

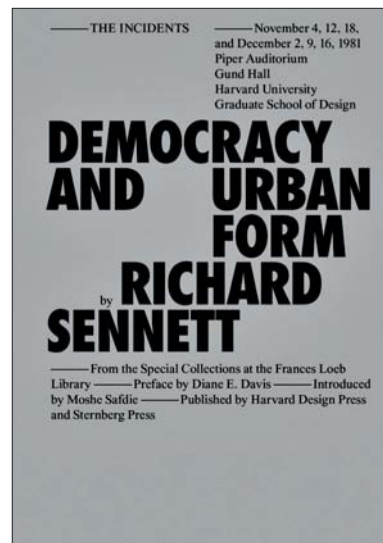
Richard Sennett's Take on Democracy and Urban Form

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Book Review / URBANISM

Democracy and Urban Form

By Richard Sennett
Cambridge MA, USA:
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Foreword by Diane E. Davis
Introduction by Moshe Safdie
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As a researcher in urban design and community participation, I found myself enthusiastically challenged by the recent publication of Richard Sennett's 1981 Harvard Lecture Series. These forty-year-old lectures forced me to question the assumptions I had learned and practiced in the field of participatory design confirming underlying ideas I have been forming on community and equality in the past few years. The six lectures offer a radical reimagining of these concepts and provide a theory of urban form for democracy.

In the first lecture, "Democracy Disabled," he overviews the connection between urban form and the ability to encourage discourse amongst

its citizens. In “The Desire of Isolation Out of Fear,” he unfolds the phenomenon of self-isolation within society. He then proceeds to describe how in “The Civilized Modern City” people can develop their individualities, which is the necessary characteristic to spark discourse. An ability that can be hindered by the homogenization of culture and the stereotyping of community as seen in “Two Kinds of Community, Neither a Solution.” In the last two lectures, “The Town Square” and “Democratic Theory and Urban Form,” Sennett develops his theory for a democratic urban form that starts with the town square.

Sennett starts his investigation by fundamentally challenging the traditional paradigms of participatory design and community development. Where traditional approaches, including Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of participation and Jane Jacobs’ community integration ideals, emphasize consensus and shared identity, Sennett argues for a profound shift from “communities of identity”¹ to “communities of difference.”² He states that our traditional understanding of community, often based on homogeneity and shared values, may actually impede the development of truly democratic urban spaces. The pursuit of looking for people that are similar to us might provide the illusion of living in an equalized place while it may in fact achieve the opposite effect. This false belief not only reinforces social divisions by keeping people in silos but also (and here is the innovative thinking of Sennett) induces people to withdraw from social life, limiting the democratic confronting of ideas even within the same community. The more homogenized a group, the less inclined its members will be to openly engage in public discourse, the elemental cell for a democratic life, according to Sennett.

The urban form always had an important role in facilitating public discourse, until the nineteenth century when it shifted away from this role. First, with Haussmann’s divisory urban planning, of which the City of Paris is an example, and then through modernist architecture’s minimization of public life. Haussmann especially embodied the end of it with the construction of large boulevards to impede riots and by creating neighborhoods homogenized by class to avoid conflicts. By separating the diverse, the urban form became an instrument that de facto impeded the occurrence of public discourse. Sennett’s vision extends beyond critique to offer an alternative to urban practices of the past. As Moshe Safdie states in his beautiful final remarks, Sennett not only tries to explain the causes that created the current urban form we are all witnessing and experiencing firsthand but also offers a theory for a possible future.³

Sennett reconceptualizes the urban space leveraging the legacy of those he defines as “the new urbanist” (185) such as Manfredo Tafuri, Aldo Rossi, and Colin Rowe (to differentiate from the 1990s New Urbanism movement) who had the merit to start shifting “the focus of design [...] from building ‘in’ an environment to building ‘an’ environment”⁴ (emphasis by Sennett).

And although, even according to Sennett, the new urbanists failed to fully implement their visions, they have merit for having envisioned Santayana's "tissues of difference" ⁵ in urban form. If it is true that human culture arises from the attachments between different people, then the town square is the place where that could occur. The square needs to regain its importance in the city not as a space for consensus-building, but as a vital arena for encountering difference, otherness, and the natural dissonance of urban life. In his last two lectures, "The Town Square" and "Democratic Theory and Urban Form," Sennett unfolds six design principles to reevaluate the town square:

1. space and motion,
2. no fixed-function streets,
3. no fixed-use buildings,
4. technological transparency,
5. buildings extent outreach, and
6. porous separation.

The descriptions of these principles are a bit nebulous, especially the technology transparency, and could have been extended, but these were, after all, lectures and serve as points of reflection. All of these principles speak of other concepts by Sennett like the open city: this idea of an urban form that is permeable, reappropriating the role of streets as public places leading to nodes of cultural generation, the squares, and entered into the realm of understanding and reflecting on the role of scale. How to move from public to private, from the architecture building to the urban context, and from idea to idea? There is no answer to this question and perhaps this is what we readers must try to discover on our own terms. What makes these lectures particularly valuable today is their remarkable applicability to contemporary challenges unforeseen in 1980.

Two modern phenomena particularly benefit from Sennett's analysis: the isolation induced by social media (an evolution of Simmel's concept of urban desensitization) and the pressing urban challenges of climate intensifying patterns. While these lectures lack direct engagement with modern technological and environmental challenges, their emphasis on designing for difference and adaptation becomes increasingly relevant as cities face new social and environmental pressures. Sennett's vision of cities as spaces that facilitate encounter with difference, rather than reinforcing existing identities, provides crucial guidance for creating more democratic and resilient urban spaces. After reading this book, I finally fully understood the late Giancarlo De Carlo statement reflecting on his profession: "the problem was no longer how to make people participate in architecture, but how to make architecture that could be appropriated by people." ⁶ Architects and urbanists must create forms that can be recreated by their users, rather than merely incorporating user participation in design.

Only in this way can we expect that difference can not only survive but thrive to give origin to new ideas and new aesthetics. At a time when cities face social isolation, political polarization, and environmental change, this book is set to stand as guidance, both theoretically and with practical inspirations for urbanists and theorists alike.

Notes

1. Richard Sennett, *Democracy and Urban Form* (Cambridge MA, USA: Harvard Design Press, 2024; London: Sternberg Press, 2024), 177.
2. Ibid., 186.
3. Ibid., 233.
4. Ibid., 185.
5. Ibid., 183.
6. Francesca Serrazanetti and Matteo Schubert, *Giancarlo De Carlo: Inspiration and Process in Architecture* (Milan: Moleskine, 2014), 138.

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