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Protests in urban environments: review and research agenda

Abstract
Although knowledge about the role of space in the field of social movement studies is already well established, it is rarely discussed within the framework of urban spatial design (with some important exceptions). We consider not only how political power is related to architectural design in urban environments but also how it is performed (and contested) during protests within these spaces. We argue that urban spatial planning should address the dual nature of street demonstrations. Public assemblies are seen as symbols of democracy, but they are also disruptive and may turn into riots. This tension is evident along two design lines: facilitating and obstructing street demonstrations in a built-up urban environment. In our essay, we show that street protests are an immanent part of neoliberal democracy, and that cities cannot avoid street demonstrations or simply exclude them in the design process.

Keywords
Urban design • protest • political space • street demonstrations • architecture

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Introduction

Street protests (marches, rallies, demonstrations) are collective actions, embodied in spatial dimensions. They are public expressions of political views and, as such, have become part of ritualized political behavior around the globe (Imig 2002; Casquete 2006; Dufour 2021). The intersection of spatial policy and legal order has understandably become an object of study in political geography. The performative act of protest makes its mark on a city, binding politics, symbols, and geographic areas in a historical context. As Bennett and Layard (2015) argue, the practice of protest changes the law apparatus and legality; it also changes the meanings of concepts such as ownership, area, and property (Finchett-Maddock 2016). Demonstration has become a symbol of political non-violence, and in (neo)liberal democracy, has been recognized as a form of consensus, enabling safe action backed by public assembly laws. Regardless of the institutionalization of street demonstrations, they can be imagined or framed as disruptive, violent, or dangerous to public order (Juris 2005; Boykoff 2006). The transformation of peaceful demonstrations into violent riots is one of the recurring features of protest activity, but what is interesting for our consideration here is the framing of the protest in the first place (Johnston & Noakes 2005) – namely, the attribution of specific meanings to it by the addressees of the claims, the media, or the social movements themselves. The framing of political places as dangerous is influenced by different factors, including cognitive bias, the sociopolitical context, and media representation (Mitchell & Staeheli 2005). Moreover, sociocultural factors such as historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and economic disparities contribute to the construction of narratives that depict certain protest places as inherently unstable and unsafe. In case of feminist protests, as Alison Young (2021) noted, this framing not only delegitimizes the protest itself but also serves to maintain existing power dynamics and marginalize dissenting voices: activists are depicted as unruly and irrational, reinforcing gendered stereotypes, and undermining their credibility as legitimate political actors.

We consider how political power is not only related to the architectural design in an urban environment but also how it is performed (and contested) by protests within these spaces. Although street demonstrations are increasingly commonplace, they are rarely discussed within the frames of urban spatial design, planning, and architecture – with some important exceptions (Parkinson 2012; Thorpe 2014; Vienne 2014; Rafail 2018; Merwood-Salisbury 2019; Silvano de la Llata 2021; Traganou 2021; Hatuka 2022). We would like to expand this discussion, arguing that urban spatial planning should face the dual nature of street demonstrations. Public assemblies are seen as a symbol of democracy, but sometimes they are also disruptive and can turn into riots. The issue is more complicated as street demonstrations are not external to cities and their residents, such as the pandemic restrictions, to which urban planning can be adjusted. Instead, they are internal and immanent, so cities cannot avoid street demonstrations or simply exclude them in the design process.

Protests in spaces

Tactics of resistance – such as various forms of space occupation, demonstrations, assemblies, or marches – are spatial tools. The significance of protest as a tool of politics is that its effect is not only to make demands but also to reconstruct the identity and symbolism of different spheres, which includes transforming the meanings of spaces (Parkinson 2012; Nicholls, Miller, & Beaumont 2013). Recalling the perspective of political geography and social movement research, space is one of the contexts that changes the course, perception, meaningfulness, and effectiveness of protests (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2003). The most important research topics on the relationship between protest and space are: (1) the parameters of protest space and collective behavior (e.g., the “density” of demonstrators and

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forces of order in particular places, the routes of movement of marches, the appearance of demonstrations in certain parts of the city, etc.) (Casquete 2006; Rucht 2007; McFarlane 2020); (2) the reach of protests (local, supra-local, global) (Dufour 2021); (3) the relationship of protests to specific locations (sites and objects); (4) the use of space as an organizational and technical resource in protests (Keith & Pile 2013); (5) the consideration of space as an object of claim (Gül et al. 2014); and (6) the transformation of space as a result of protests (Kwok & Chan 2020). These themes organize the categories we refer to when discussing anchoring a protest in a space, the scale of the protest's impact, and finally, the spaces of protest that meet certain conditions and create or limit opportunities for protesters.

Protests are an active part of the landscape – they enhance visibility (of groups and subjects), maintain memory (of place and protest). As a result of this work, the relationship between the space and the participants and observers (and sometimes opponents) changes. Research shows that protests remain in the memory of places; spaces used for political dissent become incorporated into the resources used in a protest (Gough 2000). Spaces transformed through practices, emotions, and symbols become sites of protest. With this understanding, protest sites serve specific functions. These include building horizontal support networks and a sense of community, expressing individual subjectivity, and creating social status for participants.

Protests expand the meanings of places such as main streets (Sassen 2011), squares, markets, and places of consumption. Additionally, public leisure spaces, such as parks, are also arenas of protest (Arora 2015), with Gezi (Istanbul) and Zucotti (New York) parks being the most famous examples. Protests are another layer for understanding spaces as places of memory, politics, education, and spending free time (Ghaziani 2021). Collective contestation enables architectural barriers to be crossed, including spatial and ideological programs and tools of control.

Urban planning and protest

The fact that protests take place against and in defense of democracy should be a hint that it should not be treated as an absolute value, protected by absolute law. The fact that protests are held against some groups of people, that they can be violent and can become a destructive force, should be another such hint. Therefore, we do not treat the present discussion as an unconditional protection of protests in urban spaces. On the contrary, we show the challenges that can arise in terms of hindering or facilitating them. The clash between two visions of how to organize urban space is obvious here: (1) to ensure the safety of residents and exclude or minimize demonstrations; (2) to control demonstrations by regulating and designing the space where they may take place. Designing spaces just to facilitate (or to avoid) protests would be too simple, and in our view, three dimensions need to be considered:

(1) *Protest against spatial policies* – protests influence change in urban policies and, consequently, induce change in space plans, architectural designs, or housing policies (Mualam & Max 2021). As a result of protest, we refer to both bottom-up urbanism and transformation of space. By these, we mean all situations in which protests are an organized opposition to city planning as a political and economic process that excludes specific groups from co-determination. Urban movements participating in civic control and correction of the planning process would be at the center of this dimension (Domaradzka & Wijkström 2019). As a result of protests, it is possible for new meanings or functions of space to emerge, such as temporary forms of protest camps and their architecture (Heinonen 2019); these could be considered as a useful tool for testing and designing the agenda of public affairs, control, inclusivity, and accessibility of space.

(2) *Spatial planning against protest* – the management and design of space to enhance control and to restrict assembly. The actions of authorities unwilling to implement the right to protest range from the policing of spaces where protests have taken place to the planned, large-scale reconstruction of public spaces (Schwedler 2020). Eighteenth and nineteenth century concerns about mobs and their violent nature introduced changes in city planning, with the most famous example being Georges Haussmann's redevelopment of Paris (Gould 1995). In addition to a modernization program for a city struggling with overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions, one of the new prefect's policies was to facilitate the exit of troops to barracks to make routes for the movement of military forces more efficient and to facilitate the defense of buildings during riots. As was the case then, spaces can be remodeled in current times to avoid protests and discourage participation in the practice of street politics. The image of riots, looting of stores, and violent incidents is one of the perceptions of the contemporary urban world, and these perceptions are appealed to by the police (Kretschmann 2023).

Controlling and policing is supported by CCTV technologies and other digital surveillance tools (Melgaço & Monaghan 2018), along with the suitable security management of the space, allowing police to use tactics to disperse and suppress protesters (Zajko & Béland 2008) as part of this activity.

Researchers interpret urban planning as an apparatus that enables the interests of power to be secured. Fear of rioting and looting, according to Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2005), can be used as a tool to force compliance. Mitchell, Harcourt, and Taussig (2013) point to the role of protest control and civil disobedience in the formation of sovereignty, hegemony, control, and power. This thread is relevant to our discussion, as it points to the problem of framing the legitimacy of protest, and creating a discourse using terms such as "terrorism," "hooliganism," and "threat," which are associated with specific places and spaces. This creates a geography of (politically) "dangerous places." Rasul A. Mowatt (2022) claims that maps and spatial data are used to pinpoint the precise position of social categories among a heterogeneous urban space. Phrases like "dirty," "dangerous," "sick," and "troubled" are discursive codes that are used to indicate spaces with social problems. Intervention by police and municipal authorities in such areas becomes justified, and the displacement of residents or the pacification of protesters becomes a reasonable solution. Urban planning and fear are in a mutual relationship: the urban plan is both the answer and the cause of diagnosed threats.

(3) *Spatial planning and design for protest* – enabling and facilitating protests in spaces requires several conditions. As we pointed out in the previous section, the authority may be concerned with demarcating the area of the demonstration – in the same way the political territory is established (Delaney 2008). For tactics used frequently – namely, street demonstrations or the occupation of spaces – the technical conditions include the possibility of assembly in a specific place, usually in an open, freely accessed and centrally located space. Criteria such as visibility (i.e., ease of attracting the attention of random passers-by), nuisance (this occurs in the case of blocking an important traffic route), or the ability to defend oneself in the event of an assault by security forces become important in this instance. When designing spaces for protests, we consider specific urban planning solutions, such as enhancing the theatricality of the protest, and creating better exposure for public gatherings. Another option is to create extensive urban plans that consider that spaces may also be used by a large number of people on foot, which could block traffic and, therefore, create the need to ensure the safety of other residents (spectators, people living near the place of demonstration). Moreover, this type of design can be seen as a form of political strategy. Performing design can

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be an act of critique, dialogue (Manzini 2016), or political activism (Thorpe 2014). What we have in mind here is the kind of design work that is revolutionary in relation to the existing spatial order, and is a form of influential message.

Returning to the issue discussed in the introduction: how can we predict practices that are temporal and spontaneous in nature? We must consider the relationship between the unplanned (spontaneous, ephemeral, unintentional) and the planned and programmed space (Chandhoke 1993; Van Woerkum et al. 2011). It is obvious that there are various forms of street protests; they have different dynamics, and protesters use different, often unplanned, tactics. Perhaps for this reason, thoughtful space planning that considers this temporal nature of protests is relatively rare. However, there are a few important exceptions.

Gina Ford and Martin Zogran (2017) explore the idea of designing streets that either enable or hinder the experience of street demonstrations. In response, they point out several principles, including, but not limited to: (1) considering the relationship between the gathering place, the march route, rest spaces, and the destination point; (2) arranging the space in such a way that it is possible to dismantle objects for the duration of the demonstration; (3) taking into account microtopography and details concerning the movement of the crowd (height of curbs, obstacles in the march); and (4) noting that the presence of a political crowd is a kind of spectacle, watched by the media and observers. In contrast, Tali Hatuka (2016) writes about designing for protests, and refers to protests as planned and routinized events.

While the themes, political agendas, and repertoires of protests change, certain elements of contestation remain constant, and include the need to mobilize community resources, make use of the possibilities of space, and work with the localities themselves. Silvano de la Llata (2021) shows the complexity of the relationship between design, spatial cohesion management, and protest organizing. In considering these issues, the author chooses a processual approach, and emphasizes the temporality of the place-making process of protest spaces.

Outlining the research agenda

Cities and their spaces play a key role in the production of identities and the intensified relationships necessary for the mobilization of high-risk resources, in which trust plays a decisive role (Nicholls, Miller, & Beaumont 2013). They are, in a strict sense, sites for the construction of emotions that foster (or undermine) political mobilization. They are the front line of indignation, dissatisfaction, the expectations gap, and feelings of the injustice and incompetence of the authorities. We consider designing a space for (or against) protest as an important practical and theoretical task. That is why we would like to outline an agenda for the research area of considering street protests in urban planning. Our postulates are an attempt to respond to the concerns identified in the earlier sections. We believe that, in addition to collecting empirical evidence, there is also a need to discuss theories about how political spaces are designed.

1. How to open the protest space and reconcile the conflicting expectations of different groups of city residents? The interests of different users of the city are often conflicting (Loukaitou-Sideris 1996; Mela 2014; Lehtovuori 2016), and we lack a clear delineation of the ways in which the design of protest spaces would sustainably accommodate the differences between these interests. Here, we touch on the extremely difficult issue of reconciling differences in values, such as the right to expression and the right to security. The right to (street) protest is retained by different, often conflicting, sides of a political dispute (Mitchell 2003; Apostolopoulou & Liodaki 2021); thus, assessing group expectations of a city's openness to protest also includes political affiliations, part of which may be an aversion to street demonstrations. This is not to diminish the political (collective) significance of participation in a social movement, but rather to assert that individual motivation, performance, and results are inherent in political engagement. Participation in the politics of protest is a field where one can express one's creativity, build a social bond, and create one's own identity (Crossa 2013; Bräuchler 2019).

Ex post research would also answer the question of what kind of public spaces are used for demonstrations and other protest tactics on a national and regional scale. The diversity of urban structures does not allow us to develop a pattern of functions of protest spaces, but it is an important element of comparative research – for example, between national capitals with different scales of historical buildings. The technical conditions of protest organization should be related to changes in the historical context, if only due to changes in the law of assembly (Martin 2021), but also due to the development of the city, the decomposition of the urban layout, the development of new forms of mobility, and so on (Rosenthal 2000). Research of this kind needs to be directed towards measures and goals that can be defined to evaluate the design of spaces for protest. Future research should refer to the discussion of success parameters, such as the frequency of demonstrations, their peacefulness, freedom of movement, and number of demonstrators. These qualities are not solely dependent on the nature of the designed space (Merwood-Salisbury 2019).

The success and failure of street protest strategies in relation to circumstances – such as mixed-use spaces where the organization of assembly and expression is only one function (Dufour 2021) – needs to be extensively investigated if guidelines for designing protest spaces are to be more thoroughly taken into account.

2. What is the role of "other spaces"? The practice of protest changes the character of those places that were previously outside the sphere of politics (Kowalewski 2018); therefore, researchers should also consider local redefinitions of spaces and the changing resources of political mobilization. In the case of small cities, we pointed out the importance of protest as a local event, even though it is often marginalized in the national media. Perhaps we should think similarly about other non-public spaces – whether private or unrelated to protest in their previous use (Candea 2011).

In medieval and pre-modern Europe, there were many spaces that could be described as political: from small-scale open spaces (such as areas around churches and streets) to enclosed spaces (such as city council chambers) to non-physical (virtual) spaces (such as associations that, although they met in physical spaces, created a trans-local political space). Cafés and drinking places have remained important over the centuries. As semi-enclosed spaces, inaccessible to the eye of the passer-by, they allow, through selection "at the entrance," control to be maintained and ideological homogeneity to be preserved. There are more potential political spaces – other than big squares and traditional places of gathering – and we should consider them in our research as well. A crucial factor to take into account in this regard is the application of geolocation technologies and the validation of protest spaces using social media. Private spaces, such as cars or apartment windows, have become protest spaces with enormous audience reach thanks to the publication of photographs on social media platforms (Earl 2012). However, digital media may have a dangerous impact on those involved in protesting authoritarian regimes. Social media platforms open opportunities, but are increasingly being used to control, victimize and spread fake news that demobilizes movement members.

3. When designing places of power, should we consider protest in their proximity? Power, itself contested, is connected to specific spaces and spatial behaviors that are most often

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contested by claimants. The "symbolic" conditions determine the "necessity" of acting in certain places; for example, those connected to tradition or that conventionally represent power. It is hard to imagine demonstrators appearing in places other than those considered public spaces by residents, especially when even a neighborhood protest takes place in the local center. Demonstrators are more likely to protest in places that represent power, or in places that are crucial to taking control (literally or symbolically).

In many cases, the symbolic meaning of a space (as a place of protest and as a place that represents authorities) becomes more important than the physical presence of institutions. Even during violent actions, such as street riots, participants take into account the technical properties and symbolic meaning of the space when directing themselves to specific locations. Sometimes the places where riots occur are chosen based on a plan created long before the conflict escalated. Javier Auyero gives the example of the Santiago riots (which took place in 1993 in Santiago del Estero, Argentina), in which the buildings under attack and subject to looting were identified in discussions as symbols of oppression, and were potential targets even before the attacks began (Auyero 2003).

If we recognize that protests allow spaces to change, it may be worth discussing solutions to support this process. This is increasingly important as the city is not just a stage, it is the essence of protest; unrest and protesters' claims played out in urban spaces are the essence of political life. Not only are "space and place central for understanding the (re)production, deployment, consolidation of transformation of emotions within resistance movements" (Crossa 2013, p. 829), but protests and the emotions associated with them are also central to understanding people's relationships with space.

Given that public spaces represent (or should represent) openness to temporary use, modification, and dynamics of function, we should consider how to accommodate unpredictable, sometimes violent, and socially objectionable protest events. Spaces of protest often imply an openness to persistence (Sbicca & Perdue 2014) in the space of political demands. The citizens' right to assemble is also the right to behave contrary to the expectations expressed towards a chosen collective or role (Butler 2015), which means that submitting to protest and adapting spaces to make demonstrations easier are not always obvious choices.

While the challenges of mixed and multi-use of land, equal access to space, and enhancing cultural diversity seem consistent with the call to design for protest, the issues of designing quiet green spaces, enhancing safety, and promoting public health may conflict with the right to assemble. This may be so especially if protests are loud and volatile events that can threaten public order and the health of citizens. By limiting the freedom of urban structures, as accomplished by modernists, open spaces are eliminated and replaced by intimate spaces where there is no room for shouting and gesticulating, as can happen during protests. In today's pro-social and humanized city, tailored to the needs of the dominant user group, conflict is often removed from sight, literally and figuratively. This, however, requires further investigation and exploration of how the theme of mass gatherings is present in contemporary architectural visions, design languages, and space planning. Not enough space can be seen as a method of control by designing a sedate zone that is free from the disturbance caused by public gatherings. It is as if the motto were: *No place, No protest, No problem*.

In this paper, we have outlined the complex link between power, urban areas, social dynamics, and protests; our research highlights how important it is to take into account the political, social, and geographical aspects of cities when examining social movements. Our text is meant to provoke discussion about how contemporary protest spaces and tactics can impact the theories and practices of urban planning. It is significant that the literature attributes practices such as parkour, street art, and flash mobs with critical potential and influence on space design. However, regular protests in public spaces is a topic that is studied less frequently. Through this exploration, we can learn more not only about the challenges of urbanism but also about protesting itself, which always remains tied to a social location.

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