

Thirdspaces: Exploring the Public Realm in Madrid and Barcelona

International Experience Award Trip, 2018

Public and open spaces serve vital functions in the healthy functioning of urban communities, a fact that is sometimes overlooked in the North American context. Plazas, streets, urban parks, and market squares are the places where community is carried out, where one can find evidence of the public realm. Henri Lefebvre (1974) argues for a three-part approach to the public realm: perceived space, or the physical organization and design of space; conceived space, or the planning and regulation of space; and lived space, the use of spaces by residents and visitors. Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996), which derives from Lefebvre, notes that much of the thought in geography and planning around public space focuses on perceived/first and conceived/second spaces, while ignoring the ways in which public space is lived in – the thirdspace. It is Soja's focus on thirdspaces that sparked my interest in the ways in which public spaces are used by people, and the way those uses can differ across spaces.



Open space outside the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

In April 2018, supported by an International Experience Award, I travelled to Madrid and Barcelona, Spain, to undertake a small research project in relation to the use of public space and community identity. Madrid and Barcelona possess a wealth of heavily used public spaces. I assessed a number of public spaces in both cities in their geopolitical context: Madrid, as the capital of Spain, and Barcelona, as the geopolitical centre of Catalonia.

Given time and linguistic constraints, this research evaluated thirdspaces using observations in public spaces through the social space survey developed by the Gehl Institute. The survey consists of closed- and open-ended questions, and a small mapping activity to identify locations of social activity in space. These on-site observations were complemented by numerous walking tours and conversations with local residents about public space, culture and belonging. Below are some general findings from my observations in Madrid and Barcelona.

Madrid

The city of Madrid, capital of Spain, has passed between Muslim and Christian control over its history, resulting in a mixture of cultures that remains in the city's built environment today. Madrid is home to a large number of politically important buildings, including the Palacio de las Cortes, where parliament sits; the residences of the Spanish prime minister and the Royal family; the Spanish Supreme and Constitutional Courts; and the Royal Academies. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the city's public realm is heavily organized around sites of political importance.

Puerta del Sol (Gate of the Sun)

Puerta del Sol is one of the busiest public squares in Madrid. Historically one of several gates that separated medieval pastoral areas from the city centre, Puerta del Sol is the centre of a radial network of roads throughout Spain, making it the symbolic centre of the country. The Spanish New Year's Eve celebration is broadcast from this square every year. The square also contains a number of important buildings and monuments, including the office of the President of the regional government of the Autonomous Community of Madrid (not to be confused with the Prime Minister of Spain), and the statue of the Bear and the Strawberry Tree, the heraldic symbol of Madrid.



A wide variety of people (including many tourists) gather in Puerta del Sol. Madrid

The importance of Puerta del Sol, culturally and politically, means that it is often the site of protests and demonstrations. While I witnessed no political demonstrations during my time in the space, the square was occupied by pro-democratic demonstrators during the elections for local and autonomous community governments in 2011.

I visited Puerta del Sol four times, in the early afternoon, evening and night. The semi-circular space is organized around two fountains and a statue of Carlos III on horseback, with permanent tourist booths and transit stations along the edge of the square. The site is frankly not conducive to staying for long periods or for diverse activities: There is virtually no shade, and the few seating opportunities (along the fountain edges, on some blocks around the site) were uncomfortable. I witnessed a large student group sit on the ground at the foot of the statue of Carlos III, as it provided a small strip of shade in the sun-blistered space. And while the site is lined by shopping and accommodations, the addition of tourist booths within the square itself made the space feel more commercial than other squares. Puerta del Sol felt more like a meeting place and area of transit, a connection between different parts of the city, than a destination.

During the time I spent in Puerta del Sol, it became apparent that the site is heavily used, and even dominated by, tourists. A large number of hostels, hotels and airbnbs are located within 100 metres of the square, and it serves as a meeting point for many tourist services. I witnessed many more people speaking English in the square than in other places, and there were many street performers and vendors selling goods catering to tourists, such as selfie sticks. Most people were either moving through the space, or waiting to assemble in a group to move to a different destination.

Park del Buen Retiro (El Retiro; Park of the Pleasant Retreat)

One of the largest parks in Madrid, El Retiro originally belonged to the Spanish Monarchy, and only became a public park in the 18th century. The park is filled with sculptures, monuments and galleries that reflect the site's royal connections.



Jacinto Benavente Statue in the Plaza Parterre

El Retiro was originally constructed as a retreat for the royal family in conjunction with a monastery. A series of expansions to the park continued into the 16th and 17th centuries, including the addition of tree-lined avenues, royal houses, elaborate gardens and water features. Since opening to the public in the 18th century, additional statues and commemorative monuments have been added to El Retiro, including the Paseo de la Argentina, which is lined with dozens of statues of kings that originally stood on top of the Royal Palace.

I spent time in El Retiro on three occasions, twice in the early afternoon and once in the early evening. In a city with many plazas and hard surfaces, the lawns and shady areas of El Retiro stood out as an area for passive and active recreation. The park is quite large, with a great variety of spaces to sit, watch other people and engage in various activities. These spaces included large lawns for picnics, playgrounds for children, outdoor exercise equipment, several water features to play on in rented boats, buildings with art collections, food and drink vendors, public washrooms and drinking fountains, and a variety of paths. One section of the park is a botanical garden that is physically separated from the rest of the park and requires a fee for entry.



The main area I chose for my observations in El Retiro was the monument to King Alfonso XII, a large statue of the monarch flanked by a semicircular colonnade. The monument faces Estanque del Retiro (Retiro Pond), a large artificial pond on which people can rent row and paddleboats. The pond is a popular destination for residents and visitors alike.

I witnessed a large variety of people in El Retiro, including tourist groups, families, couples, people alone, and school groups. The activities people engaged in were similarly diverse: There were a large number of runners and dog walkers through the site, as well as people using the exercise equipment, and people visiting the museums or taking pictures of the amenities. The park is clearly used as a meeting place and space for socialization: I witnessed groups congregating for picnics and informal yoga or exercise sessions, couples making out, people walking their dogs (on- and off-leash), and friends and couples renting the row boats. A large number of people seemed to enjoy sitting at the park, particularly around the pond, to watch other people.

Paseo del Prado

The Paseo del Prado is a dense, heavily travelled and tree-lined north-south boulevard in Madrid that connects three main plazas: Plaza de Cibeles, Plaza del Emperador Carlos V, and Plaza de Cánovas del Castillo. The street has a similar organization to La Rambla in Barcelona, with sidewalks for pedestrians on the outer edges, as well as a pedestrian walkway through the centre of the street, with car access on the west and east sides. The span of the del Prado is much larger than Barcelona's La Rambla (see below), with a width of approximately 100 metres between building edges at its widest, compared to approximately 35 metres on La Rambla.



The Paseo del Prado, sheltered by the green canopies of trees bordering the path, served as a respite from the wide, fast-moving vehicular access roads along the street. It also provides visitors a brief escape from the crowds of people flocking to the city's three main museums (Museu del Prado, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and Museu Thyssen-Bornemisza) and other important institutions that surround the street. The Paseo's wide, tree-lined path is punctuated by gardens, playgrounds, water fountains, benches, and the occasional permanent booth selling wares. It is far less busy than Barcelona's Rambla, and feels much less commercial. I witnessed families with children, groups of friends meeting, couples, people walking their dogs and people running. It felt like a place that was part of residents' every day routine, rather than a tourist destination.

Barcelona

Barcelona is the capital city of the autonomous community of Catalonia, located close to Spain's northeastern border with France. The population of Barcelona comprises approximately one fifth of Catalonia's population. Barcelona has been a political centre since prior to the formation of the Spanish state.



A hidden courtyard in Barri Gòtic, Barcelona

Originally founded as a Roman city, Barcelona became the capital of the County of Barcelona before merging with the Kingdom of Aragon, under which it was the capital of the Principality of Catalonia. During the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona served as the seat of the Republican government. Under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, the Catalan language and institutions were banned. The death of Franco in 1975 led to democratisation and significant change throughout Spain, including Barcelona's designation as host city of the 1992 Olympics.

Plaça de Catalunya

Plaça de Catalunya is a large, public square generally considered the centre of Barcelona. The square was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century, and was modified for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition. It forms the northern entrance to La Rambla, and sits at the edge of the medieval city (the Gothic Quarter) and the 19th century-built Eixample neighbourhood.

Plaça Catalunya serves a similar cultural function as Puerta del Sol in Madrid: It is the site of frequent cultural events and protests, and serves as a connector between different parts of the city. In 2011, demonstrations took place in Plaça Catalunya, mirroring the occupation of Puerta del Sol in the same year.



Plaça de Catalunya, Barcelona

During my week-long stay in Barcelona, I visited or walked through the plaza on a daily basis. People are always in the square: People looking for a place to sleep for the night, groups of friends meeting together, travellers and visitors, etc. On Sant Jordi Day, a free live concert was held in the square, and stalls are often erected around the centre of the perimeter, either selling small goods or setting up stalls to debate topics related to Spain's football teams and Catalan independence.

Plaça Reial (Royal Plaza)



People sit on the fountain edge in Plaça Reial, Barcelona

Plaça Reial is a public square located in the Gothic Quarter or Barri Gòtic of Barcelona, located adjacent to La Rambla. The square was built in the 19th century to replace the Capuchin convent of Santa Madrona, which had been demolished. A well-known tourist attraction, the square's edge is dominated by restaurants, nightclubs and corresponding patios.

The square is a relatively enclosed space, with narrow streets leading to it. Palm trees, street lights (designed by Antoni Gaudí), patios, and other seating surround the edges of the site, while the centre is dominated by a large fountain.

The provision of seating around the edges and at the centre, as well as the palm trees provided a variety of areas to sit from, both in sunlight and in shade, and watch other people.

A large number of tourists were apparent in Plaça Reial, identifiable by their use of different languages, and luggage. The tourist presence is unsurprising, given the square's proximity to La Rambla and location in the historic Gothic Quarter. A large number of street performers flocked to the area, singing and performing for people sitting on the restaurant patios that line the square.

Aside from the street performers, most people used the space as a meeting place or for sitting on the patios for food and drink.

La Rambla

La Rambla is a 1.2 kilometre tree-lined street with a wide pedestrian mall running down the centre. The street connects Plaça de Catalunya in the north to the Christopher Columbus monument and the old port in the south. Originally a sewage-filled stream located immediately outside of the city's walls, Rambla gradually became a street and destination for festivals and cultural events. The pedestrian concourse is flanked by two narrow service roads, and two similarly narrow pedestrian walkways that connect to surrounding streets. Today, La Rambla is a very popular tourist destination, filled with a high concentration of street vendors and patios from the overpriced restaurants located along the street's edge. Every resident I spoke with indicated that they actively avoid the area, and advised that I do the same.



Typical weekday afternoon on La Rambla, Barcelona

In August 2017, a van was driven into pedestrians on La Rambla, killing and injuring a large number of people. Responsibility for the attack was indirectly attributed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

I walked along La Rambla three times, in the morning, afternoon and at night. The street is busiest at night, with large numbers of people purchasing goods, visiting the bars and restaurants along the street, or connecting to other neighbourhoods through La Rambla.

Conclusions

Over the course of my stay in Madrid and Barcelona, I witnessed a wide variety of open spaces that make up the public realm. The idea of 'the public' is difficult to define, as there are multiple publics. My time in these two cities highlighted different uses of space by tourists and residents, specifically, but one can imagine other conceptualizations of the public, including contestation between the Spanish state and Catalan independence. Public spaces (understood as spaces, both publicly and privately-owned, in which the public has free access to) serve a vital role in providing a location for the tensions between various publics to play out and be articulated. Below are some concluding thoughts.

First, cities need public spaces for the people that live in them, not just for tourists. At the turn of the century, major Canadian cities have seen a turn to commercialization of the public realm in an effort to draw visitors from outside the city: Spaces that are nominally for public use become dominated by neon advertisements and security guards (as in Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square), or retail spaces for which only major corporations can afford a lease (as in Ottawa's Lansdowne Park). While these spaces have a part to play in the public realm, and while tourism revenue certainly benefits municipal finances, these spaces are not 'lived in' by residents. I saw this first hand from the time I spent in Madrid's Puerta del Sol and along Barcelona's La Rambla, which were reinforced by conversations with residents. If people feel like they don't belong, they will not use public spaces.

Second, people take cues from the environment around them when using public spaces. Spaces such as Madrid's Puerta del Sol and Barcelona's Plaça Reial were characterized by hard surfaces, constant foot traffic, and enclosure by multi-storey, windowed buildings. This sense of 'eyes on the street' formalized the spaces and resulted in less varied behaviour than in less formal areas, such as El Retiro park or Barcelona's beaches, which had more space, no or few nearby buildings, and more soft surfaces. Contestations of space and place were more evident in highly formalized areas, such as Puerta del Sol or Plaça Catalunya, where political will is expressed through demonstrations or rallies. This is particularly important in Spain's current political climate, in which Spanish officials have banned the colour yellow, associated with the Catalan flag, from football matches and even in Barcelona's streetlights.

Third, public spaces are used for more than just recreation. In the Canadian context, most public spaces are parks, which are designed either for views which are passively consumed (such as Nepean Point in Ottawa), or for active recreation, featuring places for play and sport. As noted earlier, some public spaces have been designed more recently with commercial consumption in mind. In reality, public spaces serve a much deeper, more diverse function than their programming and regulation would suggest: They serve as meeting places among friends and points of contact between disparate groups. In dense urban contexts where smaller-sized residential units are common, public spaces also act as an extension of the private realm.



Plaza de Oriente in Madrid

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