demands that seem to put their reusability at risk. These demands have been studied in the Öresund region, but I believe they can be relevant also for discussions on other contemporary squares associated with so-called sustainable urban design.

First, we have *densification*. In Swedish cities, densification is pursued as a means of sustainable development, often by building on open (more or less) public spaces such as parking lots, yards, and parks. This frequently results in a decrease in public space per capita. The effect of densification – both of population and space – manifest itself differently for various groups. Many people have seen their domestic spaces shrink, for example, due to the closure of common areas (public laundries, etc.), the increase of large families living in small apartments or through housing experiments with compact living (Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019). This has made some groups more reliant on public facilities, such as squares and parks than others, increasing public space related inequalities.

Second, we have *colonization*. As a response to pedestrianisation as well as to declining retail in urban centres, public squares are increasingly animated and furnished (Wirdelöv 2020). We can see how private interest increasingly colonize public squares, for example, through outdoor restaurants,

Mattias Kärrholm is Professor of Architectural Theory at the Department of Architecture and Built Environment, Lund University, Sweden. His research deals with territoriality, public space, urban design, materiality, building types, space and culture, and everyday life. Research Profile at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mattias-Kaerrholm

mattias.karrholm@abm.lth.se

1 This article is a revised and expanded version of a problem that I first presented in Kärrholm (2026).

advertisement campaigns, and new gadgets for hire, like electric scooters (Flores and Jansson 2021). Post-COVID trends such as outdoor offices and 'walk-and-talk' meetings have increased white-collar workers' use of public spaces during office hours (Troije et al. 2024). Sustainable lifestyles and technological developments have also led to the proliferation of new street furniture, such as cell phone and bike charging stations. In short, public spaces are becoming increasingly crowded with objects and activities that, although often catering for some kind of public demands, often involve a privatization of space and the colonization of actors with vested and commercial interests.

Third, we also see ongoing tendencies of *specialization* (a division of labour). Over the past few decades, many central public squares have become more specialized and homogenized. Squares become themed as, e.g., open-air food courts or event squares. This specialization of certain spaces has resulted in micro-zoning and a homogenization of urban areas. During the second half of the 20th century, we could see how retail and services clustered over the decades into large well-defined territories. This trend of has contributed to the development of a city à la carte (Kärrholm et al. 2017), which may offer a great variety of options for mobile and well-off citizens but can leave others in lack of needed services. It also increases travel and may lead to the deterioration of basic social infrastructures and local communities (as local and small shops must compete with large-scale facilities), especially affecting less mobile and less affluent segments of the population. In the Öresund region, where people might live in Lund, work in Copenhagen and shop in Malmö, we are (as in many other places) witnessing the development of a region *à la carte*. In some cases, this might lead to the development of different kinds of *urban deserts*, as basic infrastructure is replaced by well-organized and large, but themed and far in-between enclaves. *Food deserts* (Shaw 2006), which are still quite rare in Sweden, might be one of the more severe and well-known examples of this phenomenon, but other kinds of urban deserts could easily be listed as different services are centralised, often declining in number, while growing in individual or agglomerate size.

Fourth, we have *programmatic expansion*. In contrast to specialization and theming, we are also seeing an add-on of the number of specific programs (rather than generic uses) that individual public spaces are designed to accommodate. These programs might often cater for 'the common good', still they might lead to conflicts with existing uses in on-going struggles for space. In response to sustainable development, new programs have been added to public squares and other spaces, such as health promotion initiatives (outdoor gyms, new running tracks, benches designed for therapy or social interaction, etc.) and stormwater management through blue-green solutions. There is also a tendency to design public spaces with "weak" or underrepresented groups in mind (Sandström et al. 2024). Other programs reflect a posthumanist approach to urban planning (Holmberg 2015), catering to animals, like pollinators by avoiding grass cutting (sometimes inhibiting human-centred activities). These add-on programs might introduce new social challenges at the sites where they are implemented. In fact, programmatic expansion, such as the introduction of blue-green solutions, has in several cases been shown to trigger new spatial conflicts on how to use public space (Mottaghi 2023). An increase in the number of specified programs might increase spatial controversies, while in fact not adding much to the versatility or polyvalence of that space.

Squares have a public and democratic role to play, and this role means that they must remain a spatial resource and potential arena for the new issues that our society might need to tackle, now and in the future. The disappearance of local everyday life and the new focus on entertainment and the visiting middle-class might be problematic. Although possibly successful at attracting larger crowds, the trends mentioned might nevertheless lead to a larger and more structural problem: a decrease in the very publicness of public space (Brighenti 2010). Public spaces are important social infrastructures (Klinenberg 2018); they enable and direct social relationships. They also play an important role as places for community-building on different scales (Sandström 2019). Their publicness relates to

their potential to cater for a variety of different activities, interests and groups (cf. Marres 2005), and this is where these trends might pose problems. That colonization decreases public space for the gain of private interest is quite clear, but specialization might also contribute to a decline in publicness; and as program expansion and densification put extra pressure on our already crowded public squares (without necessarily making them more accessible), the risk of conflict, segregation and lockout effects increase.

The four tendencies mentioned here have been documented in different studies, but so far only in fragmented ways, often treating each tendency or part of it as a singular problem. These problems are interrelated and often operate on multiple scales, across different places, districts and even cities. A more ecological approach to public spaces to create a more holistic understanding of how different public spaces interact is much needed. How can our central squares meet contemporary demands related to urban sustainability, without compromising their ability to accommodate new activities, groups, and uses over time? How can we ensure the circular affordance and reusability of our public spaces?

References

Barata-Salgueiro, T. & Guimarães, P. (2020) Public Policy for Sustainability and Retail Resilience in Lisbon City Center. *Sustainability*, 12(22), 9433.

Brighenti, A. M. (2010) *The Publicness of Public Space*. Trento: University of Trento.

Delage, M., Baudet-Michel, S., Fol, S., Buhnik, S., Commenges, H. & Vallée, J. (2020) Retail Decline in France's Small and Medium-sized Cities over Four Decades. Evidence from a multi-level analysis. *Cities*, 104, 102790.

Flores, P. J. & Jansson, J. (2021) The Role of Consumer Innovativeness and Green Perceptions on Green Innovation Use: The case of shared e-bikes and e-scooters. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 20 (6), 1466-1479.

Holmberg, T. (2015) *Urban Animals: Crowding in Zoocities*. London: Routledge.

Kärrholm, M. (2005) Territorial Complexity in Public Spaces – A Study of Territorial Production at Three Squares in Lund. *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 18(1), 99-114.

Kärrholm, M. (2015) The Main Square Revisited, A comparison of daily usage of Stortorget Malmö, between 1978 and 2013. In M. Kärrholm (ed.) *Urban Squares*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 17-56.

Kärrholm, M. (2017) The Temporality of Territorial Production – The case of Stortorget, Malmö. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18(5), 683-705.

Kärrholm, M. (2026) "The Recent Transformation of Central Squares: On the interrelation between retail, recreation and mobility". In Daniel Paiva, Pedro Guimaraes (Eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the City, Retail, and Consumption*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. Pp. 19-31.

Kärrholm, M., Salgueira, T. B., Soumagne, J., Fernandes, J. A. R. & Chamusca, P. (2017) Time-Space Complexity and the Opening Hours of Commerce: A study of four European cities. *Revista de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território [Journal of Geography and Spatial Planning]*, 2017(12), 153-177.

Kärrholm, M. & Wirdelöv, J. (2019) The neighbourhood in pieces: the fragmentation of local public space in a Swedish housing area. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 43(5), 870-887.

Klinenberg, E. (2018) *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. New York: Crown.

Marres, N. (2005) Issues Spark a Public into Being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate. In B. Latour and P. Weibel (Eds.) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of democracy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press. 208-217.

Mottaghi, M. (2023) *Carescape of Blue-green Solutions in Everyday Life: Exploring the socio-materiality of a landscape technology*. Lund: LU.

Sandström, I. (2019) *Towards a Minor Urbanism: Thinking community without unity in recent makings of public space*. Lund: LU.

Sandström, I., Ericsson, S., & Hedvall, P. O. (2024) Gendered sustainability: Are public spaces designed for girls good for everyone? *Cities*, 149,

Shaw, H. J. (2006) Food Deserts: Towards the development of a classification. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88(2), 231-247.

Troije, C. P., Jensen, E. L., Redmalm, D. & Gustin, L. W. (2024) Unlocking the Transformative Potential of Outdoor Office Work. *Challenges*, 15(2), 25.

Van Melik, R., Van Aalst, I. & Van Weesep, J. (2007) Fear and Fantasy in the Public Domain: The development of secured and themed urban space. *Journal of Urban Design*, 12(1), 25-42.

Weltevreden, J., Atzema, O. & Frenken, K. (2005) Evolution in City Centre Retailing: The case of Utrecht (1974-2003). *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 33(11), 824-841.

Wirdelöv, J. (2020) The Trash Bin on Stage: On the sociomaterial roles of street furniture. *Urban Planning*, 5(4), 121-131.