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Citation: Luger, Jason and Lees, Loretta (2022) Revisiting urban public space through the lens of the 2020 global lockdown. *Urban Geography*, 43 (6). pp. 797-809. ISSN 0272-3638

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2073084>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2073084>>

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## **Revisiting urban public space through the lens of the 2020 global lockdown**

Jason Luger and Loretta Lees

### **Abstract:**

The new decade's tumultuous nature triggered renewed reflection on urban public space. As Covid-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures were implemented in cities around the globe, and protests on city streets from Black Lives Matter and their global supporters erupted, the world's attention was refocused on urban public spaces. These were spaces to which access was now curtailed: we were newly and differently fearful in them, anger boiled over in them; and amidst limited access, we yearned for them. The pandemic has taken many lives, including that of the urban public space theorist Michael Sorkin, whose decades of work argued for the need for truly accessible, democratic, urban public space; and mourned what he felt was its slow demise. Pushed by these triggers, this Special Issue re/visits urban public space through the lens of the 2020 lockdowns (closures) and the possibilities (openings) that seemed to emerge; in so doing we bring together a collection of global urban snapshots and critical reflections from/in cities around the world - all *variations on a theme* (Sorkin, 1992).

## **Editorial: Revisiting urban public space through the lens of the 2020 global lockdown**

Jason Luger and Loretta Lees

### **I. Variations on urban public space during a global lockdown**

This Special Issue is focused on global urban public space. Public space in cities around the world came to the fore with particular force and sudden urgency in 2020 due to Covid-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures - the result of a global pandemic; the protests on city streets (and not just in the US) from Black Lives Matter and their global supporters, and other, troubling political eruptions. That the death of urban public space theorist Michael Sorkin, who died of complications from Covid-19 in March 2020, coincided with global lockdowns that suddenly rendered public spaces inaccessible, was symbolically powerful and, for urban scholars, particularly resonant. Of course, for the late Michael Sorkin (see eulogies by Cruz and Forman, 2020; De Monchaux and Krotov, 2020; Madden, 2020; Zukin, 2020), urban public space was the fabric and foundation of democratic urban life (see also Reichl, 2016), and for decades he warned of the erosion of the public realm (its physical spaces as well as its social, cultural and political processes); and therein, that the death of public space would herald the death of the public sphere. Following Sorkin and others, this Issue re/visits (and re-animates) urban public space, and in so doing, it considers urban futures (Fields et al., 2020; Graham 2020) in/of public space. We look for

any lessons that can be learned, going forwards, from the global experiences of urban public space as the world was put into a global lockdown in 2020.

We present a collection of urban snapshots, researched and written during the pandemic, from diverse geographical settings around the globe - from London in the UK to Buenos Aires in Argentina, to Oakland, Detroit and New Jersey in the US, to Dakar in Senegal and Taipei in Taiwan, to Kolkata in India and a comparison of Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and the Netherlands plus the Tanah Tinggi district of Jakarta, Indonesia juxtaposed with Hackney, back in London. All *variations on a theme* (Sorkin, 1992) that explore the endings, beginnings, closures and openings of, urban public space at a time that is already etched as a transformative moment in history. In the Issue, the emphasis on new forms of public commons responds to Eidelman and Safransky's (2020) suggestion for a new decolonized language and historical framing of 'commons', beyond British imaginaries. And the papers further ongoing debate and discussion on planetary urbanization by grappling with the local/global nature of urban public space (e.g., Merrifield 2018; Wilson and Jonas, 2018). The Issue also re-visits, in some of the papers, the theme of urban precarity (e.g., Jordan 2017; Sun and Chen 2017) by exploring how the global pandemic has made normally routine urban public space precarious, and how such precarity is negotiated in strategic and tactful ways.

The global reach and inclusion in this Special Issue is important, and is informed by our previous writing on 'planetary public space' (see Luger and Lees, 2020). In that writing, we argued that site-specificity and local context matter in charting the geographies of planetary public space. We were/are attuned to the fact that what constitutes 'public' and 'space' and 'urban' differs across different parts of the world, for example, in authoritarian and more democratic spheres; that subtle cultural practices, often rooted in urban histories, assign and ascribe different uses and meanings to urban public space. Further complexities include concepts of 'rights' to public space, since *rights* (legal, political, human, more-than-human) do not translate evenly across global terrains. In organizing and editing this Special Issue we were/are clear that changing global dynamics and power structures necessitate a decolonizing and decentering of spatial theory, an envisioning of what the beginnings of a decolonized theory of global urban public space might look like. The diverse global stories contained in this Issue, brought to life through varying methodologies and conceptual frameworks, demonstrate empirically the alternative trajectories and multiplicity of possibilities we hoped (Luger and Lees, 2020) would emerge from inviting a planetary perspective more attuned to difference.

The pandemic and its experiences of lockdowns and other sudden transformations revealed much more than simply how vital access to urban public space is. We suggest that it showed very starkly, in vivid

granularity and with accelerated motion, some of the broader societal characteristics that Michael Sorkin suggested were inextricably linked along with urban public space. In 1992, Sorkin curated a collection of snapshots which decried the trend towards urban public space resembling a theme park. In that volume, *Variations on a Theme Park*, Sorkin and his invited authors (among them Margaret Crawford, Langdon Winner, Neil Smith, Ed Soja, Trevor Boddy, Mike Davis, and M. Christine Boyer) visited (the privatization of) markets and malls, (the disinvestment, surveillance and poverty of) transit systems and alleyways, (the gates and barricades of) suburbia, militarized plazas, and office towers, and the simulated experience of Disneyland extended to urban life more broadly. But the collection was an American perspective, written at a specific time.

At the same time as Sorkin and others were mulling over the ‘end of public space’, Francis Fukayama (1992) declared the ‘end of history’. As the American-and-allied consensus seemed (then) to have triumphed over the Soviet bloc and all it represented, for Fukayama, there were no further historical paradigm shifts to come, the ‘new world order’ was the last. For Sorkin and the then-public space consensus, trends may have likewise seemed locked in, irreversible, inevitable. But in 2022, watching turbulent events unfolding, Fukayama revised and reversed his declaration: history, it seemed, had not quite finished, with Western liberalism not exactly the dominant victor it had once inevitably seemed and democracy in retreat in the face of resurgent authoritarianism and fascistic eruptions. A paradigm-shifting pandemic was not on Fukayama’s radar in 1992, nor Sorkin’s. Sorkin, sadly, did not live to see a post 2020 urban future, but we felt strongly that the idea of this Special Issue offered an opportunity to update discussions on urban public space moving beyond an American lens and the certainty of specific times, configurations and typologies. What would Sorkin and the other urban public space theorists of 1992 say about a world, 30 years later, where democracy is not necessarily an inevitable trajectory; where the pandemic has pushed the blurring (and indeed dialectical play) of public and private space even further; where authoritarianism is finding roots in new places in hybrid formations; where digitality and virtuality (then, just emerging) offer real alternatives and even fabricated worlds which demand new definitions, understandings, and conceptions of what an urban public space looks like, feels like, makes possible? 2020 seemed a very apt time to consider questions like these, and to revisit, through a globally diverse collection of cases, *variations of the themes* Sorkin’s (1992) work probed: streets, plazas, markets; blurred lines between public and private; home and work-space; art and monuments; inequality and injustice; democracy and authoritarianism; activism and resistance.

Four over-arching themes have emerged from the papers in this Special Issue. *First, new taxonomies, uses, and meanings of ordinary urban public spaces.* Urban public space that is normally just there

floating in the background became visible in new ways during Covid-19 lockdowns around the globe. Spaces experienced as afterthoughts – in-between, small, interfaces between domestic and public, hopped or stepped-over on a typical day – took on new value, potential and social, cultural and political power. Seemingly unlikely or banal public spaces held fresh promise for remarkable transformations and ‘everyday utopias’ (Cooper, 2014). Urban publics gave new meaning and power to liminal spaces like front gardens, sidewalks, stoops, stairways, and even notions of defensible space. Public and private spaces were used differently, the interface between the two complexly blurred. The lesson from this is about how the public can alter the taxonomy, use and meaning of public space, it is not set in stone.

***Second, public space and counter-publics: pluralities and multiplicities.*** The idea of plural publics, expressing grievances in urban public space, with competing and agonistic aims and interests, was a theme in a large number of the papers. From the graffiti in Oakland to the art in Detroit to the counter images produced in West Bengal (showing spatial practices in everyday urban public space) it is clear that creative and artistic protest continued throughout Covid-19 lockdowns. If anything, the context of a global pandemic and associated lockdowns enhanced the visibility of certain protests and messages. The lesson from this is that urban public space remains a site of contestation and that the visibility of contestations is enhanced at particular moments in time (what Lefebvre, 1959a called an ‘exceptional moment’), indeed Covid-19 was used to highlight other injustices in cities. Careful readings of public space allow the invisible and marginalized to become visible and centralized (McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Hawthorn 2019). Urban public space does not exist naturally, it is an ‘imposed normality’ by power structures (i.e., the state, or state-market nexus) (Lefebvre, [1974]1991, 23). It is only brought into existence and understood as being a full set of social relations, experiences, and encounters at a specific time. Urban public space is constantly being remade, each moment in time constitutes a different space.

***Third, collectivities, solidarities and mutuality.*** The papers show that urban publics (and public markets) in 2020 demonstrated great capacity for resilience, care, and creativity when the ability to gather (and sell) in public spaces was restricted. Urban publics interacted with each other differently, neighbours found ways to comfort each other, even from a distance, traders took the public market to the private space of customers’ homes. The strengthening of community networks and the (re)building of grassroots solidarities and collectivities across urban publics may seem an unlikely outcome of physical gathering spaces being closed, it might seem more logical that a shut-down of public space would have instigated individualistic tendencies and threatened intra-personal bonds. But this does not seem to have been the case. Even so, Fullilove et al., (this Issue) did not wait for this to happen and they enacted their urban

ecological informed approach to building collective capacity for friends, neighbours, and partners to cultivate recovery, off the back of the work they had already been doing in The University of Orange. Urban public space was shown to be simultaneously local and global, comprised by and comprising social relations at intersecting scales, at different speeds.

Finally, the fourth theme that emerged was *politics: authoritarianism and democracy*. The papers show that urban public space is a political performance, a practiced choreography, mediated by state and society through webs of affective and embodied processes and practices. The literal spectacle of Modi's government demanding that its citizens 'bang vessels' to show that it too is a world/global city fighting Covid, was bizarre. It revealed the authoritarian Modi government's real concern, not Covid-19 and its impacts on India's many poor and vulnerable citizens, but rather their attempt to cast India as fighting Covid effectively, getting back on track, and being open for business. As Black Lives Matter and their global supporters took to the streets to protest structural racism in many of the world's supposed democracies, the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 also (re)politicized locally the experiences of marginal populations – such as those Simone discusses in Jakarta and London. What is clear is that reconfiguring an ontology of urban public space to suit the 21<sup>st</sup> century is crucial in order to better converse with the diversity, scale, and implications of global geo-politics (Rokem and Boano, 2017).

In the Special Issue, we used the pandemic as a temporal lens through which to re/investigate and reflect on urban public space, situated within larger social, cultural and political trends and shifts. As McCann (2020) argued, the pandemic has been an 'x-ray image', exposing the painful fractures in urban life that long predated 2020. Sorting processes rapidly aggregated those with loved ones and those without; those with internet connections and those without; those with space to move and breathe in, and those confined; those with able bodies and those with mobility challenges. Some needed to work in dangerous conditions while others could pause in forests or second homes. Some ordered food and gifts with 'clicks' and credit; others delivered, drove, served, carried, cleaned. The pandemic has been an experience that reemphasized to the globe the dialectical nature of urban public space: the simultaneities of possibility and dread; openings and closures; sociality and loneliness; community and isolation; optimism and despondency. And many paradoxes: how small our public worlds became, limited to sidewalks, front stoops, gardens, back alleys, balconies, kitchens, or hallways; and yet how vast these spaces became too as we saw them in a different light. Whole social and political worlds unto themselves became even more visible and intricately powerful in ways not appreciated before. Sociality was measured by numbers (3, 6, a school class bubble of 30) and bounded by curfews and locked doors; intimacy was rationed, chatted, texted, simulated. For many, human touch was elusive. The old, in particular, suffered this alienation. As time

and mobility slowed, the distance between places grew yet also contracted, and the urban birdsong and the grass between pavement cracks, normally going unnoticed, gained magnified vibrancy.

The onset of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 magnified and brought into stark relief the uneven deposits of privilege and flows across the city, it revealed anew an urban world deeply stratified by violent inequalities and power geometries. Magnified, too, were the messy politics and agonisms of democracy (or lack thereof) and the tragedies of the urban commons. This was seen in the visibility of global justice movements like Black Lives Matter, but also, those resistances to Covid rules and science and the violence of post-truth denials and disavowals. Masked faces represented citizenship and decency; unmasked faces sneered and scowled, shouting about conspiracies and freedom. Public space was demanded, contested, and reclaimed in 2020; its representative power not diminished, even if appearing in new forms, behind masks or protective screens. Cries for #Blacklives echoed and statues of oppressors were toppled as far apart as Bristol in the UK (see Figure 1) and Richmond, Virginia in the US (see Figure 2), as voices rose against historic and systemic racism and oppression. In October 2020, thousands of anti-lockdown protesters marched through central London, led by Save Our Rights UK, as disagreement grew over the effectiveness of restrictions and the science of the pandemic, concerned with protecting people's human rights. Protests and insurgencies (across the political spectrum) found ways of abiding by, and disregarding, rules and restrictions; public urgencies were upscaled and downscaled via outdoor, indoor, and #online formations and encounters.



Figure 1: Edward Colston statue toppled June 2020 in Bristol, UK (Source: Wikipedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward\\_Colston\\_-\\_empty\\_pedestal.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Colston_-_empty_pedestal.jpg))



Figure 2: General Stonewall Jackson statue removed July 2020 in Richmond, Virginia, USA (Source: Wikipedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=stonewall+jackson+richmond&title=Special%3ASearch&go=Go&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Stonewall-jackson-removal.jpg>)

### This Issue: *Impetus, Background, and the Papers Contained Within*

Following the rapid developments in Spring/Summer 2020 (a global pandemic and lockdowns, BLM protests and other left/right political insurrections) and further catalyzed by Michael Sorkin's untimely passing, this Special Issue started life with agreement from *Urban Geography* for a rapid turnaround as it was initially a quick-fire reflection. But, perhaps not surprisingly, the pandemic halted this speed, and as the authors struggled in/with the global pandemic, so did *Urban Geography* in getting reviewers for the issue. Journal editors globally struggled to find reviewers due to the pandemic, as academics had to shift suddenly to online teaching, deal with their children being schooled from home, and reschedule or cancel planned research projects, trips, and other events. At the same time universities began to implement mass-scale redundancies and casual jobs evaporated. The Issue is very much a product of its time.

The Issue did not come out of a conference or seminar as is often the case with Special Issues, but rather through our own discussions, networks and contacts; as such this was a distantly-produced Special Issue during Covid-19. We communicated with each other on-line and brought together these global urban stories in an organic way, in a process that was strangely therapeutic and intimate. The papers included are/were unique and diverse – bringing a richness and difference to the Special Issue from different corners of the world. What is particularly unique through this geographical diversity is how a shared experience – ‘lockdown’ – brought together urban scholars, but also, highlighted the contextuality of the experience in particular settings (eg. a dense South American city - Buenos Aires; a London social housing estate; markets in the Netherlands; streets in Kolkata).

Another unique feature of the Issue is the methodological and theoretical variety amongst the papers. There are big contrasts between the papers in the ways in which they go about their reflections on urban public space and its publics. This is a real strength and there is value in having varied perspectives sitting alongside each other. Yet, at the same time the issue hangs together in its use of the temporal global lens of the 2020 lockdown - all the papers were drafted during this lockdown from around the globe. For some authors their view was from their home, others ventured out into their cities to walk, look, interview, either during their permitted time out or in contravention of lockdown rules; no-one was in the ivory tower of their university office, and the coffee shops and public libraries offering Wi-Fi where academics increasingly work were closed.

Our invited authors were given deliberately loose instructions about the Special Issue – they simply needed to reflect on urban public space in light of the events of 2020 drawing on their own empirical work. The authors came from different disciplines, mostly geography, but also architecture, art, psychiatry, theatre/performance, and the world of activism. Most of the papers look for (and find) radical possibilities, surprising eruptions, local textures, and emerging futures with respect to urban public space; but some are more skeptical of the renewed yearning for public space in the pandemic because it overlooks the fact that it may have never existed anyway (see Belina, 2011, on ending public space as we know it).

The Special Issue papers flow into each other – we have placed them in an order that enables the unfolding of the discussion on urban public space, each paper adds more to thought and debate.

The first paper, by Warwick and Lees, is a reflection on ‘defensible space’ (attempts by architects and planners to control public space around people’s homes to enhance safety) in London, England. Contra Merrifield’s (2020) observations in ‘Beyond Plague Urbanism’ (2020) of de-encounter, fear and avoidance during Covid, they found instead new practices and negotiations in urban public space. Using

the method of *dérive* (ethnographic meanders through a city, which Sorkin frequently employed in his work), they walked and observed during their permitted time outside of their homes during the first Covid lockdown in 2020. Following Debord (1958), who they footnote, their *dérive* is a playful and constructive behaviour under circumstances which were far from usual. They found a new kind of social space outside that overcame some of the limitations of physical distancing and historical ways of seeing public space. They both question and extend classical understandings of ‘defensible space’ in relation to new notions of safety, security and control. New codes and practices in ownership, trust and belonging emerged in 2020 and previously undervalued spaces took on complex social meanings and practices that could overcome ‘confused territoriality’.

Focusing on the Covid-19 lockdown in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2020, Marcús, Boy, Benitez, Berardo, Márquez, Peralta and Vázquez discuss the findings of their large-scale survey and in-depth interviews on public experiences of the restrictions. They found people experienced new fear and insecurity in public space and that this was gendered. To cope with these fears in public space, the domestic sphere was reinvented - liminal private spaces, like balconies, were re-fashioned for everyday life, taking on vital new social and political roles. But strategies of maximizing the ‘public-ness’ of domestic space and creative re-workings are not seen as a panacea by the authors. The public city can be extended into homes by, for example, virtual platforms, but it cannot be replaced by these things. Interestingly, the banging of pots on citizens’ balconies is linked explicitly to methodologies of protest in Argentina; this can be contrasted with Warwick and Lees, who discuss the NHS Clap in the UK where pans where pots were also banged as a collective thank-you, not a protest. For women in Buenos Aires, the visibility of gathering in public space (such as the ‘Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’, seeking justice about their ‘disappeared’ children) has been critical for representation. Balconies, for a time, needed to take on this political power. Thus, the evening sounds of ‘clapping’ and ‘banging’ meant crucially different things in different urban settings.

The third paper, by Summers, is located in Oakland, California, on the east side of San Francisco Bay, and her method is also one of walking and reading the landscape during Covid-19. She focuses on the street art that was produced in 2020 as the pandemic put limits on social interaction, which she likened to the privatization of public space. Graffiti artists negotiated the potential dangers of the pandemic in public space, their art was a spatial counter-public, revealing a different city from the fast-gentrifying, homogenizing city typically portrayed and experienced. She argues there are two public Oaklands: one, a city for the elite, terraformed by neoliberal development processes; the other, a subaltern, Black and Latinx city, existing alongside, but often hidden. Reading the texts of the murals and street art gave a new

legibility to what was/is rendered illegible. Summers evokes China Miéville's science fiction in describing how viewing the murals allows one to 'breach' from one city to another, two interstitial Oaklands existing in the same space. This new visibility through the street art, she argues, was elevated even more due to the Covid-19 lock downs and protests linked to the pandemic, structural racism, and public health.

Where Summers' interstitial breach offers emancipatory potential through making visible what was usually hidden, the author writing in the fourth paper is much more skeptical. Struch considers multiple publics through the lens of street art, but specifically the notion of 'false' publics. She starts by taking us to an alleyway in downtown Detroit, where popular aesthetics and tourist attractions represent a city being remade for more affluent (new) residents and out-of-town visitors. For her, this is a 'false public', the type that Sorkin was wary of: a Disneyfication of urban space packaged as urban renaissance. Importantly, Struch is critical of a public space that she feels never really existed, and the naive return to, and yearning for, this utopian public space in the pandemic. Indeed, she does not want to recuperate urban public space; rather, she wants to end the colonial formation of public space, in Detroit's case, a colonization-by-affluent-outsiders, which forecloses the possibility of imagining participation in political life through alternative spatial practices. She cites radical site-specific artworks as alternatives - like the 2020 *In Plain Sight* skywriting planes, visible in the California sky on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, protesting the US's geo-racial regime and migrant detention facilities.

The fifth paper, by Ren, discusses the 2020 Taipei Biennial in Taipei, Taiwan, which went ahead despite the pandemic, as informed by her research on the 2018 Dak'Art in Dakar, Senegal. Her comparative research was ethnographic in both cases. In particular, she alerts us to the resilience of such art events during the pandemic as a metaphor for the continued segregation of urban life. She engages with Sorkin's (1992) notions of 'theme parks and follies', suggesting that such events are public spaces of 'pure imageability' (p. xiv) that, paradoxically, bring multiple publics (elite, non-elite; globally-networked and locally-situated; young, older) into conversation while also maintaining and reinforcing barriers and segregating walls between them. If global art biennales are versions of what Sorkin critiqued as urban theme parks, incapable of fostering meaningful public life, she finds they are also resilient and hybridized public spaces, finding new anchors and sites in changing times (e.g., galleries with and without walls, virtual art spaces), even during a pandemic. The translation of an elite biennale art space into a virtually-networked and co-produced space thereby offers enticing possibilities for reclaiming grassroots arts space, but also exposes the perils of an art world detached from meaningful urban materiality. Ren

highlights the urgency of viewing public space as a shrinking area of political discourse, linking access to public space in the pandemic with the expansion and contraction of political spaces.

In the sixth paper, Fullilove, Rodríguez, Sember, Kaufman, Maruyama, Rennis, Murdock, Chaudhury, Thompson, and Chapin, discuss their work with The University of Orange, a free school of restoration urbanism in Orange, New Jersey, founded in 2008 and building on a 64-year history of progressive organizing in the city. They focus on an initiative launched *in place of public space and the public sphere* to enable recovery from Covid-19. Their method is to talk us through their urban ecological approach to the city *in practice*, through for example, their ‘fracture on fracture’ discussions that dealt with the isolation and helplessness that came from the Covid-19 crisis. In a New York City metropolitan region already fractured by ongoing processes of displacement, segregation, and loss of communal (public spaces), felt especially by persons of color, the pandemic further-fractured community bonds, requiring immediate responses, modeled after previous community responses to historical emergencies (like the AIDS crisis in the 1980s). Their approach was/is to build collective capacity for friends, neighbours, and partners to cultivate recovery. They argue that recovery is essential due to the social fracture caused by the pandemic, as well as the chronic racial oppression being experienced, to which they add – that other crisis that looms – climate change. For them public space and the public sphere has failed or was not quick enough and they step in its place.

The seventh paper, by Breines, Dahinden, Jónsson, Lindmäe, Madella, Menet, Van Eck, Van Melik, Schapendonk and Watson (collectively forming the Moving MarketPlaces project, or MMP), look at a crucial public node – that of the public marketplace, in a comparative sweep across Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. Their research methods included ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and digital research. In this exploration, it is the public market traders themselves – often small-scale, local shop owners and workers – who extend and perpetuate the publicness of public markets as they are made Covid-safe (and periodically physically inaccessible). For the authors, the strategies and practices of the market traders, including the many ways that mutual aid and collective networks kept the flow of food, crucial items, medicines, moving – helped to produce new forms of public space that extended beyond the roofs and walks of the marketplaces themselves. Covid-19 prevented many urbanites from going *to* public markets, but in many ways, the public market instead went into the private home, reconfiguring public/private boundaries.

The eighth paper takes us to Kolkata, India, where Chakrabarti critiques the state choreography that Prime Minister Narendra Modi enacted in 2020 when citizens were told to come out on balconies and ‘ring bells

and beat on vessels' copying scenes in Europe, and a month later to switch off their lights and light candles instead (like Diwali). This was a performance of the 'Covid City' (to use the author's term) under Modi's Hindu (authoritarian) nationalism, emphasizing a new public sphere and spaces where solidarity in the pandemic and Indian national identity would be enacted through Hindu, rather than mock-European, practices. In the face of this, Chakrabarti discusses grassroots groups in Muslim West Bengal who produced a counter-performance, an alternative narrative of public located in local performances and daily spatial practices. These took the form of 'cardboard cities': temporary urban formations on bridges and footpaths that especially came alive at night, occupied by the low-wage workers who serve the elite of the city, thereby, to use the author's words, 'spatially, if not culturally, undoing the state's neat designs' (Chakrabarti, this Issue). Publics are shown to be plural and public spaces as national and local simultaneously, with powerfully different meanings, and implications for public space and the public sphere.

In the final paper, Simone bridges together Jakarta with London to consider the formation of the public 'we'. He does so through WhatsApp messaging with residents in Tana Tinggi, in Jakarta, from the social housing estate in Hackney where he lives and was locked down in 2020. He uses Covid-19 to reflect on what the public 'we' is and might be. He is interested in how Covid-19 has affected the basic manifestation of collective life in cities and how it has been enacted and articulated in public - tied not necessarily to bordered neighborhoods or housing estates, but a dynamic set of everyday processes mediated between 'home' and 'street'. In a working-class district of Jakarta and amongst the social housing estates of Hackney, residents form collectivities around 'impossible' conditions (the privatization of social housing, police violence, floods, precarious economies), the latest being Covid-19's interruption of vital daily rhythms and practices. For Simone, the public 'we' is a series of relays, in motion: a 'call and response', rather than a synchronized ensemble. The rapidity of the virus, its impacts and responses, accelerated the motion of the urban public and untethered the fleeting fixities and certainties for those on the urban periphery.

Read together these papers do a number of things. Specifically, they engage with urban public space, critically and politically, beginning at the juncture of Covid-19 lockdowns globally and the resurgence of protest (such as #blacklivesmatter). More broadly, they situate their discussions within the ongoing crisis of neoliberal enclosure, privatization and profiteering of/from public space; the rise of new forms of authoritarian biosecurity, surveillance and control; and the advent of digital public space as an extension of physical space. They also reflect upon the work of the late Michael Sorkin on this by re-engaging with

some of his key concepts, questions, and assertions. All of the contributors reject a return to ‘normal’, and most, if not all, look to urban public space for clues about the changing urban condition in a new decade.

## Concluding Thoughts

In 2020, citizens were asked to distance, de-densify and sequester in the name of public health; at the same time bodies still clustered by the thousands – albeit wearing (or not) masks. Since then, there has been a rush to decipher and speculate on the post-Covid futures of urban public space. We suggest a pause. First, Covid-19 has not gone away, even if we are beginning to re-emerge from lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing; second, rich nations may be vaccinated, but poor nations are still struggling to get vaccinations; third, Black and other non-white and marginalized people continue to face state violence. Nevertheless, the experiences of 2020, as discussed globally in this Special Issue, mean it is perhaps now more necessary than ever to rethink the future of urban public space. Whether we have reached ‘the end’ of public space, as Sorkin (1992) warned, or the possibility of a new, transformative beginning – is a tantalizing question, but not one we can answer. However, it is worth considering, as one of the authors insists, that we should not be returning to urban public space as was/is because this overlooks the fact that it never existed anyway. Indeed, public space geographies everywhere are laden with moralistic assumptions and colonial/postcolonial legacies, the skeletons and residues of historical injustices and uneven power relations (as the statues that were toppled in the images at the beginning of this introduction attest to). The popular understanding of public space as a sort of accessible agora implies the existence of a democratic structure; this democratic structure has not assisted the global poor, people of colour, the homeless, women, for example, equally (Luger and Lees, 2020). If we truly want to decolonize urban public space, we should not be returning to utopic notions of it, because that closes off alternatives and the time of lockdowns gave us food for thought. It is a shame that Sorkin is not with us to debate this, for he stuck close to a Euro-centric construction of urban public space that may well be one we need to reject now, either fully or partially. A cosmopolitan and decolonized understanding of public space must take account of local context and site-specificity; subaltern lenses and locally-constituted knowledge. Only then can global theory on public space truly be generated. The papers in this Special Issue begin that task and welcome further discussion.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the contributing authors for their papers, and *Urban Geography* special issues editors Susan Moore and Yamini Narayanan for their guidance and support, from inception to publication. Also Sharon Zukin and Anna Minton for their Afterwords.

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