



These squares are our squares: be angry about the privatisation of public space

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Public space is a right not a privilege; yet Britain is in the midst of the biggest sell-off of common space since the enclosures of the 17th and 18th century

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The public spaces of London, the collective assets of the city's citizens, are being sold to corporations - privatised - without explanation or apology. The process has been strategically engineered to seem necessary, benign and even inconsequential, but behind the veil, the simple fact is this: the United Kingdom is in the midst of the largest sell-off of common space since the enclosures of the 17th and 18th century, and London is the epicentre of the fire sale.

Cities shape our experiences. As we drift through the winding streets of our capital, our mood is affected by the bustling, menacing or inert environments we encounter. Stumbling upon a quiet square in the middle of a busy day can feel like finding water in the desert. In the days and weeks that follow, we might seek that spot instead of chancing across it, making it 'ours' in a meaningful way. Over years living in a city, we all weave mental maps of the squares, parks, paths and gardens where we pause, recharge, and meet. These are our public spaces.

Each of these public spaces also holds within them something less tangible: a potential to transform. They transform day-to-day as they are negotiated between dog walkers, footballers and picnickers, and on a larger scale by festivals, performances and protests. In our most desperate moments as a society, we hold these public spaces as a collective body and defend our broader rights from them. In short, democratic values are coded into our public spaces, and it is precisely because they are collectively owned that we have an expectation that they will be free, open and available when we need them, whoever "we" might be. Public space is a right, not a privilege.



A sign in Paternoster Square rebadged by protesters as Tahrir Square in 2011. Occupy protesters initially camped in the privately owned public space of Paternoster Square, outside the London Stock Exchange. They moved to the steps of St Paul's Cathedral after police enforced a high court injunction against public access. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

In 2011, the consequences of privatising public land came into sharp focus when Occupy protesters were forced out of Paternoster Square by a court order that revealed that the space was owned by the Mitsubishi Estate Company. It seemed, at the time, too dystopian to be true, that the rules imposed by a corporation could supersede the law of the land.

Soon after, we began hearing about confrontations in other pseudo-public spaces, such as on the land of More London, where City Hall is a public island in a sea of privatised open air space owned by Kuwaiti land barons. It transpires that for the past few decades almost every major redevelopment in London has resulted in the privatisation of public space, including areas around the Olympic Stadium, King's Cross and Nine Elms.

Local councils, straining under austerity measures and desperate to cut maintenance budgets and to release themselves from liability, are not only complicit in the process but refused to provide useful information in response to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from the Guardian, stating they either did not have the resources to respond or that they did not hold the data.

Consider for a moment what it means to live in a city where the government does not hold information about where public spaces are, nor any records about when or why they have been sold to private developers.

Given the controversy surrounding the £37.7 million of public money spent on the cancelled Garden Bridge (another pseudo-public space), should the National Audit Office not expand their investigation to ascertain who exactly is behind the enthusiastic sale of our public land? Given that last year the government tried (not for the first time) to privatise the Land Registry itself, where this information is held, we are past due in breaking out the tinfoil hats.



London City Hall is a public island in a sea of privatised open air space owned by Kuwaiti land barons. Photograph: Alamy

In most of these pseudo-public spaces, the property owners refuse to post what “rules” are enforced on the property, meaning that often you only know you breach them when you are told you have done so, and that they may in fact be making them up on the spot. Considering that these rules have been used to preclude protest, journalism and to curtail freedom of speech, as well as to generally exclude fellow citizens including cyclists, skateboarders, buskers and the homeless, how can we perceive of the creation of these spaces as anything but an attack on our fundamental rights as citizens?

It is too easy to convince ourselves that when we lose one space we can just use another. If this process continues as it has, there will be a day when all open-air space in London is privately owned, meaning corporations could effectively render protest illegal, a scenario which should send a shudder through even the most conservative observers.

Indeed, this is not a partisan issue – there are many angles from which to approach this slow-motion catastrophe and end up equally livid. Be angry because nearly half the country is already owned by 0.06% of the population and furthering that trend is exacerbating social inequality. Be angry because your freedom to do as you please is being constrained by multinational property companies who are often not even based in the UK.

Be angry because corporations do not have the same obligations as councils to care for the environment or the people in it. Be angry because these sell-offs are disproportionately affecting the poor and the young. Be angry because you are not getting a tax rebate from the sale. Be angry because pseudo-public spaces are bad for local business. Be angry because your city is becoming increasingly dull with each redevelopment.

This map - the first-ever comprehensive map of pseudo-public spaces in London - is not just an attempt to make the liquidation of our collective assets visible, it is also a call to action.

There are three things you can do right now. First, get in contact with your local council officers, MP and your mayor, Sadiq Khan, to demand that all new public spaces built are publicly owned, that already-extant pseudo-public space be governed by the law of the land, and ask that the forthcoming London Plan includes a clear steer toward transparency on this issue.

Second, take it upon yourself to assert the same rights in them as you do in public space, because corporate rules (posted or not) are not laws.

Third, do everything in your power to challenge the secrecy around this issue further by adding to this map, by posting videos of confrontations with private security guards as you try to use these spaces, and by correcting anyone who refers to these areas as “public space” or “public realm”, because they are about as public as the Shard’s lobby.

Public spaces are the organs of a healthy city. In London, this is no luxury. As the rent on our increasingly cramped flats continues to soar, open, accessible, collectively held space becomes even more essential to everyone’s wellbeing. Public space is also our stage for social and political participation; reducing it to just another real-estate commodity is an attack on our rights to the city and must be resisted by every citizen, every day.

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