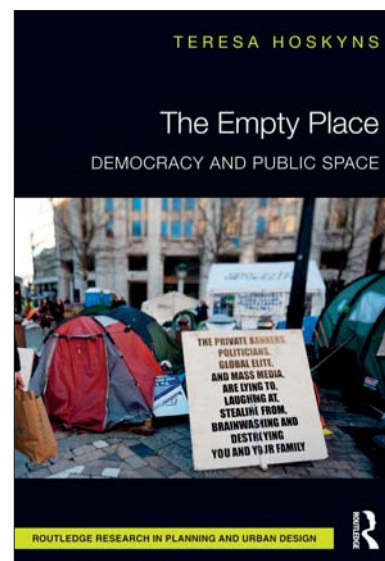


Democracy and the Place of No-Thing

Maurizio Sabini

Book Review / CROSS-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES

***The Empty Place.
Democracy and Public Space***
By Teresa Hoskyns
Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014
6 3/8 x 5/8 x 9 1/2 in. [16.2 x 1.6 x 24.1 cm]
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Good books never age. Teresa Hoskyns' book *The Empty Place* was published ten years ago, in 2014, but it remains a milestone for the line of inquiry on "democratic space." Hoskyns clearly defines the context and the goals of her discussion at the opening of the book's introduction:

In the twenty-first century we are experiencing a unique moment for democracy, influenced by circumstances of globalization, new forms of communication, political thinking and activism. New and participatory democratic practices are rising up throughout the world, transforming public space and resulting in the need to reformulate

both democracy and public space... This book explores a set of complex relationships in political philosophy, spatial theory, and spatial and democratic practice.¹

Started as a doctoral research in 1992, the impetus for completing the book probably gained momentum for Hoskyns on the eve of the global protests of the 2000s and early '10s, especially with the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements. From Tunisia to Morocco, Egypt, the Middle East and Yemen, the Arab Spring was a moment of great hope not only for the people engaged in those demonstrations and uprisings against corrupted and authoritarian governments, but for the whole world, at least the part of it aspiring to see the values of democracy expanded and strengthened. The epical gathering in Tahrir Square in Cairo, on February 9, 2011, remains an unforgettable testimony of what democratic space can offer to civil discourse and the progressive forces of society.

Almost in tandem with the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement aimed at questioning the trajectory towards higher and higher levels of power for global capitalism, by demanding a vast array of new forms of economic and social justice, as well as new ways of conducting and supporting democratic dialog within society. In this case, it was a minor urban space (compared to Tahrir Square), Zuccotti Park, but at the core of the district (Wall Street) at the core of the city (Manhattan, New York) of global capitalism, to become the physical urban space symbolizing the movement when it was occupied on September 7, 2011.

Sadly, after more than a decade, we can attest that these movements were able only to slow down the accelerated advance of global capitalism and authoritarianism around the world.

This is why Hoskyns' book is more relevant than ever: because it challenges us to reflect and to understand on how the shape, and the way we shape (design or the process of which), urban space can contribute to the safeguard and the fostering of democratic values.

The book tries to address some fundamental questions that should always be in the back of architects', designers' and planners' minds:

At what point does the social become spatial and where does politics lie between the social and the spatial? I ask why community participation is focused on architectural rather than political practice when urban decisions are made in the democratic arena and I question what type of democratic structure is necessary for participation in the production of the city. ... The book therefore gives equal time to political and spatial theory and to political and spatial practice, and aims to develop an approach that combines both disciplines.²

Through an articulated and scholarly sound inquiry, Hoskyns is able to demonstrate through her book "that the spaces pf democracy (spaces

for the practice of democracy) and the democracy of space (democratic relations in the production of space) are intertwined, and link to the conceptions and imaginations of public space, democracy and citizenship.”³

The book comprises two parts. The first, “Theorizing Democracy as a Spatial Practice,” makes an argument on how participatory democracy can become spatial practice and “examines more theoretical aspects of democracy and public space through political philosophy and spatial theory.”⁴ The second part, “Participatory Spatial Practices,” discusses how democracy can find agency through spatial practice as it relates to issues of site, identity, political democratic practice, and social forums.

Thus, Hoskyns weaves threads of thoughtful recollections of relevant historical facts, observations, and arguments. From Ancient Greece, where all things democracy began, not without contradictions and flaws though (as Hoskyns aptly remarks), to the rise of modern liberal representative democracy, through the seminal discussion by Jürgen Habermas on the transformation of the public sphere with the advent of the *bourgeoisie*, to more recent authors of radical democracy, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Hoskyns recaps for the reader one of the most fascinating lines of inquiry in Western thought. Of course, particular attention is devoted to Henri Lefebvre’s renown discussions included in *The Production of Space* (1991 [1974]) and *Critique of Everyday Life* (1996 [1946]), as well as to another milestone on this topic: David Harvey’s “The Right to the City.”⁵ As Hoskyns aptly observes, tying Harvey’s critique to the one by Lefebvre:

... on the one hand, the Right to the City concerns participation in the production of the city, but, on the other hand, it is about democratic space and the direct practice of politics as part of everyday life. Spaces for active citizenship, for political participation and for the public voice. Public space is produced and re-produced through active participation rather than passively experienced.⁶

In the second part of the book, Hoskyns discusses some case-studies: a series of projects for the youth between 2000 and 2006 at Regent’s Park estate in London, the feminist perspective (especially around the thought of Luce Irigaray and Jane Rendell), and the experience of the World Social Forums from the 2005 Porto Alegre edition to Athens 2006. Throughout these chapters, Hoskyns discusses also the legacy of some critical figures of the architectural debate of the late twentieth century, such as Giancarlo De Carlo and Bernard Tschumi.

As we well know, De Carlo raised important questions for the advancement of architecture to serve democratic values. As Hoskyns recalls in the book: “De Carlo asks why. ‘Why minimum space? Why minimum cost? Why minimum materials? ... [He advocated for an architecture] of participation to critique the modern movement ... although the aims of the modern movement were admirable, their failure to engage the users’ desires meant

that the social ideals to provide architecture for the poor were lost.”⁷ With Parc de la Villette, designed and realized by Bernard Tschumi between 1982 and 1987, and used as one of the democratic spaces for the 2003 European Social Forum in Paris, Tschumi is referenced by Hoskyns as the one who argued for “the power of architecture to change society. ... [by posing] the possibility of constructing the conditions that make it possible for non-hierarchical, non-traditional society to occur within the relationship between spaces and events.”⁸ Parc de la Villette continued to serve its purpose as a democratic space when it was one of the venues when the “Extinction Rebellion” of October 2019 (hence also its name as “October Revolution”) took place in Paris as a global protest against the environmental disasters that the world has started to face over this century.

While following Hoskyns’ arguments about democratic space, one cannot help but recalling how another protagonist of the late phase of the modern movement, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, used to define such cores of the city. Tyrwhitt elaborated on this at the 1951 eighth edition of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in Hoddesdon (UK), whose proceedings she co-edited with CIAM President José Luis Sert and Ernesto N. Rogers.⁹ Tyrwhitt posited that the primary characteristic for these spaces is in fact “... no-thing – emptiness – a space that can be filled with human emotion... it must be a gathering space... accessible to the pedestrian... it is the urban open space – the no-thing – that can act as a unifying influence.”¹⁰

In the conclusion of the book, aptly titled “The Empty Place,” Hoskyns precisely converges with these reflections, though in much more complex terms: “... [In this book] I have argued that there are multiple models of democracy and therefore multiple types of public space, varying in democraticness. However, I have also found that there is one common theme that defines democratic public space from spaces of identity and that is the theory of the empty place.”¹¹

Hoskyns’ book has become an unavoidable reading for anyone willing to study and understand the challenge, emerged in recent times, of how to construe, not just to construct, a democratic space has emerged in recent times. From the Greek *agora* to Parc de la Villette, architecture has proven that it can indeed contribute to build not only interesting and beautiful spaces and structure, but also a better society.



Figure 1. Bernard Tschumi, Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1982-87.



Figure 2. “Rebel Week” in Paris, October 5-12, 2019, at Parc de la Villette. In Paris and in other cities around the world, a week of civil disobedience was organized by the movement “Extinction Rebellion,” as part of the “October International Rebellion.” Started in the UK in October 2018, “Extinction Rebellion,” (named XR), was a movement to combat “ecological collapse.” It advocated for civil disobedience to push governments to take action against global warming and its consequences.

Notes

1. Teresa Hoskyns, *The Empty Place: Democracy and Public Space* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," in *New Left Review*, 53 (Sept-Oct, 2008), 23–40.
6. Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 85.
7. *Ibid.*, 96–97.
8. *Ibid.*, 155.
9. Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, José L. Sert, Ernesto N. Rogers (eds.), *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952). Tyrwhitt and Sert went in fact along with Rogers' argument to use the notion of the "heart" instead of the initially proposed term "core" for the congress, precisely to signify the emotional, human dimension of the social experience of such urban spaces. For this, see: Maurizio Sabini, *Ernesto Nathan Rogers. The Modern Architect as Public Intellectual* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 95–96.
10. See: Ellen Shoshkes, *Jaqueline Tyrwhitt: A Transnational Life in Urban Planning and Design* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 142.
11. Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 175.

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