



Designing Protests in Urban Public Space

Tali Hatuka

Social and political protests in urban public spaces are multiplying in cities all around the world. Tali Hatuka explains the role of space and gaze in the design of public dissent.

“Whatever happens in Tahrir immediately becomes a national concern,” the national daily *Al-Ahram*’s Fatemah Farag wrote in 1999,¹ making it clear that the location and the design of recent protests play a crucial role in the meaning and effect of the action on the general public. Indeed, when Tahrir Square, usually a traffic-choked plaza at the heart of Cairo, is filled with thousands of protesters, it captures the attention of the world. This awareness of the role of space in enhancing the impact of protests characterizes the growing sophistication of citizens who carefully design and plan dissent. This sophistication is transnational, characterizing citizens in democratic and non-democratic regimes who have become more aware of their power through their ability to craft events that increase support for their claims.

Organizers generally plan protest for two purposes: first, an external purpose in which protesters confront a target and thereby enhance the impact of their political message; and second, an internal purpose in which protesters assemble and, in so doing, intensify emotional and political solidarity among participants. Aiming to achieve these goals, organizers take into account many interconnected features (schedule, number of participants, location of the event, surveillance, etc.) that contribute to the physical and cultural implications and meanings of an event. Yet what are the crucial factors in the design of a protest? I would argue that in the context of contemporary protests, two linked features matter: the spatial form of gathering and the gaze of remote viewers. Large numbers are a bonus, but not a necessity.

The spatial forms of gathering

The fundamental decision underlying the design of any protest concerns the spatial interaction of participants and its symbolic meaning. This decision is crucial in intensifying solidarity among these participants. For example, a speaker standing at the centre of a circular space projects a message of being part of the crowd and emerging from it, as opposed to a speaker standing on a high podium at the edge of a rectangular space, evoking distinct hierarchy and theatricality. Some protests are intentionally decentralized, as seen in the recent events in Egypt, which had no clear spatial distribution of participants. This apparent disorganization mirrors the rather fragmented order among the participating groups, generating a segmented, reticular, multifaceted structure of power. Such a structure helps bring many different groups together. Leadership in this case is not concentrated but distributed, and often restricts itself to specific goals. In this complex structure, virtual communication is used as an information tool that brings a degree of homogeneity to the whole and helps it hold together.

The spatial distribution of participants should also be seen in the context of a setting’s topography, boundaries, traffic movements, and building uses (i.e. government, commercial and

¹ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/445/feature.htm>

residential buildings). Clearly, choosing a location for a protest relates to the expected and desired number of participants. But it also responds to the planned performance (i.e. marching, gathering, singing, clothing, and even the timing and length of the event), which expresses the way participants present themselves – either as supporters of or protesters against a dominant social order, all within the culture of their society.

Figure 1: Mothers of Plaza de Mayo



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Thus, it is the interplay between the performance and the place that gives a protest its character and colour. If a group creates a distinctive pattern of gathering, it might succeed in capturing more attention. Innovation matters. Examples of this creativity can be seen in the acts of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, whose children “disappeared” under the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. For over three decades, the mothers have fought for the right to reunite with their abducted children. From April 30, 1977 to the present day, they have been gathering every Thursday afternoon in Plaza de Mayo in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace. Despite the ban on protests by the dictatorship, they march in circles, two women at a time, revealing how an innovative act emerges out of both the space’s design (the paved circle around the central monument) and the legal limitations on protesting against the regime. This example shows how a group can reclaim public space by redefining its access, appearance and representation, and reinterpreting its dominant cultural purpose. Another interesting example is the Israeli group Women in Black, which temporarily occupies “informal public spaces” by standing at main traffic junctions throughout Israel every Friday afternoon (Benski 2005, pp. 57–58). Triggered by the

outbreak of the First Intifada (1987)², Women in Black was formed by a small group of women from Jerusalem protesting against occupation. Begun as a weekly vigil of women dressed in black, the organization soon became a national network of some 30 weekly vigils around Israel. At its peak, the Jerusalem vigil, characterized as the largest, was estimated to include some 350–400 activists, with a steep decline after the Gulf War (1991), and even more so after the Oslo Accords (1993). Today, four vigils are active in Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Gan Shmuel, each with between eight and fifteen women participants.³ These small groups show that even banal spaces can be used for political protest purposes.

Figure 2: Women in Black 2008



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In the case of large assemblies, it is often the organizations calling the protest (political parties, unions, social organizations, etc.) that define the spatial configuration of the event by choosing the size of the space to best suit the number of people and enhance the sense of “togetherness” and solidarity among participants. In formal places that were designed to project the regime’s power and monumentality – such as Tahrir Square in Cairo, Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, and Trafalgar Square in London, to name but three – protests tend to be large-scale. But this does not necessarily create nor guarantee national and global impact. One additional component is necessary to achieve a more significant impact: the active gaze of an audience, from the government to internet surfers and television viewers.

² The First Intifada ('uprising') refers to the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip that lasted from 1987 to 1991 and was repressed by Israel.

³ Interview with Alia Strauss, Women in Black activist, December 24, 2009.

The double-edged power of the gaze

Surveillance is now part of our daily reality. But despite cameras and police forces striving to keep order, activists have adapted, turning surveillance into a source of strength. In other words, a dominant order can be challenged despite surveillance, as in the case of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who started their action under a dictatorship that closely monitored their protests. The mothers' act of protest was indeed intended to be seen and heard. Thus, while surveillance of both assembly and space no doubt serves as a means of control, it can also become a means of protest and liberation.

Beyond making it possible to be seen and heard, the gaze of authorities (e.g. police, army) can also enhance the sense of safety among participants. The eruption of violence during a protest can drain away both active and passive supporters, and scare news watchers worldwide. Thus surveillance by a larger assembly serves protesters. As the 1989 Leipzig demonstrations and recent events in Egypt show, massive non-violent actions organized in non-democratic regimes are able to attract large numbers of people and tend to be successful. It is the sense of safety and solidarity that allows participants, even temporarily, to feel that they belong to a different society, nurturing hope for a better future.

Today, it is the gaze of the media whose attention activists wish to attract. This aim also serves the need of the media for a steady supply of spectacular images and stories. Unlike the local gaze of controlling forces and governments, the gaze of the media plays a dual role: it reframes the event, introducing a play between the actual happening and the edited narrative distributed to remote viewers worldwide. A good example of how the form of a gathering and the media were connected can be found in the worldwide protests against the invasion of Iraq on February 15, 2003. The protests were a coordinated event in which millions of people demonstrated in some 800 cities around the world. This event was unprecedented, not just in terms of scale, but also in terms of coordination and reach, as the media played a crucial role in broadcasting this international event to the world.

Thus, the gaze and its multiple roles are taken into careful consideration by protesters as they are seen as crucial with regard to people's ability to make a difference. For this reason, contemporary activists do not worry about the gaze; they play with it. They innovatively design protests using it as a source of power. In some cases, switching roles, they even design acts of protest that gaze at the actions of the authorities. An example of this can be seen in the actions of Machsom Watch (MW), a volunteer organization of Israeli women who monitor Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank, as well as Palestinian trials in military courts. MW members operate in shifts of small teams of two or three activists, seven days a week. They wear identification badges that make them recognizable as MW members, and at the end of each shift they produce a summary report of activities, which is published on their website. Their actions demonstrate a civilian awareness of the power of the gaze in activating change.

Contemporary protests start with this civilian consciousness of the changeable nature of power. The need to concretize this awareness is the main reason that political dissent in public space will continue to be a lasting phenomenon. Furthermore, it is this awareness that generates innovative spatial forms of gathering in public space. Yet protests or collective actions do not need special urban designs or designated spaces. In situations of extreme grievance, protesters will find a way to bypass most physical barriers. But in an ideal society, residing in an ideal city, authorities should create both formal and informal spaces for gatherings and allow freedom of speech through active regulation, thus making the public space the marketplace of ideas.⁴

⁴ Clearly, the supposition behind this process is that all individuals have equal access to what the liberal US Supreme Court Justice William Brennan has called "the marketplace of ideas." See *Lamont v. Postmaster General* 1965. 381 US 301 (Mitchell, 2003, p. 47).

Further reading

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<http://www.urbandesign-civilprotest.com/>

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