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"TAKING OUT THE TRASH BAG"

A Brief Look At The Degradation Of Public Space And Emergence Of Atmosphere Of Unwelcome!

By Mohammad Amerian

The inspiration for this short essay came while dining at an upscale restaurant in the affluent northern region of Tehran. In addition to the restaurant's elegant interior, there was an outdoor area that extended into the spacious pedestrian zone in front of it. We chose to sit outside. The opulent surroundings, with stylishly dressed patrons and luxury vehicles cruising by, created an atmosphere of grandeur and sophistication. The ambiance was defined by the hum of conversation and the subtle scent of fine dining. The waitstaff, clad in uniforms, attended to the guests, who passed by wearing high-end watches, handbags, and footwear. It was during this moment that I noticed a young child, whose appearance and attire starkly contrasted with the surrounding opulence, hastily approaching my table and urgently repeating the phrase:

"Uncle! Uncle! Can you please buy a pair of socks from me?" (10x)

This child was a street vendor, likely sensing that the restaurant's customers possessed the financial means to purchase a pair of socks. At that instant, the restaurant owner, seemingly frustrated by his staff's lack of action, angrily gestured for them to remove the child, which they did immediately. The child, with his humble appearance, felt out of place, in the midst of the polished surroundings, like a discordant note in an otherwise harmonious symphony. It was a brief interruption, something that seemed out of place and quickly erased, much like the trash bags collected from the streets at night.

This moment, where the young vendor was swiftly removed from the restaurant's elegant setting, exemplifies how certain groups can be marginalized in public spaces. Such instances highlight the tension between the ideal of inclusive public spaces and the reality of exclusion based on social class, appearance, or perceived economic status. The physical design of spaces often inadvertently reinforces these divides, creating environments where only certain individuals are welcomed, while others, like the street vendor, are swiftly removed.

This instance of exclusion from the restaurant is not an isolated event, but rather part of a larger pattern in which public spaces are shaped not just by their physical infrastructure but by the emotional atmospheres they create (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2020). The interaction between different social classes in urban spaces—like the juxtaposition of the luxury restaurant and the street vendor—reveals how public spaces are often imagined and experienced differently by various groups. As Fontaine (2022) explain, the emotional dimensions of spaces are just as critical as their physical forms in determining who feels welcome or unwelcome.

There is a direct connection between the recognition of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance and the publicness of public spaces (Bodnar, 2015). Public spaces must be designed to engage diverse social groups, fostering inclusion while avoiding elitism and division (De Backer et al., 2019; Goodsell, 2003). In contemporary human geography, the intertwined nature of the social and spatial realms is being widely recognized (Massey, 2008). The structures that define and limit the infrastructures of society, urban and regional blueprints, migration trends, and variations in investment levels are products of intricate social, economic, and political mechanisms (Van Blerk, 2013). The interaction between physical and non-physical components within public spaces contributes to the composition of varied atmospheres that evoke emotions such as inclusion or exclusion (Fontaine, 2022), and a sense of belonging or isolation from space among individuals (Duff & Moore, 2015).

The challenges faced by less advantaged groups, such as the young vendor (and young people in general), in public spaces are not solely due to managers' reluctance to include them (Edwards, 2015). The lack of awareness among planners and urban designers regarding the needs and preferences of different cohorts within a city along with privatization and commercialization of space are also significant factors (Tang, 2019). Consequently, the design of a space tailored to a particular social class, or a specific mode of public consumption often results in the unintentional exclusion or marginalization of other groups and making an atmosphere of unwelcome (Fontaine, 2022). This phenomenon suggests that even the most ostensibly public spaces can possess unseen barriers (Elías, 2022).

The example of the restaurant and the vendor in the pedestrian zone highlights how public spaces are often designed with the intention of fostering social interaction and community togetherness (Staeheli et al., 2016). Ideally, public spaces serve as neutral grounds where individuals from diverse racial, cultural, religious, and social backgrounds can coexist and interact (Madanipour, 2019). However, these spaces are not always as inclusive as intended. Societies marked by diversity particularly rely on public spaces to guard against social exclusion and the phenomenon of “othering” (Marzorati, 2013). When individuals or groups do not fit the expected norms or aesthetics of the space—such as the street vendor—they may be perceived as out of place and removed, creating an environment that prioritizes select social groups over others.

Staeheli and Mitchell (2007) suggest that public spaces are often consciously managed to maintain specific atmospheres or experiences. This involves adding or removing elements to shape a space’s character and the types of people it is meant to attract. Vendors, for example, are frequently considered “undesirable” elements that disrupt the aesthetic or social order of these spaces. As a result, space owners or managers may intervene to regulate and remove them, reinforcing the boundaries of who belongs in public spaces. Such practices reflect broader social dynamics where the behaviour and presence of marginalized groups are increasingly monitored and controlled (Valentine et al., 2004).

This complex interplay between fear, spatial exclusion, limited social capital, and marginalization underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by undesirable groups, such as vendors, in an atmosphere of unwelcome (Fontaine, 2022). The creation of such an atmosphere in public spaces leads to the restriction and alteration of how these spaces can be used by disenfranchised groups. Removing these groups means reducing the publicness of these spaces and diminishing the publicness of these areas results in a decreased potential for cultural and economic encounter and exchanges leading in an atmosphere of unwelcome. As illustrated by the incident with the young vendor, the transformation of public spaces into exclusive, market-driven zones directly undermines their public character. The removal of the vendor, though brief, symbolizes a larger issue: the erosion of truly public spaces that can foster diverse social interactions. When public spaces prioritize aesthetics over inclusivity, they cease to be spaces for everyone, ultimately creating a fragmented society where only certain groups belong.

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