

Privatization of Urban Space



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1 Introduction

Today, public life has become more closely connected to consumption and thus also more closely tied to private spaces within the city. The privatization of the urban environment is something that is often considered problematic as it restricts our movements within the city. Spaces that are privately owned can impose a set of rules that controls social interaction and can easily exclude what is considered undesirable groups of people. However, seen in the context of many cities in South-East Asia, private development does not necessarily have to be connected to an economic or social class. Instead, much of the city-building is privately funded, whether it is the informal settlements of the urban poor or the gated communities of the wealthy. And as for public space, there has not always existed any public space to undergo privatization, instead private developments have often lead to an improvement of services where governments have been lacking e.g. parks, schools etc.

Purpose

With this essay I wish to explore if privately owned spaces can be used in a public way. In cities where most of the land is privately owned, what are the public spaces and how does the ownership affect public life? I will try to discuss examples from both a western and an Asian perspective. Some case studies are to be found in the chosen literature, and I will also use examples (interviews and observations) from Manila and see if I can compare them to any situations in a Swedish context. The interviews and observations was conducted during a study trip to Manila that was as a part of the Urban Shelter course at Lund University .

Questions

- Can public life exist in privately owned spaces?
- How do the rules for public and private spaces differ?
- How does the view of ownership and access to common spaces differ in an Asian versus a western perspective?
- How does the increasing privatization of spaces within the city affect the way common spaces are used?
- In what ways are privatization manifested? Gated communities, shopping malls etc?
- Are there examples of privatization and gated communities to be seen in Sweden?

2 Literature Review

Definition of public space

When talking about the privatization of public space it is first important to try to understand what a public space really is. What do we mean by saying that a space is *public*, is it just a matter of ownership or are there other factors to be considered? While there is no clear definition of what is public space, the discussion tend to revolve around the usage and accessibility of spaces. In "The privatization of public space: modeling and measuring publicness" (2011), Németh and Schmidt argues that in order for a space to be considered public, it needs to be open and accessible for everyone and it should also provide functions that encourage social interaction between an as diverse set of people as possible. (Németh, 2011) These functions could range from democratic activity to casual recreation and could be open, outdoor places such as sidewalks, squares, plazas and parks, but it could also be buildings that house public functions .

These factors have in fact no direct link with the ownership of space, but rather with what the space allows to happen. As stated in: "Asian urbanisms and the privatization of cities", that if the meaning of "public" is understood as "*urban social interaction with strangers and casual acquaintances*" instead of what is

governmentally owned, then there should be no impediment for public life to exist in privately owned spaces. (Hogan, 2010) However, the ownership of spaces might very well have an indirect effect on these factors.

Concerns about privatization?

Despite the important social functions of public spaces, the provision of these spaces is more and more becoming the responsible of the private sector. This has in many places resulted in an increase of the *number* of publicly accessible spaces, but not always in the quality of those. It is for example a common phenomenon for local governments to give subsidies to private developers and investors that provide publicly accessible spaces. In other words, if a publicly accessible space is included in a new building project, the developers are allowed to build a larger portion of floor area. (Németh, 2011)

In "Whose Public Space - International Case Studies in Urban Design and Development" (2010), Mandanipour argues that the open public spaces are changing from being an integrated part of a city's social fabric into a more impersonal and fragmented urban situation. He means that public spaces that used to be rooted in community traditions and routines are now spaces that are more closely linked to economic, political and management considerations. Madanipour is not alone, these are concerns that are often raised today and the fact that the private sector is given control over spaces within the city is seen as very problematic. As private companies do not always have a public interest in mind when designing these spaces and neither are held responsible for the environments that they create, one can certainly often question the public nature of these spaces .

Németh and Schmidt (2011) bring up three main issues of privately owned, public accessible spaces that they feel pose a great threat towards public urban life .

The first concern is the process in which these spaces are created. Since there are no public opinions considered either in the design or the management of these spaces, it opposes the current views of the planning profession that states the importance of an open, participatory process. (Németh, 2011) Secondly, the close link between the public space and the image of the company that owns it could

cause a conflict of interest. Different methods are used in order to make sure that the space reflects the desired image of the company. It can be by advertisements and company logos, but it can also be by imposing rules that restrict the access to the space for undesirable groups of people. (Németh, 2011) The third point is the issue of security. The general view is that public spaces must be perceived as safe by their users in order to be well functioning public spaces. The problem is the measures that are taken in order to achieve this sense of security. (Németh, 2011) It does not just have to be by surveillance and rules, but it is also about attracting the "right" sort of people, usually the people that spend money. And that is what is problematic, when focus is shifted from providing inclusion and publicness to security.

Asian/Western Context

One can easily say that privatization is a much debated subject today, but the discussion tends to be rather one-sided and only focusing on the matter from a western point of view. And the reason that it in a western context is so negatively charged has probably much to do with the fact that the nature of urban space has been grounded in the state/market economy and there has been a long history of publicly owned spaces. When this is changing, it is seen as private forces are taking over spaces within the city that really should belong to the people. However, as argued in "Asian urbanisms and the privatization of cities", in many cities in South-east Asia, *privatization* might not be a relevant term as there has not always existed any publicly owned spaces to undergo the process of privatization. Instead, most city-building is privately funded. Whether it is the high-income gated communities, the informal settlements of the poor or major development plans financed by private companies, it is all privately owned or managed and also reflect private aims and values. (Hogan, 2010) In other words, people are building their own spaces in the city without support from the state, and the process of privatization can in a way be seen as a result of a lacking government. When the government has failed to provide public services, private sectors have responded. (Hogan, 2010)

In many cities in South-east Asia, much of the land is privately owned and the management of large areas within the city is handled by private developers. In

some cases this works well, but one could also argue that it in many ways creates a very controlled urban environment. In 2003 in Shanghai, it was announced that all new private housing developments were obliged to be equipped with a surveillance system. Even though the new areas are not required to be fenced, these security measures promote that kind of development. The local governments have been criticized for "subcontracting" security to private contractors to avoid the cost of security and police themselves. (Pow, 2009) On the other hand one could also say that these privately owned areas are less formal and less controlled. The gated communities of Shanghai could also be places of greater social freedom than places in the public sphere that are heavily controlled by the Chinese communist party. (Pow, 2009)

Gated Communities

One way in which privatization of urban land is manifested is by so called gated communities. A gated community is a residential area that, by choice of its residences, is restricted from the surroundings with a fence, a wall or another type of physical border. The gated community as a phenomenon is a part of the segregation within the city. It is perhaps most considered to be a socioeconomic segregation, but it can also be an ethnic and demographic segregation. (Martinson, 2000) Some argue that an informal settlement also could be seen as a gated community. As well as the traditional gated community, an informal settlement manifests the concentration of a specific group that are somewhat isolated from the rest of the society and governed by explicit rules. The informal settlement does not necessarily have to be surrounded by a physical border, but it is common for communities to hire guards that will secure the area from gangs hired by the property owner. Because of the illegal nature of the settlement, if the property owner wants to develop the land, he/she first have to get rid of the "squatters" (Hogan, 2010) There are other reasons for the isolation of informal settlements as well, it can be because people from informal settlements are excluded from other places in the city, and when a gated community in a way is a lifestyle or a way of living, an informal settlement might not be by choice.

When speaking about gated communities in a western context it is almost always the American gated communities which are referred to. These are communities

exclusively for the rich which could be said to contribute to the segregation of an area. In many Asian cities, even though a gated community for the rich is often guarded and surveilled in order to keep out undesirable people, the different socioeconomic classes are very much dependent on each other and co-exist even within the walls of a gated community. The community cannot function without the cheap labor of the lower classes but have large armies of gardeners, security guards, domestic workers etc. (Hogan, 2010) Choon-Piew Pow (2009) also argues that the security issue, often the case when comparing to the American gated communities does not have the same meaning in many Asian cities. He means that to some extent, China has a tradition of "gating" and that enclosed housing forms have been a common typology. For example, the ancient walled cities, enclosed courtyard houses (siheyuan) and the *work-unit-compounds* during the socialist era. (Pow, 2009) This is something that could be said about Manila as well where gating has its root in colonialism. The area of Intra Muros during the Spanish colonial period divided the population and excluded people according to race, religion and class. Forbes Park in Manila is said to be *the first self-consciously modern gated community in the world* ,it was created after World War II with the purpose of protecting and barricading its residences from the chaos after the war. (Hogan, 2010)

Gated communities in Sweden?

During the last decades in Sweden there has been major changes in the conditions of planning. A more market-oriented planning has become the norm and private factors, such as the major construction and real-estate companies, have gained more influence over the process. (Martinson, 2000) Martinson argues that this has resulted in greater segregation and has had a visible effect on city life. We have a housing market that is becoming more clearly focused on the wishes of the financially strong .She argues that the phenomenon of gated communities is something that is becoming more and more common in Sweden. (Martinson, 2000) The areas that could be considered to be gated do not have an actual gate but are restricted in terms of non-physical borders. They have a price level that completely exclude the majority of the population and are often clearly profiled, for example: eco villages, golf villages, senior housing etc. and have specific rules and regulations. (Martinson, 2000) Victoria Park in Malmö is a quite extreme

example of a gated community in Sweden, being almost like a resort. The residents pay a large service fee in order to receive services like: a 24-hour reception, surveillance, cinema, spa, wine cellar and free coffee. A less extreme example, but also much more common, is all the housing cooperatives (bostadsrättsföreningar) that have courtyards and staircases which are locked or only accessible by code.

3 Discussion

Public life in private spaces?

The question whether privately owned spaces can provide for public life is quite complex. In Metro Manila I think that was something that became evident as a large part of the urban land is owned by private companies. Manila certainly had existing public urban life, both in spaces which are privately owned and in spaces which are publicly owned .

Shopping malls are an interesting phenomenon concerning this subject. Although they are clearly tied to spaces of consumption they are also very much a social gathering space. In Manila, this was something that almost could be considered as a "mall-culture", going to the mall is something people do for fun on the weekends, not necessarily to spend money but also to meet friends and enjoy the air conditioned space that the malls provide. Could a mall be considered a public space? Malls might be used in a public way, but the nature of these spaces are clearly profiled towards consumption. Even though they might not explicitly exclude certain people, they do not either encourage other social activities than consumption. And the design of these spaces are often about attracting the "right" sort of people, usually the people that spend money. Again, it is an example of when the focus is changing from providing an inclusive public space to providing security and generating profit. However, there are of course different degrees of publicness in these spaces as well, it is difficult to compare a shopping mall or a controlled park such as the Ayala triangle, to the common spaces of any privately owned barangay. I would argue that it is a matter of *control* and *influence* .

Spaces that are controlled by large private companies, such as the Ayala Triangle, can easily impose a set of rules in order to control and restrict the usage of that

space. These spaces are often linked to consumption and an image of the company. People who cannot afford to buy anything or are undesirable in other ways are not allowed on the property. It can however in a sense be a social space and activities that might be considered public are provided, the Ayala Triangle is used for recreational activities, e.g. exercising, picnics etc. which in theory anyone could take part in. But at the same time it is watched by guards and surveillance systems and a set of rules that can get you rejected if they are not being followed, (not allowed to walk on grass, no smoking, opening hours). Furthermore, even if public life exists in these spaces, the public nature of a privately owned space could easily change over a day as the private developer decides that another use for the space will be more profitable. This is about the matter of *influence*. A small, communal barangay also has rules and regulations in order to control the behavior of the people living in the area. This could be in terms of a curfew, a gate and guards. The difference is that the organization is much smaller and it might be possible to have a personal influence over the organization and one's own urban environment. It also has to do with the importance of a space to be able to adapt according to different needs, that it may change its purpose over time and according to whom is using the space. Such spaces has a great value as people may take part in changing and have an impact on their surroundings and thus also feel more included. This may be difficult in a space that has many imposed rules and regulations.

Subcontracting public functions

In Metro Manila much of the land is privately owned, and the management of large areas within the city is handled by private developers. Bonifacio Global City is a privately developed area in Metro Manila, it houses the rich families of Manila and is very much a city within a city. In the area there are schools, malls, parks, museums, a hospital, i.e. facilities to accommodate every need of the residents. It is a private bubble that you never have to leave. Even the infrastructure is private, roads, public transport, water supply and electricity are all owned and managed by the same company. This does not just create a very socio-economically segregated area, but it is also a question of the power of one single company. To be responsible for the infrastructure of an entire area, and also to be trusted with handling its surveillance, this creates a very controlled urban

environment. The case of Bonifacio Global City is a situation similar to the one in Shanghai, where important functions in society are "subcontracted" to private developers. It does not necessarily mean that the services provided are of lesser quality, it is probably often an improvement of what some governments are able to supply, but without regulations that control for example how much it is reasonable to pay for water and electricity, or how the information gathered from surveillance is handled, private companies gain a lot of power.

Gatedness

It is important when comparing the "publicness" of Asian cities to cities in "western" countries, that the context in which these spaces exist is considered. A country that does not have a history of public ownership has developed other forms of public spaces and the different historic and cultural backgrounds makes these places gain a different meaning. Gated communities is a clear example of this as in the context of South-east Asia, gating does not necessarily have to be related to a specific socioeconomic group. In Manila, even in communities for low-income people, gating a neighborhood is the norm.

But it does not always, as in most "western" examples, only have to do with security of an area. It is also a way of creating a sense of community and belonging. It is possible that a larger sense of freedom can be achieved within the walls of a gated community than what would have been the case if the area was not gated. A lot of the persons we interviewed in Manila in different gated relocation projects argued that the gates was necessary for them to be able to feel safe as their children played outside. Many also thought that the rules that applied for the community was something that contributed to a more pleasant environment, the curfew for example was something that resulted in a quieter and calmer place during the evenings.

Nevertheless, gating a community creates segregation in the sense that it excludes people from places within the city. It restricts our movements and forces us to take long detours as the network of the city becomes more rigid and allows for less flexibility.

4 Urban Shelter Design and the Role of Architects

How can the positive aspects of a gated community (security and community feeling) be achieved without the negative effects (segregation, restriction of movements)? In other words, how can a sense of security be created without actual walls ?

First of all, a solid wall is more problematic than a perforated one as it not only restricts our movements but also our view. This could create further problems of segregation as a non-visible area on another side of a barrier becomes something even more distant and unfamiliar. The premises on which one is allowed to enter the area is also an important factor. A gate that is open and that you can enter during the day without having to report to a security guard and that is closed only by night is of course less intimidating than a 24-hour guarded gate.

As a part of the Urban Shelter course, I have tried to deal with these questions when developing a project for a neighborhood design. How can a sense of security and community be achieved in a rapidly growing city such as Manila? One of the main goals has been to create this sense of community without the need for an actual gate. The strategy then has been to create smaller more private spaces within the neighborhood in forms of communal courtyards. By allowing the courtyard to be private and dedicated to the people living around it, the street could be kept publicly accessible. This is a vital aspect as many people rely on commercial activities for an income. Without public streets there would be a much smaller customer base. A network of streets is also important for people to be able to move freely within the city and not being interrupted by inaccessible space. It has also been a question about working with flexibility and that the borders into the private courtyards should be able to be open or closed depending on time. Time meaning hours of the day, but also that as the community develops it might include more people and then there should be a possibility to open these borders. As for the architects role in this it is important not to "over program" spaces, because that is in a way also a form of controlling the behavior of the people that are going to use the space. A certain level of flexibility is needed in order for people to make the space their own and to be able to adapt the spaces according to different needs.

I think that is something that applies for any private developer that deals with the question of public spaces as well. For a space to be perceived as public, it is important for people to feel that the space belongs to them and that one can have an impact on how the space is shaped and used. By having the possibility of taking part in shaping the spaces within a city, one is also more prone to feel as a part of the city's larger network.

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