

The Struggle to Reclaim the City: An Interview With Michael Sorkin

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Abstract

The potential for citizens to reclaim and reappropriate the physical spaces of their city has garnered a great deal of attention over the past year or so. The Occupy movement, “Arab Spring,” and various social protest movements around the world have all reinvigorated debates over the political importance of public space. These movements posit an alternate historical trajectory to the one depicted by urban theorists and sociologists over the past half-century, who lament the steady “decline” of public space. One of the most vocal critics of the detrimental effects of contemporary urban planning for the sanctity of public space and urban life is the New York–based architect, academic, and architectural critic Michael Sorkin. Sorkin is currently Distinguished Professor of Architecture and Director of the Graduate Urban Design Program at the City College of New York. He is the author of several books and hundreds of articles on buildings, cities, and urban planning and design. In this interview, Sorkin weighs into these debates over the political and social importance of public space in cities and the challenges to disempowerment and disenfranchisement in urban environments. He discusses his early influences, the ongoing importance of Jane Jacobs to urban planning, sustainable living and “the possibility of New York becoming completely self-sufficient within its political boundaries”; as well as his views on the Occupy movement and post-9/11 surveillance and paranoia.

Keywords

Jane Jacobs, public space, media and urbanism, Michael Sorkin, Occupy movement, self-organized urbanism, surveillance

Over the past year or so, there has been widespread public and media attention paid to protest movements where the act of physically gathering in and reappropriating public space has played a vital role. The events dominate the international news headlines on any given day: the Occupy movement and various anti-austerity protests in Greece, Italy, and Spain; the struggles for democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and other regions in the Middle East; and protests over social welfare and the privatization of public space in Brazil and Istanbul respectively. The resurgence of grassroots movements aimed at appropriating the streets and public squares of cities for political and social protest has coincided with—and undoubtedly spurred—a renewed academic

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interest in the importance of embodied interaction in urban space. Scholars such as Andy Merrifield (2013), David Harvey (2012), Eric Kluitenberg (2011), McKenzie Wark (2011), and Saskia Sassen (2011) have all recently drawn on the Occupy and “Arab Spring” protests to underscore the potential for these social media–driven movements to reclaim urban space from the clutches of neoliberal urban development, political repression, and the status quo. For urban theorists, this turn toward recapturing the “public” in public space seemingly offers a glimpse of an alternate model for urban planning. It contradicts the prevailing trend toward the privatization, commercialization, and pervasive surveillance of formerly public spaces. Instead, it promises a radical new grassroots urban politics that begins by carving out a space and reclaiming one’s city or neighborhood, one public square or street at a time. As Harvey (2012) writes, “The revolution in our times has to be urban—or nothing” (p. 25).

These issues and debates have long been of concern to New York–based architect, academic, and critic Michael Sorkin. They frequently recur throughout his extensive body of writing on architecture, urban planning, and the city—from his collections of architectural criticism and commentary (Sorkin, 1991, 2001, 2011) to his academic writing (Sorkin, 1992a, 2008) and more recently his most personal work, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* (Sorkin, 2009). Sorkin’s writing covers a wide range of topics and issues, from his solidarity with his fellow tenants’ ongoing battle with the landlord of their apartment building to the threat of “Disneyfication,” post-9/11 surveillance, and generic, endlessly reproducible architecture to the aestheticism and functionality of cities. But across his work there is often the sense of a struggle against the prevailing attitudes in contemporary urban planning. Like Jane Jacobs—who is clearly a strong influence—Sorkin is concerned with the fundamentals of what makes a “good city”: diversity, intimacy, propinquity and “authentic” social interaction, and self-governance and grassroots community management of one’s lived environment. These sentiments resonate with the politics engendered by the recent spate of social protests aimed at occupying and reappropriating urban space. But, with Sorkin, these ideas have roots in a broader understanding of the city as an ongoing and constantly evolving site of contestation, a notion that both informs and pervades much of his writing over the past two decades. As he writes in the introduction to *Variations on a Theme Park*, “The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself” (Sorkin, 1992a, p. xv).

In the early 1990s, Sorkin’s edited collection *Variations on a Theme Park* examined how “a new kind of urbanism” had begun to emerge in the late 20th century. New communication technologies and corporatized megamalls and shopping complexes, the book argues, are rapidly replacing and eradicating “traditional public space.” As its title suggests, for Sorkin the model for this new kind of city is the utopian, artificial design of Disneyland:

Disney invokes an urbanism without producing a city. Rather, it produces a kind of aura-stripped hypercity, a city with billions of citizens . . . but no residents. Physicalized yet conceptual, it’s the utopia of transience, a place where everyone is just passing through. This is its message for the city to be, a place everywhere and nowhere, assembled only through constant motion. (Sorkin, 1992b, p. 231)

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, there was a pervasive thread running through the work of a number of urban theorists and sociologists who lamented the decline of public space in the postindustrial era. As Varnelis and Friedberg (2008) write, “Public space became increasingly privatized and virtualized” during the 20th century, “with networks of individuals being replaced by television broadcast networks, and individuals becoming less and less citizens and more and more consumers” (p. 18). Theorists such as Harvey (2012), Richard Sennett (1977/2002), and Paul Virilio (1997) were extremely pessimistic about the rise of new telecommunication technologies and their expansion into the public spaces of the city. As Virilio (1997) writes, “The screen abruptly became the city square, the crossroads of all mass media” (p. 389). Sorkin’s

writing in this period shares a similar outlook and can be squarely situated within this body of work. His concerns however are often more grounded than those of Virilio and less historically sweeping than Sennett's, perhaps underlining his more practical nature as a result of his training as an architect.

Sorkin's more recent academic writing—particularly his edited collection *Indefensible Space* (2008)—focuses on the extension of mechanisms for surveillance and control into the physical architecture of cities in the post-9/11 era. For Sorkin, the “architecture of insecurity” has become increasingly pervasive in the modern city, manifest in electronic modes of surveillance such as CCTV cameras, tollway scanners, and GPS tags implanted in pets and humans to monitor their movements, as well as the physical barriers found in airports, shopping malls, and enclaves and gated communities for the rich. This trend, writes Sorkin (2008), “repeats itself around the city . . . [it is] part of an accelerating transformation of the built and political environments” (pp. vii-i). Our growing obsession with security ironically leads to a perpetual state of anxiety and insecurity, whereby the role of surveillance and enforcement is inverted and turned back onto those it protects. In turn, it makes “each of us simultaneously soldier and suspect, enmeshed inextricably in the permanent warfare of all against us” (Sorkin, 2008, p. xviii).

Sorkin's mainstream writing also echoes this aversion toward poor urban design and attempts by urban planners and architects to eradicate or control the public spaces of the city. It is laced with acerbic wit and replete with withering attacks on established conventions—and figures—within urban planning. His writing as the *Village Voice*'s architecture critic, collected in *Exquisite Corpse*, famously targets prominent figures who he is not afraid to call out for their allegiance to a form of urbanism that displays contempt for its citizens and the public life of the city. Among them are Donald Trump—the design for Trump Tower is “the kind of work that would get a D—at a second-rate school of architecture” (Sorkin, 1991, p. 144) and then—*New York Times* architectural critic Paul Goldberger, whose “main loyalties are directed to the architectural clique that invented him in the first place” (p. 101). Sorkin's critical essays and articles after this period are collected in *Some Assembly Required* (2001) and his most recent volume *All Over the Map* (2011). A review by Norman Weinstein (2011) of the latter collection describes him as “a moralizing critic, with all the pluses and minuses that accrue from that stance” (n.p.).

Sorkin is undoubtedly a (deliberately) provocative and confrontational writer. He is at times perhaps too polemical and pessimistic in his academic writing. He shares with writers like Virilio a tendency toward dystopian, highly loaded depictions of the contemporary city that in their generalizing account of the erosion of public space and embodied interaction often avoids offering a way forward or articulating an alternate trajectory that urban planning could take. Also like these writers, his writing is predominantly about Western cities; as would be expected, New York and its streets and buildings are pervasive in his work, whereas cities outside North America often earn only a cursory glance. In his book *Some Assembly Required*, Sorkin (2001) pragmatically observes, “For me, writing has always been the extension of architecture by other means both polemically and as fuel for my money pit of a studio: I write because I am an architect” (p. xi). Although written over a decade ago, perhaps this best sums up Sorkin's current position within contemporary urban studies. His writing is unashamedly polemical, but it is always grounded in a pragmatic desire to change the conditions of the lived environment for the better, whether by rhetorical or material means.

This interview with Sorkin spans the themes and arguments of his work over the past two decades, as well as his early influences and how these informed his ideas about architecture and the city. It centers predominantly on his academic and critical writing, and it also touches on his current work as director of Terreform, which is devoted to research on sustainable architecture and urban planning. Sorkin discusses the ongoing relevance of Jane Jacobs now more than 50 years after the publication of her widely regarded book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961); his current work on sustainable urban agriculture and self-organized living in the

city; and the relationship between media and urban space. As the opening lines of this introduction suggests, we are also in a time where political movements have opened up new possibilities to reclaim the city and challenge the forms of urban planning that are often the subject of Sorkin's ire. Fittingly, then, these issues are also prominent in our discussion, and Sorkin offers his thoughts on the Occupy movement, social media technologies, and their role in urban protest, as well as current events such as the shocking shooting of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida that occurred several weeks prior to our discussion. The interview was conducted in Sorkin's studio in New York on March 24, 2012, where he was kind enough to patiently and incisively answer my questions and afterwards invite me to look around his studio at his current architectural projects and designs.

DL: I'd like to begin by discussing your background and how you became interested in architecture and urbanism. As well as being a prominent architect, you've also written a large body of polemical and often provocative articles and books that are critical of contemporary urban planning. What compelled you to reach beyond the field of architecture and into theoretical criticism and public debate?

MS: I'm a child of the sixties and grew up in a highly politicized environment, starting with the civil rights movement, going on to questions of feminism and the variety of liberations—including the holy trinity of sex, drugs, and rock and roll—that filled life in those days. I was raised in a liberal boomer suburb, am born of pinkish parents, and matured in a heady atmosphere of "struggle," so this comes naturally to me. When I was first thinking about architecture as a kid, my mother gave me a copy of Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* as a birthday present in what must have been 1961. This became a dog-eared, sacred text for me and with it the belief that social ideas not simply attached themselves to architecture and urbanism but that design was a crucial medium of politics. (It also convinced me that Vallingby was the omega point of urban design.) This affinity for "traditional" modernism led to some perplexity for me in understanding how architecture could truly be insubordinate and transgressive, and in my early practice, I surely tended to the view that the main issues were distributive and that "formalism" merely served as camouflage for privilege. To be sure, this analysis had the virtue of being at least partly true, and it's also the case that far too much "postmodern" architectural theorizing has been unpolitical, devolving on a smaller and smaller conceptual compass and encumbering architecture with more meaning than it could usefully support. Certainly, one of the reasons that I have always been so attracted to the city is that it so complexly maps social, economic, and political relations. David Harvey talks about a kind of lacuna in Marxian analysis, in which the proletariat is identified too closely with the factory and not closely enough with the urban and has been making the argument for years that the locus of revolutionary struggle is the city. For me, though, an affinity for the city and urban life has also had a liberating effect on my architectural practice by giving perspective to what's really at stake—and what isn't—in form-making.

DL: In your work, you've often mentioned Jane Jacobs and her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* as having ongoing relevance to contemporary urban planning. Now that it's more than 50 years since that book's publication, where do you see her work and her ideas now?

MS: Jacobs and Mumford are a fascinating pair. They were not infrequently at each other's throats, and I think each misrepresented the work of the other. Jacobs is particularly important for the way she identified the primacy of the neighborhood as an increment of urban organization and for how she so precisely unpacked so many styles in which communal life is spatialized in the city. I think she also had very important economic insights about the city, and one of the things I've been doing in my own work is an extension of a "Jacobsian"

idea about what propels urban growth. Jacobs wrote about the genesis of urban development in import substitution. While this theory has a long history in economics, the application to the way cities grow and differentiate is more particular to her as is her radical insight that cities produce the countryside, not vice versa. We have a research practice—Terreform—running parallel to the architectural studio and its major project—*New York City (Steady) State*. This is, in many ways, an extension of this idea. It investigates the possibility of New York becoming completely self-sufficient within its political boundaries, finding a substitute for every single import. It's clearly a "utopian" project in the sense of being governed by a kind of absolute ideal (and in its fantastical teleology), but our aim is actually to compile an encyclopedia of the forms and technologies for a truly radical effort at taking responsibility for our weight on the earth.

Certainly, one of the most salubrious developments—both practically and theoretically—that's taken place over the past 40 or so years is a great expansion of consciousness about "green" and environmental questions in architecture and urbanism and the ways in which the built environment functions in the context of planetary sustainability. These are fundamentally political issues. The most fundamental has to do with privilege, with the inequitable distribution of world resources. This becomes immediately relevant for design if you think about how the practices of architecture and urbanism are forms of taking—and assigning—responsibility for your behavior as a citizen of the planet and of your polis. So, back to Jacobs. I'm interested in the scale of neighborhoods as an increment of political organization and behavior. If we're going to build democracy and political autonomy, organization at the level of locality is important. And, if cities are going to be responsible and empowered, then it's crucial that one thinks deeply about their processes of respiration—the way in which they consume and produce. Jacobs is incredibly useful but also has her limits. I think she's very strong on human ecology; not so interested in the way in which planetary and natural ecologies work in the context of the city. The "regional planning," Mumford crowd is much more astute and germane in that context. The question of scale in discussions of democracy and environment has become quite lively again, especially in the vital debates about the nature of the local that we're having.

DL: What kind of potential do you think there is today for this kind of self-organization you talk about within the city? What kind of results have you seen emerge from your own work?

MS: Many powerful and important things are happening. We've had the Occupy movement this year, which is a wonderful, self-organized, "viral" phenomenon. The first volume of the New York study we're working on is about food, and there's been a huge community working on urban agriculture—another mode of occupation—which is both intrinsically interesting and serves as a surrogate for many other questions of environmentalist and localist practice. The evolution—and convolution—of this movement are surely revelatory. There's a story in the *New York Times* today about a large food co-op in Brooklyn that has 45,000 members. It started out as a group of neighbors, and they're now having a big struggle about whether to buy Israeli peppers, whether the political ripple effect of this local form or organization demands that they need to join that particular boycott. That particular issue is a bit of a tempest in a teapot; nevertheless the fact that it's happening in the context of this self-organized system for eating well and supporting nonexploitative organic agriculture is something very salient and is happily characteristic of the way lots of people are thinking about living in the city nowadays.

The food movement, in its debates about food justice and food sovereignty, is enmeshed in really fundamental questions and speaks volumes about the nature of the cities we're producing. New York City, for example, has both the richest and the poorest census tracts in the United States, and they're only about a mile apart. To the degree that the Occupy

movement has a “theme,” it’s all about inequality, and this is legible everywhere, in access to sound nutrition just as it is in access to the street. The struggle against mono-cropping and corporate agriculture is continuous with the struggle against the mono-function of the automobile street and for the right of free assembly in popularly defined public space.

DL: I’d like to turn now to some of your earlier work, in particular your writings from the early 1990s about the impact of media technologies on the physical architecture of urban space. In *Variations on a Theme Park* you write that computers, the Internet, and other communication technologies are “eviscerating historic politics of propinquity, the very cement of the city” giving rise to “a wholly new kind of city, a city without a place attached to it” (Sorkin, 1992a, p. xi). That was back when we were only beginning to see the impact of new technologies like the Internet and mobile phones—how do you think these technologies have changed social life in the city since then?

MS: I don’t think I have terribly original new thoughts on this subject, but I think the thrust of that argument was that they have a disembodying—alienating—effect: I still believe that literal propinquity is fundamental to democratic life. One of the things that cities do is to organize both the planned and accidental collision (and collusion) of bodies in actual, physical space. It seems to me that we’re not yet ready to risk replacing that—I choose the word advisedly—“authentic” set of interactions, with something that is virtual and mediated, not entirely in our control, and subject to the worst forms of Big Brotherish oversight. But again, this is an argument that’s been made by many people and is surely a big part of what the Occupy movement—and the Arab Spring—were about; the assertion of both the right and the power of people physically gathering in space and thereby claiming it for the idea of a public. The recurrent expression of being together in place, of this fundamental form of collectivity, is critical to the meaning of the movement, which is deeply embedded in the fact and practices of physical assembly. It’s true that Twitter and other social media facilitated this, but the technology isn’t really the point; it was a goad, it was the medium by which it was possible to do the primary thing, which was getting together. I think people are turning these media to their own use, using them to facilitate something that they actually threaten to annihilate. I really believe we give up embodied relations at our peril. I’m all for the technological supplement, but Jeff Bezos [founder and CEO of Amazon] already knows too much about us, and we’re at grave risk if we don’t keep refining our means of resistance.

DL: In your more recent work, you’ve written a lot about the effects of post-9/11 security policies and mechanisms of surveillance on architecture and urban life. In an essay written in the wake of the attacks in 2001, you write about the “internalization” of fear and the way you’d unconsciously avoid one side of the street for fear of a hidden car bomb. In that piece you lament that “we are creating an urbanism predicated primarily on risk avoidance” (Sorkin, 2011, p. 42). How have you seen this trend toward the securitization of public space evolve over the intervening years since you wrote that piece?

MS: Again, these are not exactly breathtakingly original insights and descend from the familiar Foucauldian metaphor (and practices) of the panopticon and the way—thinking ourselves controlled—we internalize the means of our own repression and surrender to the unseen authority. A striking quotidian example can be found on King Street, the next block over from here, where—at last count—there were between 45 and 50 CCTV cameras actually visible from the sidewalk. The question is not simply one of surveillance but of who is doing the watching. With all these media—the drone passing overhead, the CCTV cameras, the metal detectors, the radiation sniffers on the Brooklyn Bridge, the police dogs in the subway—the prison grows more confining.

DL: So do you think we’re heading toward greater degrees of these forms of control, or have they relaxed somewhat in the intervening years?

MS: Everybody's talking about the young kid—Trayvon Martin—who was just shot down in Florida, not just as a "simple" instance of racism, and not just because of the way paranoia is ratcheted up and institutionalized in privatized "security" operations, but because of the insane dispersal of the means and legitimacy of violence, especially in this country. If the world is somehow recast and depicted as essentially sinister, one is perforce entitled to take protective steps, and our laws are becoming more and more liberal in granting the right to violence. Trayvon Martin was doing nothing but strolling home from the store, and his killer was not immediately arrested—and may yet be acquitted of the crime—because of the state's insane "stand your ground" law. An historic notion of the sanctity of a private domicile is legally extended into public space, and the idea that one could use violence as a last resort is now transformed to a point where people are enabled to use violence as a first resort—shoot first, ask questions later. This social authorization of violence is becoming more and more pervasive, with agency increasingly distributed beyond the state to corporations and vigilante individuals. This reactionary voluntarism is a huge risk for us, and it comes not simply from the Second Amendment lunatics who control the Republican Party but from a broader condition of moral laxity, in which President Obama reviews a list of people every day and ticks off his candidates for extrajudicial assassination.

DL: Professor Sorkin, thanks very much for your time and your insight, it was fantastic speaking to you.

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