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La Plaza: Public Space as Space of Negotiation

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The concept of the public and the public sphere has already been discussed extensively and in detail (Calhoun 1999, Fraser 1999, Marchart 1998 and the relevant articles in this issue). This essay is intended to focus on public space in its property as a concrete, real, and urban place. Against the background of several theses on the public and space, the main square of Mexico City serves as an example for the significance of this kind of real public space as a disputed space of negotiation.[1]

Public Sphere as Collective Invention

Classically, according to Richard Sennett, the public sphere is the space where one is exposed to everyone's inquisitive gaze, the space in which there are actors and onlookers, where one is simultaneously observer and observed (Sennett 1986). The relationship between the individual and society is reflected in urban space. Here, according to Georg Simmel, is where the urban mentality is revealed, which is characterized by distance and reservation, but also by a complexity of relationships and situations. (Simmel 1984). Public space offers the possibility of disappearing anonymously in the masses, but also that of identifying with a

group. In the meeting of strangers or like-minded people, a central principle of public space is evident: there is something communal about it and it is borne or used by a collective (Fraser 1999).[2]
The Columbian communications scholar Armando Silva says that public space is a marker, and despite the withdrawal of the state from its social obligations, from here it is still always possible to speak of a collective space beyond personal or economic interests. It is only from this space that it is possible to develop collective processes. The public sphere is ultimately a collective invention (Silva 2003:25).
How this collective is composed, however, can be very different. Zygmunt Bauman distinguishes between the following forms of togetherness: "mobile togetherness" – alongside one another in busy streets or squares –, "stationary togetherness" – in the waiting room a conglomeration of strangers shares a limited space –, "temporal togetherness" at a workplace, "manifest togetherness" of a crowd as large as possible (football stadium), and "postulated togetherness", which refers to the construction of certain identities (nations, races, classes) (Bauman 1997:76ff). Indications of the different meanings of the public sphere in relation to space (street, waiting room, football stadium) are manifested in this list; at the same time, though, these places and criteria of the public sphere refer to possible approaches for analysing public space and its appropriation.

Urban Space and the Public Sphere

Public space temporarily undergoes different utilizations, it is not characterized by stability and continuity, but is instead processual and situational. It is thus a space of negotiation, materially and discursively disputed. It is heterogeneously produced, used and

negotiated. Continuously meeting and negotiating differing interests and values, attributions of meaning that can also be contradictory, are what distinguishes public spaces. In this sense, the existence of public space is also a central characteristic of and a precondition for the urban.
City as a complex structure consists of individual places, institutions and actors, activities and discourses. Urban space is consequently physical, social and discursive space. Physical space refers to the built environment, the infrastructural organization and architecture. In a corporeal sense, the material (cement, glass, steel, bricks, sand, plastic, asphalt) is significant. The material characterizes a concrete place, also in the sense of a social surface, and determines interactions as much as noises and smells do. Social space refers to space in a scenic sense as the stage for acts and actions. Actors play in the space, negotiating appropriation and interpretation, notions and visions of the city. Social space reflects the social order and its institutions in specific forms of interaction and communication. The discursive space indicates the ideas of city and urbanity, on which the actions are based. Yet it also refers to the representation of the space and its image. It is through the dialectical connection between material construction, social practice and representation that concrete urban places are first created (Harvey 1993:17). Urban space is thus not simply the sum of relationships between forms and practice, but is simultaneously a condition for the reproduction of urban everyday life. This space is always also filled with power and ideology.

Yet what does real public space mean as a negotiable location of everyday practice? And what does it look like? How is it perceived, used and occupied? I would like to pursue these questions of the constitution of public space as space of negotiation using the example of a specific square in Mexico City.

Zócalo – Empty Center of Mexico City

With roughly twenty million inhabitants, Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world. In the nineties the name of the metropolis still evoked horror scenarios of population explosions, environmental disasters and ungovernability. Mexico City stood for the boundaries of urban growth and for urban chaos. Today the city is seen from a different perspective with interest in the appropriation of spaces, in the organization of everyday survival and the significance of the spontaneous structures of everyday practice. A system of improvised utilizations of space and time worked out by the inhabitants can be found in Mexico City, organizing the daily flow of goods, interactions and information. It is unimaginable that the city could function without these informal structures. It seems that what is chaotic, spontaneous, temporary prevents the city from devouring itself.

Zócalo is the main square in the historic center of the metropolis of Mexico. In this square, following the conquest of the city, the Spanish erected their buildings of representation in the 16th century over the ruins of the destroyed ceremonial center of the Aztecs: cathedrals over the temple ruins, the palace of the viceroy over the palace of the last ruler of the Aztecs. The open area between the buildings, the place outside the former temple walls, became the new center of power in the colonial city. Until the beginning of the 20th century the square was the functional center of the city. With the enormous growth of the city in the second half of the century, new functional centers arose in the metropolitan zones. Zócalo continued to remain the center, but gained an increasingly symbolic significance. Since the park area of the square was paved over with concrete in the late fifties, the

center of the city is an austere surface of 240 by 240 meters. The physically empty center is impressive, but it is also unsettling, as though it constantly has to be filled with something. The "empty center" opens up a space to be occupied with symbols, demonstrations of power and an endless number of narratives. Again and again, the public square is newly occupied, produced, negotiated and disputed.

For many years Zócalo remained reserved to the manifestation of the state. Up to today, there is a yearly calendar of official ceremonies and events that are held by the government or the military in the square. One of these events is the daily flag ritual. In the middle of the cement area of Zócalo there is a fifty-meter-high flagpole with a gigantic national flag of Mexico. The flag is raised early every morning and lowered every evening at six o'clock, accompanied by a military ritual. During this ceremony, passers-by and onlookers watch as military dignitaries, soldiers and military police march across the plaza in a cordoned square in time to the national anthem. As soon as the last soldiers have disappeared inside the national palace with the flag, the strict demarcation of the square dissolves and people stream back and forth across and through it again. Then, however, as though magnetically drawn, they form new circles around street artists who take up their performance again at the same time, or they jostle into the metro entrances.
Another example for this kind of symbolic and national occupation of this public space is the parade in memory of the Mexican Revolution on November 20th. For this occasion the square is decorated days ahead of time and furnished with podiums and stands. On the day of the event, the center is blocked off around a wide area, access to the Zócalo is only permitted to a few selected onlookers. From the balcony of the national palace and the

reserved seats in the stands, representatives of the country greet groups of athletes marching past. The area itself remains completely empty during the event, which only emphasizes the monumentality of the square. Although the Zócalo is the center of the event, the strict organization clearly distinguishes it from everyday routine. The otherwise usual actors such as passers-by and street peddlers have vanished. Their absence and the emptiness mirror the formalization, regulation and control of public space. At this point in time, the Zócalo serves the material and symbolic founding of political power.

Depending on the event and the occasion, the Zócalo is repeatedly structured, arranged and actually staged with new things: sometimes the square is adorned with tents for assemblies, sometimes with long rows of chairs, podiums, stands or giant banners. The square becomes a stage to be played on by each group in their own way.
A form of this kind of appropriation of space that is also material is conducted by the street peddlers, who set up their booths at the edge of the square, as everywhere else in the city, every day. Elaborately developed packing systems turn a packet on a hand cart into an entire street kitchen, a clothing store or a tool shop. Each booth has a roof of plastic tarpaulin, is connected to other booths with strings and connected to the city electricity net via makeshift electrical cords to street lamps. Especially in the historical center, this informal market regularly also leads to violent disputes between merchants, street peddler syndicates, city politicians and the police.[3]

However, the Zócalo is also a location for cultural events. There is an open air cinema regularly, classical concerts and theater performances take place, there are art exhibitions, information events and raves. Under the motto *"la calle para todos"* (the street

for all), for example, the first elected city government organized events in recent years, where stars playing guest performances in the city, such as Compay Segundo, Tigres del Norte, Manu Chao or popular DJs from Berlin, played in Zócalo for free.

And finally, the Zócalo is also the goal of demonstrations. *"Tomar el Zócalo"*, the battlecry of oppositional political movements since the sixties, may best be translated as "take the Zócalo". The call to occupy the square and fill it with their own contents was still a genuine provocation at that time, because until then the Zócalo was the sole representative location of the hegemonial state power. It was a taboo for groups critical of the government, a forbidden space, so to speak. The student movements of 1968 and 1984 first turned the square into a place for the demonstration of non-conformity with regard to the official politics. One of the most radical demonstrations to this day – which was organized and carried out, unlike most other demonstrations, primarily by students and young people – was that of the day of remembrance of the massacre of October 2, 1968. On that day, in conclusion to a student demonstration in the "Plaza of Three Cultures", over three hundred people were killed by the Mexican military.
Today hundreds of demonstrations take place in Mexico City every year, the goal of which is almost always the Zócalo. In addition to the mass demonstrations of the independent unions on May 1st, solidarity rallys to support the demands of the neo-Zapatista movement of the EZLN or the city district movement of the *Movimiento Urbano Popular*, there are countless smaller manifestations by school pupils for more scholarships, nurses for better working conditions, residents from the peripheries for a better supply of water and electricity in their city districts. A common form of demonstrations is setting up camps. In general, these are groups from the province who come to the capital to

present their concerns to the authorities and the public. They occupy the public space for several weeks, until the groups move on voluntarily following more or less successful negotiations, or the camp is broken up violently. Some groups settle in side streets near the center, others directly in Zócalo. Tents and temporary kitchens are made of plastic tarpaulin, washing is hung out to dry on the tent ropes, a toilet is set up around an open manhole cover. Due to the construction of a separate temporary and mobile city in the middle of the center, crossing the Zócalo as usual, one suddenly finds oneself in dead ends, in between washing lines, sleeping people and huge pots. This form of appropriation excludes other forms of use; for example, it is not possible to carry out the daily flag ceremony. Instead, the flagpole is turned into a post, to which the strings of the tents are tied. The temporary inhabitants of the square interrupt the flow of urban everyday life by inhabiting public space with a tent camp and calling the familiar categories of "private" and "public" into question.

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[1] In this I refer to my ethnographic work on the Zócalo of Mexico City, cf. Wildner 2003.

[2] According to Nancy Fraser, the following characteristics can be distinguished as political aspects and connotations of the public: public space relates to the state, it is communal; it is accessible for everyone; something that affects everyone; a common good or common interest (cf. Fraser 1999). In addition, the public sphere also always involves certain rules, regulations and control mechanisms, which come into effect in public space.

[3] Street peddling is an everyday battle for the use of public space, which Mayor Legoretta in 1998 described as an unresolvable conflict. The methods of his predecessors, such as building market halls, for example, or constant police controls and even raids, either led to the cleared streets quickly being occupied by new street peddlers, or that the international fast food chains appropriated the broad sidewalks with plastic tables as an extension of the restaurant. The only possibility that Legoretta saw was in filling the public space reconquered by the street peddlers with new contents. He stated that limiting street peddling only worked, if the neighboring residents took action for a concrete and local use for the cleared space, e.g. as a playground or park, and felt responsible for it.