

Redefining Security in Public Space: The Case of LOVE Park

| JEREMY NEMETH

Public spaces frequently exhibit high levels of societal control through spatial manipulation and use arrangements. Planners too often envision the “public” as a homogeneous entity that utilizes public space as determined by physical form and design elements. While environmental design can clearly determine how one navigates a public space, in diverse cosmopolitan cities it is increasingly difficult to determine who will be allowed access to these spaces.

True Public(s)

Access for all individuals is the minimum condition of a truly public space [3]. In publicly accessible spaces, humans should expect to interact with those maintaining diverse interests, opinions, and perspectives. True public spaces are vibrant sites of open communication and deliberation.

Institutional powers desire to situate individuals in spaces that determine their physical interaction. Planners design the sites to facilitate these interactions, and these constructed spaces become the contexts of regulated social relations. So as truly public parks and plazas accommodate unconstrained social interaction, they lack the control necessary for governments to seamlessly advance policy agendas. Legal measures are often used as last resorts for controlling public space. A critical example of such a process occurred recently in Philadelphia’s Center City district.

LOVE Park

Municipal Law 10-610 prohibits skateboarding on “any public property” in Philadelphia’s downtown area that includes LOVE Park, a widely-acclaimed “mecca” of street skateboarding and a striking symbol of youth subculture. In the summer of 2002, the municipal government implemented physical renovations and a twenty-four hour police watch to render the Park “unskateable”.

Local groups and individuals have weighed in heavily on the prohibition. While limited business owners agreed with the decision, the majority felt that the LOVE Park was “sending signals” to the rest of the world about the creativity and diversity existing in Philadelphia’s downtown core. One prominent downtown developer related fresh resident concerns about a lack of nighttime safety around his adjacent buildings since the ban was imposed.

Neighbors of LOVE Park consistently related that the skateboarders’ presence increased their sense of security.

The mayor-led City Council was evenly split over the ban. The decision was a significant issue during the mayoral race of 2003, driving candidates to candidly discuss the prohibition at City Hall and in the park itself. Anti-skateboarding incumbent John Street was reelected and promptly levied an increasingly heavy-handed enforcement of the ban, recently unveiling metal anti-skating devices in the park and increasing local police presence to further deter transgressing skateboarders.

Ban supporters suggest that the untidy appearance and often abrasive attitudes of the skateboarding subculture represent images of disorder and insecurity for park users, while surveys and interviews conducted with local subjects demonstrate a different outlook. Neighbors of LOVE Park consistently related that the skaters’ presence increased their sense of security, responding that they:

“felt safe knowing that many teenagers were around...now that [the skateboarders] are gone I feel

| *Jeremy Nemeth is with Rutgers University, 33 Livingston Ave, New Brunswick, NJ 08901; email: jnemeth@eden.rutgers.edu.*

scared at night crossing the park. Without the youth I feel unsafe.”

Another long-time resident mentioned that the Park “was just about always occupied with kids and people, not just during office hours” [2]. Since the ban, another park user “doesn’t feel safe at night now there because it is lonely and more dangerous” [4].

Rethinking Security

While those concerned with social justice promote universally accessible public spaces, conventional wisdom maintains that dynamic public sites like LOVE Park can intimidate some users and threaten their sense of security, leaving these spaces less desirable due to the presence of the “uncontrolled”. Contemporary planners endeavor to convey a feeling of safety and order, and control access to these parks and plazas by designing highly articulated physical forms that dictate precisely how the public will use these spaces. Habraken and others maintain that architectural representations of territorial boundaries can secure public spaces and that these borders might even improve social cohesion [1, p. 9].

This environmentally deterministic solution to the complex problem of public security does not take into account the potential for social exclusion. The case of

LOVE Park shows that this exclusivity can prove immensely detrimental to the creation of inclusive and diverse public environments.

Additionally, users and neighbors of LOVE Park attest to the fact that humans desire the energy and enthusiasm sustained in these spaces to feel secure in public. The stable physical and social presence of these “miscreant” youth was precisely the generator of security desired by the City’s urban planners and policymakers.

By controlling the public spaces in which true human interaction occurs, planners and policymakers are challenging the fundamental desires of groups to forge social bonds and enhance their own sense familiarity with the environment. Security is not merely achieved through an understanding of territory but through acknowledgement and confrontation with individuals or groups maintaining diverse perspectives on the world.

References

- [1] J. Habraken, “Security and the architectural expression of territory,” summary article and interview, 2004.
- [2] Independence Hall Association. 2003; <http://www.ushistory.org/lovepark>, accessed Nov. 2003 – Mar. 2004.
- [3] I.M. Young, *Inclusion & Democracy*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.
- [4] Personal communication, 2003.

LETTER

Dear Editor,

I have been deeply impressed by the technology used for the face recognition system mentioned in the Spring 2004 issue of your magazine [K. Bowyer, “Face Recognition Technology: Security versus Privacy,” *T&S Magazine*, pp. 9-20, Spring 2004]. Although there is a feeling that a customer’s privacy is being disturbed, I feel it is necessary to protect civilian lives. I am a final year undergraduate student from India and I plan to take up this subject as my final year project along with a thesis. I have an idea to build up the same system

using a low cost device with the help of ADSP-2192 processors or Blackfin processors. I have taken a DSP course at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, and this has instilled a deep thirst for knowledge in me on this topic. Thank you very much for the article. You are doing a great job. Carry on the good work.

*Chacko Cherian
Madras, India
chacko_cherian@yahoo.com*