

The Myth of the Town Square: Public Space and Democracy in the American Urban Landscape

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The idea of the American town square has long captivated the imagination of philosophers, theorists, and cultural critics. Despite being lauded by thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt as a central pillar of American Democracy, the town square has seen a profound shift throughout America's urban history. My research this summer focused on this shift by examining two central lines of thought. I first wanted to understand the evolution (or devolution) of the town square in America — essentially examining how it lost prominence in American communities and what came to exist in its place. I then wanted to understand if our modern public spaces, including downtowns, city parks, community centers, cafes, and modern plazas and squares, were effective as public spaces and if they maintained any remnants of the democratic ideal of the town square.

To answer these questions, I began with an exploration of primary source accounts of town squares in historical documents, with a particular interest in town squares across New England. Throughout this process, I came to understand how the town square once stood as a hub of political and civic action, lauded by nineteenth century political thinkers. Yet it also became clear that these spaces thrived primarily because of simple constraints of the time. Limited transportation, the absence of digital communication, and the necessity of face-to-face interaction for commerce and governance all served to concentrate civic life into these local communal hubs. However, with the rise of automobile culture and industrialization, these constraints lessened, and the town square began to lose its central role in community life. The further urbanization and subsequent suburbanization in addition to a growing sense of individualism in American culture pulled people away from communal centers and allowed commerce, rather than politics, to gain predominance in public spaces.

This left me with the challenge of understanding how public space manifests in modern American communities — what makes an effective or ineffective public space? Where, if anywhere, does democratic action find a physical home in our modern urban landscape? To begin answering these questions I undertook an extensive literature review, reading books like *The City Creative: The Rise of Urban Placemaking in Contemporary America* by Michael H. Carriere and David Schalliol, a book focused on “creative placemaking” in modern America, tracing the origins of creative placemaking from the mid-twentieth century to the early 2000s, with an eye towards how small, grassroots organizations and individuals engage with available space in an urban context — often using space in creative, or un-orthodox ways to suit their needs. I also read authors like Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, and Richard Rothstein to understand how downtowns, communal spaces, and cities have evolved and the role public space plays within them.

Unsurprisingly, I discovered that many modern public spaces fall short of embodying the democratic spirit of the traditional town square. Yet, I also found glimmers of hope. As in *The City Creative*, there exist communities in which grassroots initiatives have reclaimed public areas, drawing in some of the original spirit of the town square. This left me with a final question: how can we build spaces that deliberately encourage the communal spirit once found in the town square? My research led me to the conclusion that while space is not the only factor, and that people will create space for themselves when none is available, it can be a major positive force in fostering community engagement and revitalizing democratic participation and we ought to construct spaces towards meaningful community building. Recognizing this potential, my research advocates for intentional urban design that prioritizes the creation and maintenance of communal spaces. While the era of the traditional town square may be long gone, it is more important than ever that we strive to cultivate a democratic spirit through meaningful public space.

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