Urban Squares
Spatio-temporal studies of design and everyday life in the Öresund region

Mattias Kärrholm (ed.)
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Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER I

Introduction
An agorology of everyday life

Mattias Kärrholm

Let me start with two quotes describing the observation of public squares by two different eyewitnesses in the sixteenth century. The first comes from the account of the travels of the English writer Fynes Moryson. When visiting Padua in 1594, Moryson noted that the city had five squares, all used for different but quite mundane purposes:

There be five market places: in the first the Gentlemen and Students meet and walke: in the second herbes are sold, in the third corne: in the fourth wood, and in the fifth straw. (Moryson, 1907: 152)

The second quote comes from the account of an unknown eyewitness who accompanied Francisco Pizarro to Cuzco. It is a description of Hawkaypata, the main square he visited in November 1533, and an Inca drinking ritual held there from the perspective of a European visitor:

There were so many people and [they were] such good drinkers, men as well as women, and such were the quantities that they poured into their skins – for all they do is drink and not eat – that it is certain, without any doubt, that two wide channels more than half a vara wide, covered with slabs, ... flowed all day with the urine of those that pissed into them, in such abundance that it seemed they were fountains. Certainly, given the quantity of what they
drank and of the people who drank, this is not to be marveled at, though it is a marvel and a thing never before seen. (Protzen & Howland Rowe 1994: 239)

Public squares have historically served different purposes, sometimes specific and single, but perhaps more often diverse and manifold. Sometimes they host ordinary events and sometimes extraordinary. These two particular examples above were taken from two different continents, but in fact the ordinary and the extraordinary often coexist in the same square.

The main aim of this book is to contribute to the study of everyday life in urban squares. This is done using four empirical examples, all of which focus on different ways to describe and investigate public life and public space in urban squares (Fig. 1.1). Each of the four cases focuses on the squares’ urban material culture and the spatio-temporal changes that they endure, or have already undergone. Each site is very different in character, but all are city squares, located in the Öresund region, a large, transnational region that also has been extensively transformed in the last couple of decades. Our hope is that the case studies presented here will bring theoretical and methodological insights to the study of public squares, and thus also to the study of urban squares as a potentially important field of research.

The sheer number of different perspectives from which the subject has been dealt with is testimony to the perennial importance of public squares. Admittedly, it is not a large field of research, but it is both enduring and far-ranging. In urban and architectural history, we have books discussing public squares in different cultures and contexts through history (Zucker 1959; Webb 1990; Kostof 1992). In books on urban design (Moughtin 2003; Childs 2006), they are often described as a formal element in the cityscape, discussed from an aesthetic (Sitte 1889) or social (Whyte 1980) perspective, and catalogued by geometric (Krier 1979) or functional types (Stübben 1890), or just on the basis of empirical examples (Åström 1985, 1988; Gehl & Gemzöe 2001). In the social sciences, we have recently seen an increasing interest in the social and political role of public squares. This includes studies on their importance for retail and urban competition (Warnaby 2013), for spectacles and events (Basson 2006), for religion (Burdziej 2005), for national identity (Sumartojo 2009), and, of course, for political performativity – as in many studies in the wake of political
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events, such as the Tahrir Square riots in Cairo during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 (Butler 2011; Gregory 2013) or the Taksim Square demonstrations against the Taksim Gezi Park project in Istanbul in 2013 and 2014 (Kuymulu 2013).

Perhaps we might soon see the advent of ‘agorology’ – the study of urban squares – as a research field in its own right. It is true that the concept of agorology has already been used in research: in the field of macromarketing, agorology has been used to describe the study of market institutions (Mittelstaedt et al. 2006), with the concept used to convey the functional complexity of the Greek agora, and to underscore ‘the interdependence of markets and marketing systems with other dimensions of civic life’ (131). However, even though the contextual aspect is judged vital, agorology is here taken to refer to the agora at its most rudimentary, reducing it to a discussion of the economic aspects of the marketplace. In this anthology we would argue that agorology should and could be a much more open field of inquiry, focusing on the study of urban squares and all that might entail. Our aim, however, is not to develop agorology as a general field of research – although this would certainly be an interesting figure. The four squares investigated in this anthology.

Fig. 1.1 The four squares investigated in this anthology.
task – but to investigate what could well become a principal theme within such an agorology – the quotidian life of urban squares, or the *agorology of everyday life*. One way to describe such a field would be to begin with Georges Perec’s three-day study of Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris in October 1974 (Perec 2010 [1975]). In all his work, Perec was interested in what was ‘infra-ordinary’ about everyday life, and he undertook several projects and studies of everyday life and spaces, which, as Sheringham (2006) points out, are very much part of the tradition of French scholars interested in the *quotidien*, including thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Roland Barthes, and Marc Augé, but also Michel Foucault and Jean-Luc Nancy. In Place Saint-Sulpice, Perec was at great pains to describe the things and events that generally went unnoted in topographical, journalistic, or other accounts of places. He listed objects, birds, bus routes, colours, commenting all the while on things he drank, how people behaved, and even their body language:

> I am now at La Fontaine St-Sulpice, sitting with my back to the square: the cars and people in my line of sight are coming from the square or are getting ready to cross it (with the exception of some pedestrians coming from rue Bonaparte).

> Several grannies wearing gloves pushed some baby carriages.

> They’re preparing for the National Day for the Elderly. An 83-year-old woman came in, presented her collection box to the café owner, but left again without holding it out to us.

> On the sidewalk, there is a man shaken, but not yet ravaged, by tics (movements of the shoulder as if he were experiencing a continual itching in the neck); he holds the cigarette the same way I do (between the middle finger and the ring finger): it’s the first time I’ve come across someone else with this habit. (Perec 2010: 18–19)

Perec’s notes make clear that we ourselves are part of the quotidian, and his investigations become in a way as much a study of the observer as of the observed; a study of the relationship between the observer as a fully embodied subject (eating, drinking, taking notes, etc.) and the life of the square (Sheringham 2006: 268 ff.).

Perec’s work was an early and methodologically interesting study of quotidian life in a public square, but there are of course several other important examples even more closely connected to the academic field.
Two early examples are William H. Whyte’s studies of New York in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) and Perla Korosec-Serfaty’s analysis of daily practices in the main square in Malmö in Sweden (Korosec-Serfaty 1982). More recent studies include *On the Plaza*, Setha Low’s account (2000) of two plazas in San José in Costa Rica, and *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*, in which Gisa Wezkalnys (2010) charts the former East German square Alexanderplatz after the reunification of Germany. Both Low’s and Wezkalnys’s seminal works are reasonably thorough examples of ‘square ethnography’. Filipa Wunderlich’s extensive and methodologically innovative studies of place temporality in Fitzroy Square in London should also be mentioned here (2010; 2014).

Most of these studies, as well as our own, share a focus on the everyday life of centrally located squares, and it should thus be remembered that agorology also needs to extend to studies of peripheral or suburban squares (for a good Swedish example, see Olsson et al. 2004).

Henri Lefebvre was one of the first philosophers who insisted on the important role of everyday life in society, and thus on its importance as a field of research and as a subject in need of theoretical attention (Lefebvre 1991a [1947], 1991b [1974], 2004 [1992]). Everyday life – and its recurrent, rhythmic activities – has an important transformative and productive power. If one accepts Lefebvre’s thesis in its entirety, it also means that such theoretical attention cannot be rooted in the abstract categorizations that are so common in urban design. Kostof (1992: 149–64), for example, following earlier texts on the urban design of public squares, makes two different typologizations of squares, one based on shapes (the triangle, the trapezoid, the rectangle, the L, the circle, the ellipse, the hemicycle), and the other based on uses (the civic centre, the *place d’armes*, the square for games or traffic, and the residential square). This classification echoes several others in the way that it focuses on form and function as two separate domains. An agorology of everyday life implies the opposite: that form and function, materiality and sociality, have to be studied together. Any classification or sorting of squares needs to be done through lived space, and must thus imply a world of heterogeneous, socio-material actors rather than the abstraction and purification of the world into tidy categories according to either form or function (Latour 2005).

Much like Perec, Maurice Blanchot has pointed out that everyday life is hard to uncover. Indeed, he sees it as one of its defining traits: ‘the everyday escapes: that is its definition’ (Blanchot, in Sheringham 2006:...
One of the aims of the present volume is to find new methods of crafting presence (Law 2004) in a way that makes everyday life and its material and temporal conditions visible. The four case studies in this book thus offer quite different takes on urban squares, all representing different perspectives on how to study the transformation of everyday life and material culture.

In the first essay, Mattias Kärrholm reproduces Korosec-Serfaty’s comprehensive empirical study of Malmö’s centrally located main square from thirty-five years ago, and compares daily usage of the square between 1978 and 2013. The essay investigates changes in place temporalities and material culture, but also uses the square as a means of discussing urban and societal changes on other scales, for example the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary activities, and between absent and present users.

In the second essay, Paulina Prieto de la Fuente investigates the rhythm of public eating in one of Malmö’s busiest bus hubs, and uses these insights to suggest a new way of conceptualizing the question of urban design. Using an ethnographic repertoire, including time-lapse studies, Prieto de la Fuente maps actors involved in public eating situations (such as food, rubbish, birds, and seating). She then investigates how rhythmic, but non-continuous actors produce certain socio-material regularities in the square, constituting ‘discrete architectures’, and suggests how these might be further studied.

The third essay, by Gunnar Sandin, tells the story of an urban renewal process close to Malmö’s old city centre. Sandin follows the architectural proposal, the public consultation process, and the different actions taken in the remaking of the square. Although official procedures for the inclusion of citizens’ opinions are in place, the planning authorities seem to have a strategy of neglecting the interests of the citizens. Sandin goes on to investigate the temporal agency of these strategies, and how they are enacted in the planning process and in the square itself.

In the fourth and last essay, Ida Sandström discusses the attempts to generate a transnational space in the Superkilen public square in Copenhagen. Superkilen represents an elaborate, designerly way of addressing a heterogeneous community. Sandström here identifies three different urban design strategies brought into play: designed fragmentation, designed confrontation, and intentional spacing. She analyses the urban design using Blanchot’s concept of the fragmentary demand,
for example, along with Nancy’s thoughts on being-in-common, and relates the design to situated examples and observations of the ongoing everyday life of the square.

Together, these case studies help us see how the everyday life of city squares, together with the materialities and architecture involved, play an important part in the production of public space. Two of the squares in question have been radically redesigned, whereas the other two prompt studies that focus on material transformations on other scales than that of the squares themselves. This difference allows for a discussion of aspects of materiality and everyday life on different spatio-temporal levels, ranging from micro-events altering in seconds, to decades-long societal and governmental change at urban, regional, and transnational levels. The aim is that these case studies, taken together, might open up perspectives that would lay bare the diverse and transformative socio-material practices of everyday life. Urban squares are often bursting with representational potential: they are strategic arenas of visibility and invisibility; they are important stages where relationships between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the struggles of absence and presence, are played out. This, we would argue, is also why the life of urban squares is so interesting whenever the spotlight falls on the transformation of public space. Our hope is thus that the four case studies presented here will, in their own humble way, encourage new perspectives on urban design and public life, and point to the very real opportunities offered by a more detailed agorology of everyday life.

References


In this study I have analysed day-to-day activities in Stortorget, the main square in Malmö, Sweden (Fig. 2.1 & 2.2), comparing 1978 with 2013. In 1978, Stortorget had just become part of a small pedestrianized area stretching down to Gustav Adolfs torg, the square two blocks south. Malmö was then an industrial city in the early throes of an urban crisis, with a declining population at just under 250,000 inhabitants. Today, what was a pedestrian street has now grown into a large pedestrian precinct (see Kärrholm 2012) and Malmö has a rising population of about 300,000. The city of Malmö is the centre of a large and growing urban region in southern Sweden, and can be seen as a successful example of a post-industrial city. In fact, it has even been described as a ‘standard–exceptional’ case of post-industrial change, a cliché in terms of branding but exceptional in terms of success and transformation (Holgersen 2014: 14). That said, the change into what has sometimes also been called a ‘knowledge city’ has come at a price, with a great increase in segregation and a new discourse of crime and security problems (see, for example, Rodenstedt 2014).

A study of an urban space compared over time allows us to compare two sides of paradigmatic urban change in a city that has abandoned its industrial context for post-industrial consumer society, and offers interesting insights into an important urban site and its changing role for everyday life. There are three principal reasons why Stortorget in