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Towards a Spatialized Model of Democracy

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POSITION PAPER

ABSTRACT - *This position paper describes diverse models of democracy in political philosophy and discusses how these models can produce the public spaces of the city. In late neoliberal western societies privatization of public space has greatly diminished the democratic infrastructure of our cities, and we have witnessed a corporatization and commercialization of the public realm. This paper contrasts public space in late neoliberal society in the West with public space in China. Since the start of Deng Xiaoping's reform era, China has seen a focus by communities and government on developing new public space and I argue that a civic, collaborative, community model of public space is emerging. I find that the focus on the creation of new community public spaces in China is a key tool towards its democratization and call for a radical democratic rethinking of public space as the space of democracy in the West. By thinking spatially about democracy, we can move towards a model where diverse models and practices co-exist.*

Keywords: agonistic democracy; civil society; participation; political philosophy; public space

When people talk about "democracy" in the West they are likely to be referring to liberal parliamentary representative model of democracy, common to most western countries. The model involves the practice of voting to elect officials nationally or locally every four to five years. The elected officials then make decisions and create laws on behalf of the electorate. Rather than maintain the right to govern ourselves and therefore

engage in the everyday democratic spatial practices that collective governance requires, we have relinquished our right to sovereignty, removed power from the situated position of our everyday lives in the local environment and handed it to centralized committees. This practice of democracy is hugely changed from its participatory roots in ancient Greece where a multitude of diverse democratic spaces and practices formed the *polis* (people, politics, city). Such as the associational practices that took place in the *agora* (market place), the agonistic performative practices that took place in the theatre and the more discursive, governance practices in the people's assembly. In *The Critique of Everyday Life* (1991 [1947]), Henri Lefebvre states that the big mistake made by "man" was the mistake that put power outside of everyday life.[1]

In the book *The Empty Place: Democracy and Public Space* (2014),[2] I argue that parliamentary representative liberal democracy, thought to be the great discovery of our time,[3] is a de-spatialization of politics. Matters of concern are discussed in linear progression by the same committee without the need to involve citizen practices taking place in the public spaces of the city. For Chantal Mouffe, it was only when it was thought that representation could enter democracy (Jeremy Bentham and John Mill) that democracy was introduced into liberalism at the end of the nineteenth century.[4] In *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), she describes how a contradiction lies in the very heart of "liberal democracy" between "liberal" and "democracy." She argues that the logic of liberal (rule of law, individual liberty) is in conflict with democracy (rule of the people). For Mouffe liberal democracy is more of a liberalization of democracy than a model of democracy.
In late neoliberal society we see a dominance of liberalism over democracy. While the practice of democracy in the West is mostly representative, in political philosophy many political theorists advocate models prioritizing participatory democracy. The development model advocated by John Stewart Mill, the son of John Mill, argued that participation and active citizenship are crucial to democracy because it is through participation in democratic practices that an informed citizenry emerges and advocated a model of democracy that was a combination of representative and participatory. For J. S. Mill it is by participating at a local level that the individual learns democracy and becomes a citizen. He agreed with Bentham that representation is necessary at the national level, but advocated participatory democratic institutions to operate at a local level.[5]

Mouffe argues that liberal models of democracy privilege a central consensus and political positions outside the center become marginalized, pushed to the far left or the far right. For Mouffe, a vibrant democracy requires the presence of adversaries, which involves the recognition of the antagonistic dimension inherent in human societies. She argues for "the political" rather than politics and advocates an agonistic model of democracy that recognizes and embraces conflict as a necessary and productive aspect of political life.[6] Her model makes space for radical

ideas in a democracy and puts political struggles and disagreements at the center of the debate, rather than seeking a consensus. The consensus model excludes many political positions that can be found for example in the social movements and feminism. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Mouffe developed the notion of radical democracy with Ernesto Laclau. They argue that marginal actors, like for example social movements, should form a chain of equivalence to create a separate hegemonic power to challenge the central consensus. Their model can be seen to be spatial as in their view democracy requires "a multiplication of political spaces" and a decentralization of power into these spaces.[7]

Habermas' deliberative theory of democracy can also be seen as a spatial model of democracy because it involves multiple coexistent deliberative practices, although his notion of the public sphere separates public deliberation from the public realm. Civil society takes place between the public and private realm. His model is associational as citizens do not participate directly in decision making but participate through a culture of debating. He argues that for a healthy democracy to function a two-tiered concept of lifeworld and system is necessary. While the system is the state, deliberative activities take place in the lifeworld and form a public sphere, "the sphere of private people, come together as a public." [8]
The public sphere generates opinions and attitudes that serve to affirm or challenge the affairs of the state. In ideal terms, a strong public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to legitimate authority in any functioning democracy.[9] Habermas idealizes bourgeois public sphere of the 18th century where he argues that the town was the life center of civil society. Its institutions were coffee houses and salons or table societies. One of the key arguments in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) is that in modern society, the culture-debating society has been replaced by the "pseudo-public or sham private world of culture consumption." [10]

If we think spatially about democracy this frees us, from the question commonly discussed in political philosophy of what model of democracy is best for society. For geographer Doreen Massey, space can be understood as interconnected coexistent relations.[11] A spatial democracy therefore can be seen to involve a multiplicity of coexistent democratic practices and spaces rather than a single model. Whereas models are useful when considering individual spaces, a spatial democracy can be seen to be based on different interlocking concepts or models of democracy and citizenship that coexist. A spatial democracy can be seen as a multitude of interconnected diverse democratic spatial practices taking place at the same time.

NEOLIBERALISM

In western countries we have witnessed an increasing dis-location or de-spatialization of democracy. Massey argues that "neoliberal globalization

is yet another in a long line of attempts to tame the spatial" and that neoliberalism can be seen both politically and through its geographical spatial mirror as an attempt to de-politicize society.[12] The neoliberal model, heavily influenced by thinkers like Friedrich Hayek (and later Milton Friedman), advocates for a minimal state, privatization of public assets, and the expansion of market logic into nearly all spheres of life. The United Kingdom saw a massive program of privatization under Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1979-1997) that continued to be implemented by successive governments. The long, process included, among other things, the sale of council houses, allotments, sports centers, school playing fields and land owned by the National Health Service (NHS), Forestry Commission, and the Ministry of Defense. The privatization of state-owned enterprises such as the National Coal Board, British Rail and Water Authorities all resulted in the transfer of over 2,000,000 ha [4,942,108 acres] of public land to private owners.[13] The result of this is we have seen a dramatic shrinking of the public realm, the territories under the ownership and control of the electorate, and a huge empowerment to private corporations. The dismantling of the public realm, therefore, can be seen to have removed the democratic framework from society, the public spaces and facilities under the ownership and the democratic control of the *demos*. If the public realm is the infrastructure of democracy then this privatization can be seen to be a corporate take-over of democracy.

Neoliberalism has taken place to such an extent that spatial theorists like Matthew Carmona argue that we can no longer think of public space as publicly owned. He argues that ultimately, the publicness of space refers to the rights and responsibilities associated with spaces. However, rights and responsibilities describe a liberal rather than a democratic idea of public space. Rights of access are not the same as democratic rights and it is therefore critical to have a clear understanding of what constitutes democratic space when thinking about spaces of democracy. Carmona argues for a number of rights including the right to "demonstrate peacefully and campaign politically" that could be understood as democratic rights. He does not however question the neoliberal nature or the ownership and the control of the space that remain with the private corporation.[14]

A different meaning of rights can be understood through Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City," his radical meaning adopted by the antiglobalization movement and protest groups, concerns the right to participate in the production of the city as well as the right to use public space for democratic practice. Lefebvre's right to the city is a claim for the recognition of the urban as the (re)producer of social relations of power, and the right of *citadins* to participate in this process of production. For Lefebvre:

> The right to the city ...should modify, concretise and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (*citadin*) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right

> of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the "marginal" and even for the "privileged").[15]

Therefore, Lefebvre's "The Right to the City" describes both the democracy of space and the spaces of democracy as it is the right to participate in shaping the city and the right to access and freely produce the cities' public spaces.

In Claude Lefort's theory of the empty place, Lefort argues that democracy requires a site of power that is empty.[16] He argues that modern democracy is by nature indeterminate; it differs from other forms of organization, such as monarchy, as it abolishes an external image of power: "power is not identified with any one body but is linked to the image of the empty place." He states that the empty place is "impossible to occupy so that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it." [17]

If public space is defined by public access then the internet can be seen to be a public space, and the theory of the empty place can be used to measure the democraticness of virtual sites. If we apply Lefort's notion to X, formally Twitter that has been widely described by its owner, Elon Musk as a "digital town square." This can be seen as problematic as X is a private platform owned and controlled by a single body. While it is possible to exchange ideas and have democratic exchange on X, the power and control ultimately lies with one body who can for example, opaquely manipulate the algorithms to decide which voices to amplify.

PARTICIPATORY SPACES OF DEMOCRACY

The first decade of the 21st century was a hopeful time for democracy with many people thinking about how to democratize through participation, and democratic public space played a central role. There was a huge social forum movement with direct democracy assemblies like the World Social Forum (WSF) and the European Social Forum (ESF) attracting tens of thousands of people to what then seemed like the participatory future of democratic governance. This was a unique moment for democracy, influenced by circumstances of globalization, new forms of communication such as the Internet, political thinking and activism. The organization of the assemblies were spatial, where rather than matters of concern being discussed consecutively as in parliamentary democracy, they were discussed concurrently by experts and interested people in parallel workshops seminars and assemblies. The WSF started in Brazil, in Porto Alegre (2001), a city where the Workers Party, or Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) had already implemented a participatory budget system, involving city residents in decision-making on budget allocations.

The participatory budget system gave the city a strong social infrastructure, that meant the city could open to the approximately 100,000 people that arrived for the forum. In contrast, in European cities the social forums depended on sympathetic city mayors to offer space for the assemblies. London hosted the ESF in 2004, while the mayor Ken Livingston was sympathetic and collaborated with the forum organizers, he did not have any publicly owned space such as sports halls or parks to offer the forum.[18] The social forum networks have been instrumental in coordinating global campaigns with diverse political positions on issues like climate justice, war, debt relief, and workers' rights, contributing to a more interconnected and democratized global civil society. However, in many European cities the forums found difficulty plugging into the city and we saw a failure of government institutions to connect with participatory forms of politics. This calls for a radical rethinking of democratic institutions and a reintroduction of a social and democratic framework into the public realm of the city.
As the social forums found success in some parts of the world but failed to take root in Europe and the United States, another more confrontational movement emerged. The new movement did not attempt to participate in the city but demonstrated their democratic rights through occupying physical public space.

The social forum movement was followed by the occupy movement where activists demonstrated their democratic rights to practice democracy in physical public space in 2011. Occupy Wall Street started on September 17, 2011 and spread to over one hundred cities in the United States and more than 1,500 actions throughout the world. Demonstrators came together to protest about the "blatant injustices of our times perpetuated by economic elites political disenfranchisement and social and economic injustice. We are daring to imagine a new socio-political and economic alternative that offers greater possibility of equality." The first principle of Occupy Wall Street was "Engaging in direct and transparent participatory democracy." [19] The demonstrators can be seen to have created an agonistic space of radical democracy as Occupy Wall Street was hegemonic as it formed an alternative power base. It was an assembly comprised of a chain of equivalence of diverse left positions such as trade unions and left democratic parties and social movements. The movement also became a space to articulate democratic struggles. (Fig. 1.)

In the case of Occupy Wall St, Richard Sennett argues that protestors managed to occupy Zuccotti Park or Liberty Plaza (restored to its historic name by protestors) in the heart of New York's financial district because of an ambiguity between public and private.[20] Zuccotti Park is owned and managed by a commercial real estate company but accessible to the public under city law. Following the New York City's 1961 incentive zoning program," developers would receive planning permission to build tall buildings if they provided public space.[21] This meant that the space must be open twenty-four hours per day and seven days per week. Sennett argues

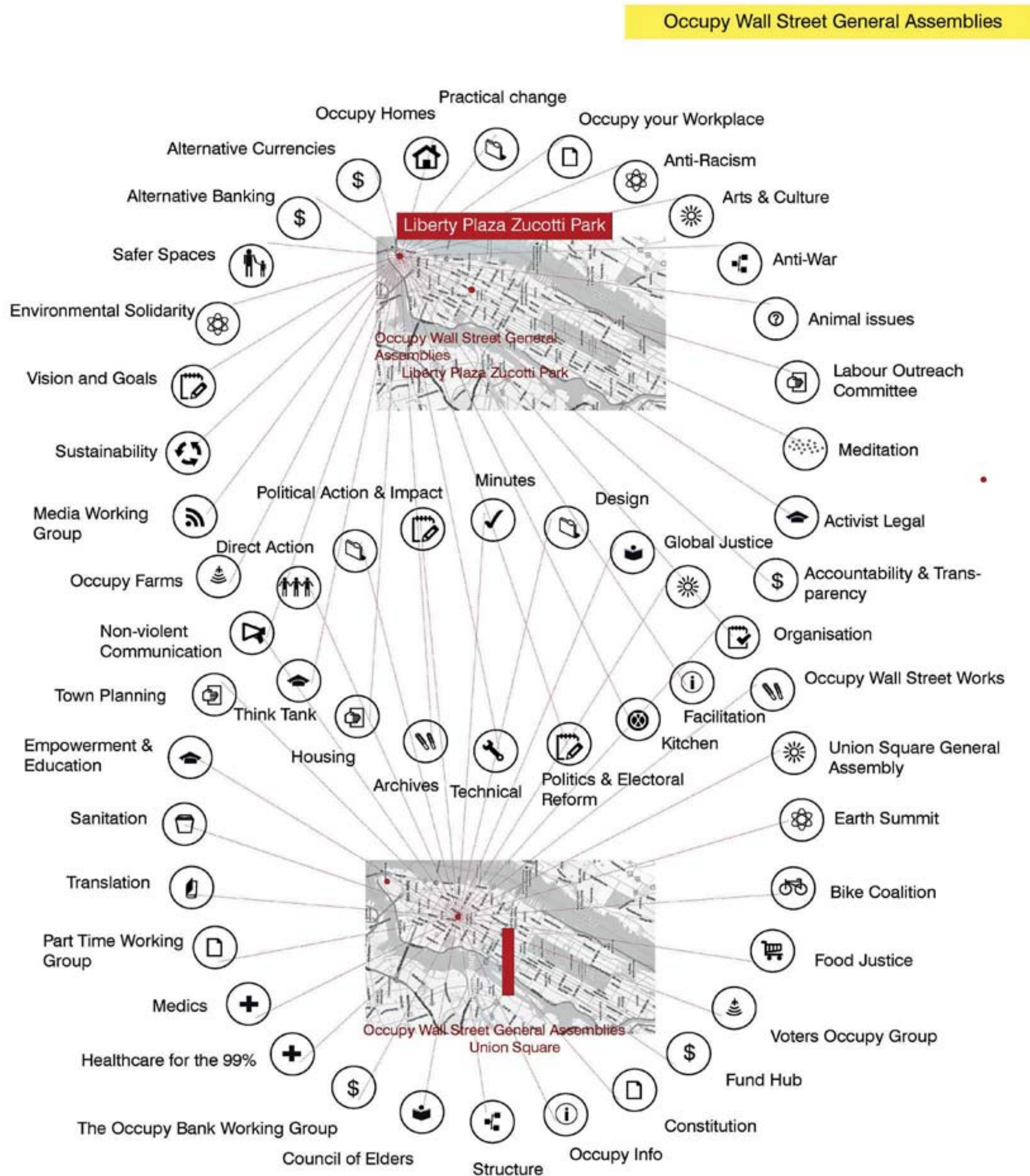

Figure 1. Occupy Wall Street, New York, 2011.

that the camp revealed a discrepancy between the buildings' owners and police as to who controls the space and this led to the negotiations, the ambiguous quality necessary for democratic public space.
Likewise, if we look at the space occupied by Occupy London, that formed a similar assembly to Occupy Wall Street, protestors originally wanted to occupy Paternoster Square, the square outside the London

Stock Exchange that appears to be public because it contains shops and a Sainsbury's supermarket. The square, owned and controlled by the Mitsubishi Estate Company immediately closed to the general public, and the protesters were denied access to the space for the duration of the camp. Instead, the protestors occupied the adjacent space outside St. Paul's Cathedral that has the border between the Corporation of London and Church of England land running through the cobbled central part where the tents were erected. There was also some uncertainty as to exact location of the border and therefore, in order to evict the camp, negotiations had to take place between the Church of England and the Corporation of London. The Church was divided as to whether to support the camp as evictions would violate a tradition established in the Middle Ages that "a church should provide sanctuary in the city, offering refuge in cloister gardens to the poor." Therefore, the ambiguous and discursive nature of the ownership of the public space outside St. Paul's Cathedral resulted democratic rights. (Fig. 2.)

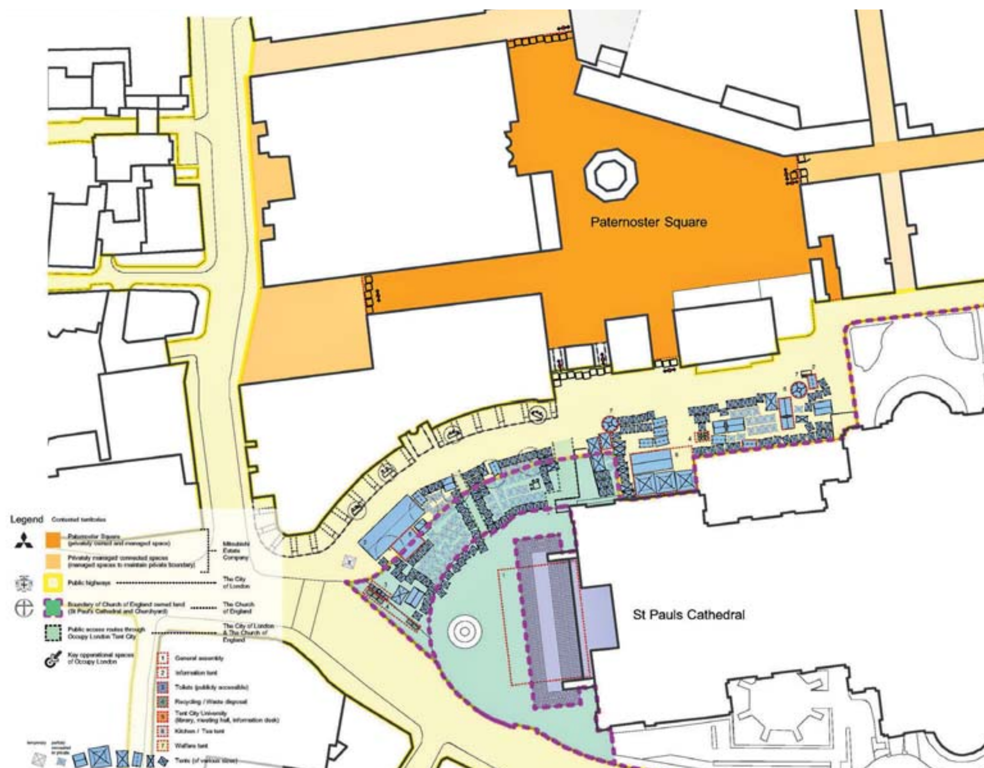

Figure 2. Occupy London, 2011-12.

In both cases of Wall Street and London, protestors were able to occupy public space firstly because there were democratic rights linked to the spaces and secondly because the occupation triggered discursive practices amongst the bodies owning and controlling the space.

THE COMMUNITY MODEL OF PUBLIC SPACE IN CHINA

While the West is dismantling the public realm and privatizing public space through neoliberal policies of privatization. China, can be seen to be experiencing the opposite phenomenon, a huge expansion of publicly owned public space.

China is often judged in the West on the grounds of democracy. China's system is "whole process people's democracy" that refers to grass roots participation in the Communist Party of China (CPC), however the democratic model in China is commonly criticized by commentators for not offering multi-party alternatives. Democratic centralism and the one-party political system mean one political position remains in power. Dick Howard's critique of communism is that although communist states are theoretically organized on participatory democratic principles as they have mass participation in the communist party, they become totalitarian and undemocratic as they fail to realize the pluralist or radical nature of democracy.[22]

However, if we examine the lifeworld and the expansion of public space in China a different story is emerging. Multiple community activities taking place in public space, like performance, *tai chi*, dance, music and pop-up markets generate a sense of freedom, not oppression, and contribute to an emerging public sphere.[23] Many scholars have likened the model emerging in China to political theorist Jürgen Habermas's deliberative model of democracy where vibrant practices taking place in the lifeworld create associational public spaces and an alternative democratic infrastructure to the system, the CPC.

A combination of factors that started during Deng Xiaoping's opening up period 1976-1989 have led to a huge expansion of public space. Firstly, Edward Gu argues that during the period of Deng following the Mao era, civil society started to take place in China. During this period cultural intellectuals focused on the creation of new public spaces rather than oppositional political practices to the CPC, in order to obtain political autonomy. By transforming state controlled public spaces and institutions, the period saw the creation of new autonomous cultural public realm controlled through state/community collaborations. During this time, new books were published, and many new autonomous magazines of cultural orientations were produced.[24]

For Guoxin Xing, since Deng's opening up period China has also seen the emergence of a proletarian public sphere that has its roots in the Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During Mao's cultural revolution cultural practice was encouraged as political participation. Workers produced culture through cultural activities such as writing, theatre, cinema or dance as part of the *dānwèi* (单位), the work unit that regulated all the three dimensions of a worker's life– workplace, the sphere of the family, and leisure activities. The performance activities took place in workers' cultural palaces (工人文化宫 *gōngrén wénhuàgōng*) that were built as part of the *dānwèi* in most large and medium-sized cities.[25] Following Chinese

economic reform in 1978 workers' cultural palaces and the cultural facilities of the *dānwèi* were commercialized. Qian argues that as a resistance to the social transformations brought about by the commercialization of modern China, community groups appropriated public space to continue the cultural practices of the *dānwèi*. Because the activities were no longer state-organized but spontaneously organized by community cultural and leisure organizations this produced an autonomous cultural public sphere, as well as new autonomous public spaces. The appropriation of public space for activities such as dancing was so widespread in China that providing space for autonomous community activities became government policy. A Ministry of Culture 2015 circular for guiding the "healthy development of public square dancing," states that the government authorities are advised to increase the free opening of public space according to the characteristics of the needs of the masses.[26]

Another factor contributing to China's expansion of public space is the move into a postindustrial era. This has seen a shift from the industrial to the civic in many Chinese cities. The transformation has included hundreds of kilometers of ex-industrial, often polluted and neglected industrial spaces such as waterfronts that have been turned into new public spaces as well as spaces for tourism and commerce. An example of new public space can be seen in the transformation 45 km [28 mi] Huangpu River bank in Shanghai. For urban planner Zou Junwen, from the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute, the aim of the Huangpu waterfront is an international first-class public "sitting room" as well as an ecological corridor.[27]
The role of the state in these spaces is collaborative. A complex participatory management system is in place involving community members and the state. Each cultural group has representatives, the authority of the space allocates each group a specific time slot and checks are made to monitor noise, petty crimes, and other nuisances.[28]
In the paper "Public Man and Public Space in Shanghai Today" Anthony Orum et al. state, "if residents are able to freely occupy public space, like parks, then this is testimony to the fundamental free and democratic character of the city." Orum and a team of researchers from Fudan University, Shanghai, observed diverse spaces, streets, squares, and parks in Shanghai over a number of months. They found a great diversity of uses ranging from vendors who sell their wares to people in the streets, to heated and extensive political discussions, to performers of Beijing Opera, and ballroom dancing in the squares and parks. Their conclusion, following theorist Richard Sennet was that "public man is alive and well today in Shanghai." [29]

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL TERRITORIES AND SITUATED PRACTICES

Neoliberalism can be seen to be in conflict with democracy and the current ecological crisis shows the limits of neoliberal parliamentary democracy.

The corporatization and commodification of the public realm in the West has seen the fragmentation of our environment, treated as a "commodity" rather than a common space for the common good. This leads to an urgency to reclaim and re-produce our environment through community social rather than neoliberal methods.

As shown in China the focus by communities on the creation of new performative public space has created a social territory throughout China, a dynamic spatial infrastructure and a vibrant civil society. The focus on new public space has had the effect of democratizing the lifeworld and producing a discursive outside to the CPC.

By thinking spatially about democracy as interconnected situated practices, we can develop a model of democracy that has a multitude of spaces linked to democratic struggles and local practices, taking on diverse virtual and physical forms. The agonistic model advocated by Mouffe, the associational model advocated by Habermas or the performative community model in China are just three models out of infinite possibilities for democratic space. Theorists for example, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers emphasize the importance of situated practices – ways of knowing and acting that are rooted in specific contexts and therefore city planners and architects are in a unique position to reimagine and reclaim democratic space.

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Credits

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Figure 2: map by © Carl Fraser.

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