

Editorial

Entanglements of Improvisation, Conviviality, and Conflict in Everyday Encounters in Public Space

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Abstract

The everyday life of public space is characterised by many kinds of convivial, conflictual, and improvisational encounters between people of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Because public spaces are, in principle at least, freely accessible to all, they are of central importance to everyday life and intrinsically interesting to social scientists. This thematic issue brings together a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on everyday encounters in public space. In the introduction to this thematic issue, we appeal to urban scholars of all backgrounds to take the social life of public space seriously; as essential social infrastructure, public space is key to the collective well-being of city-dwellers, and it provides a crucial bridge between urban planning and the social sciences. Here, we briefly survey research on everyday encounters and introduce each of the contributions to the issue. While the articles in this issue are organised around the three core themes of conviviality, conflict, and improvisation, we argue for the entanglements of each within the everyday life of public spaces.

Keywords

conflict; conviviality; encounter; everyday life; improvisation; public space

Issue

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1. Introduction

As the planet continues to urbanise, public spaces become increasingly important. Public spaces are central to political mobilisation, collective action, and the practice of democracy. That said, in the rush to understand the centrality of public space to political mobilisation and democratic practice, the more ordinary everyday life of public space is often given short shrift. Public spaces are unique settings for understanding encounters across types of social relationships and forms of social difference. From the fleeting and happenstance to the regular and routinised, everyday encounters in public space make social inclusion and exclusion manifest in myriad ways. Drawn from a wide range of disciplines, the articles in this thematic issue take up the challenge of treating public space as a domain of everyday

encounters between strangers, critically examining varieties of co-existence amongst city dwellers expressed in and through encounters in urban public spaces.

By treating public space as *social* space where various social dynamics—conflictual, convivial, improvisational—are entangled, contributors to this thematic issue focus on public space as simultaneously a setting for the practice of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984) and as a site of encounter (Valentine, 2008). Rather than focusing on large-scale protests or major public events, articles in this issue treat mundane, everyday happenings in urban public spaces as essential data. Mundane certainly does not denote meaningless. Everyday life in public spaces is characterised by frequent and continuous encounters with others, whether intimates, friends, acquaintances, or strangers (Horgan et al., 2022). In principle, public spaces are freely accessible to all. Yet as the

contributions to this thematic issue demonstrate, in practice a range of social and material factors enhance, attenuate, and/or compromise this freedom and accessibility.

This thematic issue offers a variety of perspectives on public spaces as sites of everyday encounter. The 13 articles centre social encounters and everyday life across three key areas: improvisation, conviviality, and conflict. An underlying premise of this thematic issue is that these must be examined together to better understand the richness and complexity of the social life of public spaces. We start with improvisation as a building block of everyday life and its creativity, adaptability, and unpredictability. With improvisation as a centrepiece, everyday entanglements (rather than polarities) of conflict and conviviality take shape according to the specific social, historical, political, and cultural contexts of urban public spaces. Almost 20 years ago Paul Gilroy (2005, p. xv) positioned conviviality as centrally concerned with “processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life.” Since then, convivialities research has enhanced and expanded this premise (Germain, 2013; Radice, 2016; Vigneswaran, 2014; Wise & Velayutham, 2009, 2014). At the same time, the study of conviviality—be it directly or indirectly, through presence or absence—always nods to its opposite. In this regard, conflict becomes a way to capture how the material and social life of public space may be welcoming to some and inhospitable to others. We argue that only by positioning conflict in dialogue with both conviviality and improvisation can we continue to counterweight the “vast sociology of hopelessness to which the contemporary city is home” (Hall & Smith, 2015, p. 3).

2. Entanglements of Conviviality, Conflict, and Improvisation

2.1. Conviviality

Several articles in this issue offer significant contributions to the “convivial, everyday turn” (Neal et al., 2013, p. 315). In their pathbreaking contribution, “‘It’s a Two-Way Thing’: Symbolic Boundaries and Convivial Practices in Changing Neighbourhoods in London and Tshwane,” Susanne Wessendorf and Tamlyn Monson use ethnographic data from Newham (UK) and Mshongo (South Africa) to bring convivialities research into conversation with work on symbolic boundaries. While “perceptions of inequality, lack of civility, and lack of reciprocity shape symbolic boundaries against newcomers,” Wessendorf and Monson’s (2023, p. 6) analysis shows how convivial practices may temper such negative perceptions. Drawing on both behavioural mapping and survey data, in “Conviviality in Public Squares: How Affordances and Individual Factors Shape Optional Activities” Hannah Widmer carefully examines how individual factors and the affordances of public space variously impact if and how people use public squares in Zurich (Switzerland) in convivial ways. Widmer’s (2023)

analysis builds upon existing convivialities research focused on *cultural* difference by attending to how other kinds of differences (e.g., socio-economic, gender, age, etc.) figure in generating conviviality. Sonia Bookman’s ethnographic study, “The Forks Market: Cosmopolitan Canopy, Conviviality, and Class” looks at how The Forks Market, a redesigned “branded public space” in Winnipeg (Canada) seeks to cultivate particular forms of cosmopolitanism. While “patrons co-perform a kind of cosmopolitan conviviality,” Bookman (2023, p. 31) finds this is “marked by ambivalence” as the market privileges middle-class taste and consumption.

Drawing on ethnographic data from Cardiff (Wales) and New York (USA), in “The Coining of Convivial Public Space: Homelessness, Outreach Work, and Interaction Order” Robin James Smith et al. (2023, p. 42) show how the work of “frontline street-based care and outreach” teams requires “improvised conviviality.” Informed by the ethnomethodological perspective in sociology, the authors treat conviviality as a “fragile interactional accomplishment” (Smith et al., 2023, p. 42), making the provocative argument that the material specifics of any locality matter less than the interactions occurring within. Taking a different line very much tied to locality, Troy D. Glover, Luke Moyer, Joe Todd, and Taryn Graham’s article “Strengthening Social Ties While Walking the Neighbourhood?” examines how possibilities for frequent, sometimes happenstance, encounters enabled by neighbourhood walking facilitate the development of social ties. This kind of largely unquantifiable “incidental sociability” (Glover et al., 2023) is important for social cohesion. With similar interest in social cohesion, in “Geographies of Encounter, Public Space, and Social Cohesion: Reviewing Knowledge at the Intersection of Social Sciences and Built Environment Disciplines,” Patricia Aelbrecht and Quentin Stevens provide a systematic review of literatures criss-crossing the social sciences, architecture, and urban design, focusing especially on intersections between research on social cohesion and urban design literature. Their proposed framework provides “a multi-dimensional account of how public spaces with different design approaches are connected to different experiences of social encounters, which in turn impact varied experiences of social cohesion” (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2023, p. 63).

2.2. Conflict

While conviviality is a desirable feature of social life in public spaces, contributors are not so naïve as to treat conviviality as a panacea. Rather, conviviality emerges as a complex spatial and interactional practice characterised as much by ambivalence and conflict as by connection and playfulness. Existing research attunes us to how conviviality can be bound up with new forms of conflict and may consolidate old forms of marginalisation (Back & Sinha, 2016). Because they harbour a variety of sometimes competing uses and users, public spaces

are sites of everyday conflict. In this vein, Lise Mahieus and Eugene McCann's article, "'Hot+Noisy' Public Space: Conviviality, 'Unapologetic Asianness,' and the Future of Vancouver's Chinatown," carefully examines complex debates around everyday life in a changing neighbourhood. Working with data from a series of events where the local Chinese community appropriate public spaces for Mahjong games, the authors advocate for more radical approaches to conviviality. By probing "the productive possibilities of 'political conviviality' and agonistic encounters," they show how "agonistic 'place-keeping'" (rather than "placemaking") enhances solidarity amongst members of a marginalised community under threat of gentrification (Mahieus & McCann, 2023, p. 77).

Because urban environments are unyielding to the needs of many, conflict is also connected to counter-strategies of response and resistance. To this end, Louise Sträuli's "Negotiating Difference on Public Transport: How Practices and Experiences of Deviance Shape Public Space" uses qualitative interviews to explore how individuals navigate financial, psychological, and physical barriers to using public transportation in Tallinn (Estonia) and Brussels (Belgium). Sträuli (2023, p. 90) stresses how "conceptualising publicness as a continuous process facilitates more equitable and inclusive planning." Similarly, Shirin Pourafkari's article, "Visually Impaired Persons and Social Encounters in Central Melbourne," examines via multi-method research how visually impaired persons (VIPs) perceive and experience the city's socio-spatial landscape. As Pourafkari (2023, p. 105) argues, "social equity in relation to VIPs shouldn't be reduced to questions of wayfinding and technical aids for navigation. Rather, increased focus should be devoted to questions of VIPs' participation in urban space and public life."

Conflicts in public space can also touch on difficult social knowledge. In their article, "The Role of the Body in Pandemic Geographies of Encounter: Anti-Restriction Protesters Between Collective Action and Political Violence," Sabine Knierbein and Richard Pfeifer examine protest as a complex, embodied public practice. Drawing on fieldwork in Vienna (Austria), they make a case for understanding the challenging example of public protests against Covid-19 restrictions where "the body was often perceived as simultaneously 'being threatened' by the state and 'collectively liberated' in public space" (Knierbein & Pfeifer, 2023, p. 116). For Knierbein and Pfeifer (2023, p. 116), this tension "not only mitigated potential conflicts between different types of protesters with different ideological backgrounds but also stimulated the emergence of ambivalent pandemic geographies of encounter."

2.3. Improvisation

As a form of social practice, improvisation arises in the context of uncertainty and unpredictability, and it is always required when engaging with the unantic-

pated. Improvisation, then, is a key feature of everyday encounters between strangers in public spaces. Work on improvisation in public spaces has tended to focus on the improvised uses of materials in modifying shared space, DIY urbanism, and grassroots initiatives. Several articles here advance a more targeted concern with improvisation in urban interaction. Anne-Lene Sand, Anniken Førde, John Pløger, and Mathias Poulsen's article, "Improvisation and Planning: Engaging With Unforeseen Encounters in Urban Public Space," explores tensions between improvisational uses and urban planning. Based on two research projects involving children and youth, the authors emphasise the important role of play and improvisation for social belonging. Their case studies demonstrate the social benefits of "flexible spaces, allowing improvisational and surprising use and multimodal encounters that created new connectivities and engagement" (Sand et al., 2023, p. 129).

Similarly, in "Reading Publicness: Meaningful and Spontaneous Encounters in Beirut During a Time of Crisis," Roula El-Khoury, Rachele Saliba, and Tamara Nasr underscore the significance of spontaneous interactions and activities during intense urban duress. Drawing on narrative and observational data from Lebanon, the authors locate examples of creativity and improvisation where more robust and inclusive versions of publicness surface. Their framework emphasises the "particularity of the context of Beirut during times of crisis...and the potential of spontaneous social practices in overcoming challenging conditions" (El-Khoury et al., 2023, p. 142). Yet conviviality and improvisation are too often inhibited through urban planning, regulation, and politics. Katja Friedrich and Stefanie Rößler's "Built Space Hinders Lived Space: Social Encounters and Appropriation in Large Housing Estates" adds "feeling at home" to our understanding of neighbourhood conviviality and community well-being. Their in-depth study demonstrates how encounters are inhibited or potentiated by social and physical characteristics and presents a compelling case for how to make housing estates "more liveable in the long term by promoting encounters and appropriation" (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023, p. 105).

3. Conclusions

Public spaces are not only tangible, physical spaces. They are also spaces "vital for people to socialize, learn, and play...they form an infrastructure of inclusion and exclusion" (Low, 2023, p. 2). Articles in this thematic issue demonstrate the ongoing and growing importance of public spaces as sites that can intensify prevailing inequalities and potentially generate new ones, while also harbouring forms of sociability and social infrastructure vital to urban wellbeing, vivacity, and interconnectedness.

By aligning the entanglements of conviviality and conflict with the improvisational character of social life—"the jazz of human exchange" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 79)—

contributors to this thematic issue treat everyday happenings, mundane encounters, and ordinary scenes seriously. Taken together, the articles gathered here show that there is still much to be learned about and from everyday encounters in public space.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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