

# THE CITY AS PUBLIC SPACE

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**A** CITY IS FULL OF EXTERNALITIES. NOISES AND SMELLS, CONGESTION and pollution, loitering and littering, fear and excitement, the everyday encounters with strangers and strange behaviours, the shared use of public spaces and the clash of activities—all produce or result in various forms of uncompensated costs individuals impose upon one another. This ubiquity of externalities, I want to suggest, is in fact part of the essential nature of the city. Indeed, trying to eliminate the gap between the private cost and the social cost of all these activities, or to *internalize* all those externalities—even trying to imagine a hypothetical world in which they are all internalized—would represent a denial of the type of interactions that define the urban environment. City life means never being able to completely retreat from the multiple effects of other people's action and behaviour. This is another way of saying that a city is by definition a public space.

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As it has so often been argued, the notion of public space is essentially an urban notion. Inversely, the city is itself the public space par excellence. As Kingwell suggests, “Urban life is public life, the courtyard is the city, and proximity inevitably creates the complicated shared gazes of the unprivate private—which is to say, the always already public.”<sup>1</sup> One can read this contribution as an interpretation of this insight, based on the notion of ubiquitous urban externalities.

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## I

When people litter in a park or drive a car, they produce *negative* externalities: they impose the cost of their action on other users of the park or on anyone stuck in traffic or breathing the polluted air. Inversely, a person's decision to bike to work produces *positive* externalities in the form of cleaner air and more road space for others. Everyone will enjoy the benefits of cleaner air and less congested roads, but the lone cyclist has no way to charge them for providing those benefits.

Externalities are problematic for economists, as they often lead to market failures. When a factory disposes of its waste by discharging it into the atmosphere, imposing the cost of its action on anyone breathing the polluted air, the market is not the solution but the problem. An important condition of an ideal market is that people assume the cost of their action. But under externalities, prices are not optimal. People can do things that make themselves better off, at the expense of others, without compensating them.

But externalities are also problematic for political philosophers. In a just society, citizens should bear their fair share of burdens, but they also have a right to their fair share of the benefits produced by social co-operation. A problem, however, is that a large part of these benefits are *free*. Social co-operation usually works if nearly everyone does their part, but this condition also entails that some can enjoy the benefits of the co-operation freely, without assuming their share of its burdens.

This is why some political philosophers argue, explicitly or implicitly, that justice requires that the norms of social co-operation should be immunized against externalities, that is, against the uncompensated costs that individuals impose upon one another. In other words, the norms governing a just society should not be the result of exploitation, either by free riders enjoying the benefits of positive externalities or parasites imposing negative externalities. Co-operation on terms affected by such externalities would certainly be neither rational nor fair, but would be the result of an exploitive agreement.<sup>2</sup> The idea behind all this is, I believe, easy to grasp: any past injustices should be eliminated in order to secure a *fair* or *just* social scheme.

The problem, when one takes this framework and tries to apply it to urban institutions, is that it is hard to imagine the possibility of internalizing every externality produced in the city. Consequently, and despite a common desire to get rid of them, both economists and political

philosophers still have to come to grips with the idea that externalities are essential to what a city is. Following Jane Jacobs, economists like Nobel Prize laureate Robert Lucas have started to recognize that externalities explain the development of cities, or at least, that they account for their social and economic vitality. As Jacobs explains in *The Economy of Cities*, cities don't have economic power despite their inefficiencies, but thanks to their inefficiencies.<sup>3</sup>

Theorists interested in questions of justice now need to come to the same realization. The question of urban justice is not that of a compromise between justice and the presence of externalities, but that of the conditions of justice given the ubiquity of urban externalities. Trying to eliminate or internalize all urban externalities would be to ignore what a city is, but it would also be to undermine the resources it needs to thrive socially, culturally, and economically. In the remaining of this contribution, I will discuss these two claims and will close on the importance in a just and democratic city for citizens to gain control of urban externalities—that is, of public space.

## II

What is a city? This is by no means an easy question. Early in the twentieth century Louis Wirth, founding member of the Chicago School of sociology, proposed a now-classic definition of the city as “a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals.”<sup>4</sup> This is an important definition, one which had an overwhelming influence on generations of urban scholars. Many failed to realize, however, that these criteria can easily mislead if taken separately. For instance, many students of the city have taken density as the best way to define their subject. But, as Louis Wirth had already made clear, density alone is a completely arbitrary criterion if it is not correlated with other social characteristics of the city.<sup>5</sup> A town can be very dense, but not large nor heterogeneous enough to count as a city.

The interesting question, then, is this: what is so special about this complex combination of density, size, and heterogeneity? I want to suggest that this complex mixture expresses itself primarily through an intensification of the effects of individual actions or behaviours on others. It is reflected not only in more important variations between groups and individuals, and between their potential and actual interactions, but, more significantly, in an environment highly welcoming to externalities,

to the point that they become ubiquitous and inescapable. Indeed, the result of having a great number of different people in a relatively dense environment is that the possibilities of getting in each other's way—of *producing externalities*—are almost limitless. In a city, everything is affected by everything else, to the point in fact that its very existence depends on these spillover effects of individual actions and private transactions. The very presence of these ubiquitous externalities, produced by this complex relation between density, size, and heterogeneity, is *the* urban condition. Without such external effects, there is just no city.

To make the point clearer, think about the classic argument in favour of private property. Individuals often find themselves in situations where they can improve their own condition in a way that imposes a cost upon others. But when everyone does this, the accumulated costs may easily outweigh the advantages, leaving everyone worse off than they were to start with. These situations are what we have come to call, following Garrett Hardin, tragedies of the commons, situations where individuals pursuing their own interests undermine a collective good. The original example comes from England, at a time when land was held in common to graze sheep. The problem was that, when people grazed their sheep in the commons, they had an incentive to overgraze, which benefited themselves at the expense of everyone else, and which also wound up generating a collective action problem. This phenomenon occurs every time individuals have an incentive to produce negative externalities but no incentive to produce positive externalities. The classic solution is to break up the commons into private properties, thus, in the original scenario, restricting grazing to each farmer's lot. In eliminating the opportunistic strategy that generates the tragedy in the first place, it fully internalizes the externalities and resolves the collective action problem. An important role of the state is to create institutional mechanisms aimed at securing this kind of agreement or to secure through other means (regulation or taxation, for instance) the internalization of externalities.

The problem is that if one tries to apply this model to urban institutions, it is difficult to imagine that it is possible (or even desirable, as I will try to show later) to internalize every externality produced in the city, that is, to break down the city as public space into multiple private spaces. The ubiquity of externalities—or the impossibility to internalize them entirely—is indeed what defines the urban environment. Thus, by contrast with a classic tragedy of the commons, which does not depend

on the number or on the density of people affected, and which can be neutralized with the help of various institutional techniques without modifying the nature of the social environment in question, urban externalities, characterized by their being the product of this complex combination of density, size, and heterogeneity, cannot be completely neutralized without altering the social entity in question, that is, without simultaneously eliminating the conditions of possibility of the city.

My attempt here is primarily to theorize or to systematize an intuition expressed in various ways by many authors that have written on the city. Indeed, this relation between cities and externalities can help us understand why Rem Koolhaas, in his major work on New York—his “retroactive manifesto” as he calls it—defines urban culture as a “culture of congestion” and describes the built environment of Manhattan as “a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion,”<sup>6</sup> or why Michel de Certeau sees the *real* city—in contrast to that of utopian and urbanistic discourses—as an improper space.<sup>7</sup> I will argue in a later section that one can also interpret Jane Jacobs’s work in this vein.

### III

The idea that externalities are an essential characteristic of cities should be understood to mean not only that people are always getting in each other’s way, but that it is neither possible nor desirable to neutralize all these spillover effects, that is, to internalize all the externalities that cities generate. The point is not simply that individual actions are not isolated and that they affect other people’s lives. This would be a rather banal claim, and not one that is particularly specific to cities. The claim here is that the existence of the city depends on the presence of externalities and that urban institutions might even sometimes have to intervene to protect them.

The reason urban externalities are not only a condition of cities, but can also be desirable, is that they account for cities’ social, cultural, and economic vitality. Urban externalities are what make great cities. They give cities their atmosphere, their creative and innovative burst—think of Richard Florida’s idea of a creative class whose members are basically looking to take advantage of other people’s presence, actions, and behaviours.<sup>8</sup> These qualities of the city can never be the direct result of planning. The atmosphere of a neighbourhood, for instance, cannot be the product of someone’s intention. It is always the result of uncoordinated

actions. But even if this can't be planned directly, urban institutions and the built environment of the city will necessarily play a major role in how urban externalities thrive and the directions they take. Thus, instead of aiming at internalizing all externalities, an important function of urban institutions might be to secure or even encourage the production of some *urban* externalities, while minimizing their negative effects (or what can be perceived as such).

This conclusion can look surprising, since the city is usually associated with numerous *negative* externalities: car horns and neighbours' music, congestion and pollution, crowds of people walking, shouting, bustling, littering, shoving, and so on. A popular and largely shared vision of the city is that of a polluted, dangerous, noisy, and alienating place; thus, the role of good urban institutions should first be to fight these evils and to protect individuals against other people's actions, instead of encouraging these spillover effects.

My point is not that externalities found in cities have a different structure than those we usually find in collective action problems. Cities are indeed full of these situations where individuals have an incentive to produce negative externalities but no incentive to produce positive externalities. Consequently, it is possible to solve many localized collective action problems or to internalize various externalities in the city through a classic institutional mechanism such as regulation or taxation. Road taxation, for instance, was proven in many places to be an efficient means of dealing with congestion.

Historically, cities have accomplished a great deal in the elimination or internalization of negative externalities. We too often forget that the air in large cities is much cleaner today than it was just a few decades back. The urban quality of life in general is also without comparison to what it was centuries ago. One should not forget that up until the development of sewage systems in the nineteenth century, it was normal for inhabitants of a city to throw their garbage and excrement out on the street. What people experienced on a daily basis would seem to us simply unbearable, but for them, these smells and sights were part of urban life. As Paul Seabright writes with regard to ancient Athens, this city "was remarkable for the contrast between the grandeur of the Acropolis and the squalor of its residential streets, but only by a very modern eye would the squalor even have been noticed."<sup>9</sup>

The evolution of cities goes hand in hand with a constant striving to solve these various collective action problems, to get rid of all sorts

of negative externalities. And there is no doubt still plenty of room for improvement (think about urban sprawl). But it is impossible to control or to trace the effects of all types of externalities in cities. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine that the institutional mechanisms we can resort to in order to internalize externalities would really solve all collective action problems specific to cities and their various public spaces. The problem with urban externalities is that they tend to escape objective evaluation. It is hard to determine whether they are positive or negative. Indeed, the evaluation of these externalities largely depends on the subjective preference of the urban dweller or on the context in which he or she experiences the externality.

One can think about neighbourhoods that will be given up and avoided by the general public but that will often attract and be valued by artists and bohemians, who will bring life, and value, back. Trying to “clean” these places, to eliminate what is seen by many as nests of negative externalities, would undermine important resources for the social and economic vitality of cities. The same goes for “aesthetic externalities.” For instance, what some people consider architecturally pleasing others see as an insult to the eye. These externalities are not peculiar to the city, but many urban externalities certainly take this form. Think about the kind of public controversies generated by urban-renewal projects of the postwar years and onward, such as public housing or revitalization of old industrial districts. These large-scale urban projects always seem to impose a controversial vision of the good neighbourhood, the good public place, or the good city. Examples of such controversies abounded in the last few decades, but the classic of the genre remains the destruction by Baron Haussmann in the nineteenth century of numerous old, and mostly slummy, Paris neighbourhoods, in order to impose a highly controversial plan of urban renewal centred around the Grands Boulevards, a plan which still raises passions today. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas shows a clear understanding of the nature of these controversies in writing that “the Zoning Law is not only a legal document; it is also a design project.”<sup>10</sup> A design project, or an aesthetic proposition more generally, by its very nature rarely generates unanimity.

The evaluation of externalities, however, does not only depend on preferences. It can also vary for an individual, in function of the context in which he or she experiences these externalities. When I was a graduate student, I lived in a neighbourhood filled with frat houses. Living in such a neighbourhood can be bothersome, especially on those nights

when I wanted to go to bed early. But I always benefited from animated, and therefore safer, streets when coming home late. Thus, even though one generally associates cities with a series of negative externalities, many of these are intertwined with all sorts of positive externalities, that is, with a series of resources essential to what a “good” city is. Indeed, among other reasons, one comes to the city in order to take advantage of these “free” benefits, these positive externalities produced by diverse and lively streets, by artists and various cultural resources, by numerous sources of excitation and surprises that can also generate their fair share of negative externalities, depending on the perspective one adopts.

This Janus-faced feature of urban externalities is, according to Iris Young, a virtue of city life. She calls it the eroticism of city: “the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one’s secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising.”<sup>11</sup> This “virtue” of city life captures the idea I’m trying to put forth here, according to which negative and positive urban externalities are often nothing more than the two faces of the same coin. It explains why the city attracts people and scares them away at the same time. There is something threatening in city life that puts into question the stability of our identity, but there is also something exciting about the experience of difference it offers. Each neighbourhood, for instance, proposes a unique experience, with people from different horizons, origins, or cultures constantly bringing us to face realities that are not ours. For Young, this virtue of the city is also the product of its built forms, of the variety of its architecture, the juxtaposition of ages, styles, and uses. In all of these cases, it is almost always impossible to attempt an objective evaluation of the externalities thus produced, that is, to determine, independent of context or individual preferences, whether they are positive or negative.

Cities are thus defined by externalities, but also by the fact that positive and negative externalities are intertwined and blurred. For this reason, success in eliminating negative externalities could very well carry with it the unintended effect of also eliminating positive externalities, the very group of resources that accounts for the social, cultural, and economic vitality of the city. A great city depends on the grace of its problems.



## IV

Nineteenth-century French writer and humorist Alphonse Allais proposed to move cities to the country in order to free them from all of these nuisances that they are commonly associated with—noise, smells, crowdedness, pollution, stress—and to bring them closer to the *plaisirs champêtres*, the joys of country life. Of course, we understand that the city is all of these things. These problems are what distinguish the city from the country. But even in jest, Allais did capture something important about the zeitgeist. A common hatred of the city and a romantic desire for open space was indeed the order of the day.

This anti-urban trend was made most explicit in the works of modern architects and urbanists, who had been profoundly marked by their experience of the dirty and unhealthy industrial cities of the turn of the twentieth century. Ebenezer Howard with his Garden City, Le Corbusier with his *ville radieuse*, and Frank Lloyd Wright with his Broadacre City were all in one way or another trying to free the city from all its externalities: by bringing nature back into the city through the creation of large urban parks or green belts; by getting rid of, or at least in hiding, the streets; and by preventing mixed-use neighbourhoods, making sure that residential areas would not be contaminated by commerce or industry. There was also the assumption that other people are necessarily evils and that we should limit exposure to these others through strategies of isolation or protection of private life. Most importantly, the common purpose of these architects and urban planners was to achieve or impose a rational and unadulterated *order* on the city. Among the great figures of modern urban planning, Le Corbusier is probably the one who pushed this rationale the furthest, offering a radical rejection of history and architectural traditions, even proclaiming the death of existing cities, which offer an image of chaos, Le Corbusier writes in *La Charte d'Athènes*.<sup>12</sup>

So, their aim was primarily to eliminate a series of negative externalities associated with cities—noises and smells, invasion of private life, congestion, urbanistic and architectural chaos. In many ways, their intentions were praiseworthy. Most cities at the time were insalubrious. The problem is that the hope of modern urban planners to reach their goal by the neutralization of spillover effects, by a strictly functional division of space, and by the efficiency of circulation, was based on a complete ignorance of the role played by externalities in urban dynamics. The development of externality-free cities would have the indirect and negative

consequence of eliminating numerous positive externalities that are central to city life.

Jane Jacobs's forceful criticism of modern urban planning in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* seems to be grounded in a similar intuition.<sup>13</sup> The strategies of modern urban planners who try to eliminate negative externalities that run through cities end up undermining a series of resources that are essential for the social, cultural, and economic vitality of cities. According to Jacobs, good neighbourhoods, like her own Greenwich Village, are densely populated and have many streets, not many parks, and a stock of old buildings; they mix together in a disorganized fashion residential units, businesses, and other working places. From the viewpoint of the modern planning curricula, they are slums and should be replaced by well-ordered neighbourhoods organized around the park, not the street. What Jacobs has helped us see, however, is that these "bad" neighbourhoods, with all their grit and mess, are socially, politically, and economically much more dynamic than the urban projects built according to the principles of urban modern planning. As Jacobs remarks, in these dense and diverse neighbourhoods people spend more time on the street, discussing, loitering, or just enjoying what she calls the "ballet of the street." One of the reasons, but also one of the consequences, is that the streets and public spaces are much safer and more welcoming in these neighbourhoods than in the well-ordered public spaces of suburbia or of large urban projects. The popularity and safety of these streets is a positive externality, a by-product of people's actions.

This idea was most famously captured by Jacobs's notion of "eyes upon the street." This is the now well-known idea that streets are safer when they attract people, when more people are on them. The intuition is that streets can be controlled and policed by the mere presence of people using them, with different purposes and at different times of the day. In this perspective, mixed uses (residential, work, leisure) secure frequent public encounters and thus become informal mechanisms of surveillance. Streets should therefore be organized in such a way as to encourage as many people as possible to use them, at nearly all hours, who will witness all activities, thus making it safer, attracting even more people, who will in turn police it. There are many ways to encourage this virtuous circle and the presence of eyes upon the street: by making sure that buildings are not offering a blind façade (that they are oriented toward the street, not the backyard); by making sure that residents witness and

care about what's going on outside, in public; by having places like shops and restaurants with active building fronts that also give people a reason to use the sidewalk.

In other words, we can't force people to use and police the street or to take responsibility for what's going on in public, but we can plan the public realm in such a way as to make sure that people will effectively be brought or encouraged to produce these positive externalities that not only make for safe and exciting streets, but also foster social networks, civic trust, and, potentially, a genuine sense of community life.

## V

I discussed two claims in this contribution: that the ubiquity of urban externalities—the multiple effects of other people's actions and behaviours—is an essential part to what a city is, and that it accounts for what make cities great. But what does it all mean from the perspective of urban justice?

The first thing to notice is that the way we talk about justice should change when we take the city, rather than the state, as the subject of justice. It does not mean that the city is not affected by more traditional problems of social justice. It is. But it is important to draw a distinction between issues of *social* justice, which are primarily concerned with questions of equality, and issues of *urban* justice, which are concerned with the city as public space. Theories of (distributive) justice often assume that it is possible to quantify everyone's share. Once everyone's situation is fair or just (according to our favourite principles), further costs and benefits are simply managed through exchange or consumption. In cities, however, "money" is neither the only nor the most important quantifier when determining the way people are treated, since an important number of essential costs and benefits don't take the form of exchange, but of (urban) externalities.

In this context, an important role of urban institutions can be understood as the attempt to secure and sometimes encourage the production of some urban externalities while minimizing their negative effects (or what could be perceived as such). Urban planning could then be thought of as a way to pursue and take advantage of the numerous positive externalities of the city. But, as I suggested, it can be very difficult to evaluate urban externalities—that is, to determine whether they are positive or negative. Since there is no objective and definitive answer

to the evaluation of urban externalities, it can be hard, and sometimes impossible, to eliminate negative externalities without eliminating the positive ones. Instead, the control and directions of externalities has to be constantly negotiated, making urban public space particularly conducive to conflict. Any urban planning decision will favour a certain pattern of externalities that quickly becomes entrenched and that will tend to remain stable, even though it will rarely generate unanimity.

The ubiquity and the ambiguity of urban externalities, then, pose a serious challenge for justice, but they do not in themselves undermine the possibility of a just and healthy urban public life. The threats arise when people lose control of the externalities, and the repeated complaints about surveillance, homogenization, domination, or commercialization of public space can all be in one way or another attributed to this symptom. In a just and democratic city, however, citizens need to be in control of urban externalities—that is, of public space. The negotiation of space and the control of any urban externality should not be left to a particular group—be it politicians, advertisers, or developers—and urban institutions should be organized in such a way as to prevent it. In other words, urban institutions should provide mechanisms to keep negotiation of the city as public space and the directions of externalities alive and fair.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Chapter 1 of this book for Mark Kingwell's "Masters of Chancery: The Gift of Public Space."
- 2 This way of wording things is due to David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The basic intuition here is that it does not make sense to talk about justice if externalities are ignored. When it comes to the basic institutions of society, everything needs to fall within the scope of the social contract. Basically, rational contractors could not come to an agreement about the division of society's benefits in the presence of uncompensated externalities, since they would naturally demand that these external effects be included within the scope of the agreement.
- 3 See Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 85–121.
- 4 Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938): 8.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 6 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 10.

- 7 Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 139–42.
- 8 See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class ... and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
- 9 Paul Seabright, *The Company of Strangers: A Natural History of Economic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 114.
- 10 Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 107.
- 11 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 239.
- 12 Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athènes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 95.
- 13 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 1993).

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