Richard Sennett
1998 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture
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The Spaces of Democracy

The University of Michigan College of Architecture + Urban Planning
Foreword

“There are those who in the midst of madness stood up and fought tyranny and whose capacity of humanity and heroism shone brightly against the darkness of genocide. And one man, Raoul Wallenberg, stands above the rest.”

The Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies

At Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, there is an avenue of evergreen trees called The Avenue of the Righteous. Each of the 600 trees planted there represents a gentile who saved a Jew during the Holocaust. One is for Raoul Wallenberg. The plaque which accompanies the planting has the inscription: “Whoever saves a single soul, it is as if he had saved the whole world.” Raoul Wallenberg, Israel’s first honorary citizen and an honorary citizen of the United States, is credited with saving over 100,000 souls.

Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg was born in Sweden in 1912 to a distinguished family of bankers, bishops, diplomats and industrialists. Although he could have attended any university, Wallenberg elected in 1931 to study architecture at the University of Michigan. No one knew – at least initially – that he came from such a distinguished family. His nickname was Rudy. He loved hitch hiking through the United States, Mexico and Canada. He often hitched a ride to Detroit to attend concerts, especially to hear the music of Mozart. He enjoyed cycling, canoeing, hiking and swimming. He graduated with honors and was awarded the American Institute of Architects’ Silver Medal.
After graduation and a period of employment in South Africa, Raoul accepted a position with a bank in Haifa, Palestine, where he became familiar with the plight of Europe’s Jews. By the beginning of 1944, most European Jews were already victims of Hitler’s Nazi regime. However, Hungary still had 750,000 Jewish residents. In the spring of 1944, Adolph Eichmann was ordered to Budapest to destroy these remaining Jews before the end of the war. Sweden, a neutral country, sent Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest as First Secretary of the Swedish Legation for the express purpose of saving as many Jews as possible before the end of the war.

At this juncture, the story becomes one of extraordinary heroism. Wallenberg printed and issued thousands of ‘Schutz-passes,’ fake passports that proclaimed their holders to be Swedish citizens. He set up safe houses and created hospitals, soup kitchens and shelters – all flying the Swedish flag. He bribed German officials, using money from the United States War Refugee Board. He threatened German officers with war crimes trials after the war. His individual acts of courage are too numerous to detail.

In December of 1944, the Russians had surrounded Budapest; the end of World War II was in sight. On 17 January 1945, Wallenberg and his driver went to a meeting with the Russian Commander and were never seen again. His fate is unknown. Raoul Wallenberg is now recognized as one of this century’s most important heroes, testimony to the power of the individual to make a difference.

*James C. Snyder*

*College of Architecture + Urban Planning*
Theories of architecture have historically sought legitimacy in philosophy and the sciences. Accordingly, during the last several decades architects have expanded their view to include the insights of such disciplines as literary criticism, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and the social sciences. As with the university-wide interrogation of barriers between conventionally constituted fields of knowledge, the architect's intellectual eclecticism has allowed for broad reappraisals of the work of the design disciplines. However, at times, such borrowings have had the consequence of transforming language which has been developed with precision in its own discipline into a strange jargon when applied to architecture. There is always the danger that the concrete object of our own discipline will disappear in a welter of artificial abstraction.

Professor Sennett has a rare ability to demonstrate the rewards of such broad thinking while banishing its perils. Richard Sennett is a sociologist in whose studies the human subject is bound to the inhabitation of real physical places. It is his gift to make concrete the connections that exist between the apparently non-physical categories of human experience – as he has done with the concept of compassion and the practice of democracy – and the forms of our cities.

In his recent book, *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett examines how the experience of the ‘other’ of human difference has been shaped by the changing physical and visual form of cities since antiquity – a subject which has particular poignancy in the context of this lecture. In seeking to commemorate the heroic deeds of Raoul Wallenberg, who saved thousands of lives from the maw of the Holocaust, the question of how people shape their
experience of difference, and how the human reality of each to each may lead towards or away from compassion stands out as a critical question. The physical proximity of citizens in the agora of democratic Athens with which Professor Sennett begins his book suggests an environment in which fractious interests and positions retain their connection to living individuals and groups. The early absence in democratic Athens of spatial hierarchies that would divide people into active and passive or ruling and ruled groups offers a picture of exemplary mutuality—even if marred, as it was, by the narrow definition of the citizenry. Amongst Athenians, differences were not apprehended through social abstractions and did not lead to demonization.

Professor Sennett’s investigation of the past draws upon its acutely observed circumstances in search of ethically constituted standards for the space of the city. In his thought and work, Professor Sennett is able to discover threads that link physically intangible ethical practices to their physical setting and to picture, with supple imagination, their relevance to the construction of cities today.

Robert A. Levit
Assistant Professor of Architecture
About twenty years ago I went to Jerusalem as part of an urban design group. Although I knew better rationally, I was fired up by the belief that art might succeed where politics had failed, in making a more democratic city. The team, from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, explored how to transform a triangle of waste land outside the Damascus Gate into a public space which Palestinians and Israelis might share. Since I had previously done planning work in Jordan, the team assigned me the task of meeting with some Palestinian officials. Specifically, I was asked to enlist the help of Anwar Nusseibeh, the doyen of an old and elite Palestinian family.

I first went to visit Mr. Nusseibeh at his office. He was head of the East Jerusalem Electric Light Company, one of the few local businesses the Israelis allowed Palestinians to manage in the city. Mr. Nusseibeh was a courtly man who, I discovered, in another life would have devoted himself to poetry rather than electricity. By chance, we had slipped into speaking French at that first encounter and he began to describe to me writers and artists he had known in Paris in the 1930s. These figures were more alive in his memory than the immediate difficulties he faced.

I cannot say that a bond of trust developed between us, since I could do nothing about being American and a good Jew, nor about the driver and guards provided by the Mayor of Jerusalem. But as the afternoon light faded in his office while we spoke in a language foreign to the Israeli monitors, we began to understand one another.
Our talks, which continued over the next few days in a cafe and finally in Mr. Nusseibeh’s home, were mostly about pre-war Paris. France had been, for different reasons, a refuge for each of us, and there is perhaps something about Paris which arouses in its foreign residents feelings of regret for the past. In any event, this shared bond prompted Mr. Nusseibeh, the most courteous of men, finally to challenge me about the present.

“You want to build a place at Damascus Gate for ‘democracy,’” Mr. Nusseibeh said as I recall, “but you cannot show me – even supposing democracy is possible between victors and the people they have captured – what a democratic space looks like. Will better buildings incline the Israeli people to treat us as equals, better buildings curb the violent rage of our own young ones? Even if we forget our impossible present circumstances, what effect can the mere shape of a wall, the curve of a street, lights and plants, have in weakening the grip of power or shaping the desire for justice?”

Mr. Nusseibeh’s question had two mental parts: how visual design might serve the political project of democracy, and what is urban about democracy itself. These issues haunt urban designers today in places as diverse as Sarajevo after its civil war, Berlin after the fall of communism, and Los Angeles after its racial riots. In these places, as in Jerusalem, the politics of conflict is hard to relate to urban design. Yet the essence of democracy lies in displacing conflict and difference from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm. How to do so was Mr. Nusseibeh’s challenge.
Jerusalem is a very old city, and in ancient times those who lived in Jerusalem might have known how to respond to Mr. Nusseibeh's challenge by invoking examples from Athens, the center of civilization in the ancient world. We would never want to copy the social conditions of Athenian democracy. The majority of people living in the city were slaves, and all women were excluded from politics. But we can learn something from how this often fickle, intensely competitive people related democracy, such as they knew it, to architecture.

Athens, from roughly 600 to 350 BC, located its democratic practices in two places in the city, the town square and the theater. Two very different kinds of democracy were practiced in the square and the theater. The square stimulated citizens to step outside their own concerns and take note of the presence and needs of other people in the city. The architecture of the theater helped citizens to focus their attention and concentrate when engaged in decision-making.
It was in the Pnyx that the Athenians debated and decided on the actions the city would take. The Pnyx was a bowl shaped, open-air theater about ten minutes walk from the central square of Athens. Chiseled out of a hill, the Pnyx in form resembled other Greek theaters, and like them originally provided space for dancing and plays. In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Athenians put this ordinary theater to a different use, in seeking for order in their politics. Speakers stood in the open, circular space on a stone platform called a bema, so that they could be seen by everyone in the theater. Behind the speaker the land dropped away, so that words seemed to hover in the air between the mass of five to six thousand bodies gathered together and the empty sky. The sun from morning to late afternoon struck the speaker’s face so that nothing in his expression or gestures was obscured by shadow. The audience for this political theater sat around the bowl in assigned places, men sitting with others who belonged to the same local tribe. The citizens watched each other’s reactions as intently as the orator at the bema.

People sat or stood in this relation for a long time, as long as the sunlight lasted. The theatrical space thus functioned as a detection mechanism, its focus and duration meant to get beneath the surface of momentary impressions. And such a disciplinary space of eye, voice, and body had one great virtue: Through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient political theater sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.
In the Pnyx, two visual rules thus organized the often raucous meetings at which people took decisions: exposure – both of the speaker and of the audience to one another – and fixity of place, in where the speaker stood and the audience sat. These two visual rules supported a verbal order, a single voice speaking at any one time.

The other space of democracy was the Athenian agora. The town square consisted of a large open space crossed diagonally by the main street of Athens. At the sides of the agora were temples and buildings called stoas, sheds with an open side onto the agora. A number of activities occurred simultaneously in the agora – commerce, religious rituals, casual hanging out. In the open space there was also a rectangular law court surrounded by a low wall, so that citizens going about their business or making an offering to the gods could also follow the progress of justice.
The stoa helped resolve this confusion. As one moved from the open space into the stoa, one moved from a public realm in which citizens freely intermingled into more private spaces. The rooms at the back of the stoas were used for dinner parties and private meetings. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the stoa was the transition space just under the shelter of the roof on the open side; here one could retreat yet keep in touch with the square.

What import did such a complex, teeming space have for the practice of democracy? A democracy supposes people can consider views other than their own. This was Aristotle's notion in the *Politics*. He thought the awareness of difference occurs only in cities, since the very city is formed by *synoikismos*, a drawing together of different families and tribes, of competing economic interests, of natives with foreigners.

'Difference' today seems to be about identity – we think of race, gender, or class. Aristotle meant something more by difference; he included also the experience of doing different things, of acting in divergent ways which do not neatly fit together. The mixture in a city of action as well as identity is the foundation of its distinctive politics. Aristotle's hope was that when a person becomes accustomed to a diverse, complex milieu, he or she will cease reacting violently when challenged by something strange or contrary. Instead, this environment should create an outlook favorable to discussion of differing views or conflicting interests. The agora was the place in the city where this outlook should be formed.
Almost all modern urban planners subscribe to this Aristotelian principle. But if in the same space different persons or activities are merely concentrated, but each remains isolated and segregated, diversity loses its force. Differences have to interact.

The Athenian agora made differences among male citizens interact in two ways. First, in the open space of the agora there were few visual barriers between events occurring at the same time, so that men did not experience physical compartmentalization. As a result, in coming to the town square to deal with a banker, a citizen might be suddenly caught up in a trial in the law court, shouting out his own opinion or simply taking in an unexpected problem. Secondly, the agora established a space for stepping back from engagement. This occurred at the edge, just under the roof of the stoa on its open side; here was a fluid, liminal zone of transition between private and public.

These two principles of visual design — lack of visual barriers but a well-defined zone of transition between public and private — shaped people’s experience of language. The flow of speech was less continuous and singular than in the Pnyx. In the agora, communication through words became more fragmentary, as people moved from one scene to another. The operations of the eye were correspondingly more active and varied in the agora than in the Pnyx. A person standing under the stoa roof looked out, his eye searching, scanning. In the Pnyx the eye was fixed on a single scene, that of the orator standing at the bema. At most, the observer scanned the reactions of people sitting elsewhere, fixed in their seats.
This ancient example illustrates how the making of theaters and town squares can be put to democratic use. The theater organizes the sustained attention required for decision-making; the square is a school for the often fragmentary, confusing experience of diversity. The square prepares people for debate; the theater visually disciplines their debating.

This is, of course, in principle. Throughout their long history, these two urban forms have been put to many divergent or contrary uses. We need only think of the Nazi spectacles in Germany to summon an image of theatrically-focused attention dedicated to totalitarian ends. The disorders of 19th century Parisian squares frequently drove people further inside themselves rather than made citizens more attentive to each other.
Yet the mind creates only by considering models, ideals, possibilities. For me, at the time I went to Jerusalem, the model of the agora was the touchstone of my love for cities and of my faith in urban design – as it was for other urbanists like Jane Jacobs and Henri LeFebvre, and more largely for radicals of the 1960s. I understood one thing when I began to write: Every individual needs the experience of being challenged by others in order to grow both psychologically and ethically. Psychologically, human beings develop only in a rhythm of disorientation and recovery. A static sense of self and world becomes a kind of psychological death. Ethically, painful and uncomfortable encounters with those who differ are the only ways in which individuals learn modesty. For these reasons, I believed, human beings need cities, and within cities agoras of some sort, to become fully human.

I could have summoned these arguments when Mr. Nusseibeh challenged me about plans for the Damascus Gate. I had reasoned them through in my first book, *The Uses of Disorder*, and spent a decade thereafter trying to realize them in practice. But I remained silent. In looking back, I understand there were two reasons why I said nothing. First of all, I would have answered him in bad faith, as an American urbanist speaking about democracy. Secondly, in Jerusalem I began to lose my faith in the agora.

A future historian might well conclude that Americans in the last half of the twentieth century focused their energies on preventing democracy in the built environment. Gated communities, now the most popular forms of American
residential building, take to an extreme the denial of democracy of the agora. Here are homogenized communities which are guarded and sealed off like medieval castles. In my youth, less extreme forms of American development already tended to the same end. The shopping malls of the 1920s to 1950s were indeed diverse places; the malls which came into existence in the 1960s were instead monofunctional. In a mall today one rarely sees an AIDS service agency, a police station, or a school next door to a GAP. Moreover, the renewal of old cities like my own – New York – had depended on the globalization of the world economy. Yet, globalization creates cities which are sharply divided. A globalized core now isolates Manhattan, for instance, from the localized economies and cultures of the outer boroughs.
Professional urban design is part of this story of bad faith with democracy. The pristine, gleaming white small towns produced by the movement called the New Urbanism are a world apart from the everyday disorders of life. The kitsch, pseudo small towns now being built as an antidote to suburban sprawl provide no home for difference — difference of the kind which leads to conflicts of ethnicity, race, class, or sexual preference. Or, in a purely stylistic vein, the battle between modernism and post-modernism is a clothing conflict about the surfaces of buildings. These outer architectural garments tell us little about how to make buildings and spaces more democratic.

It could be said that the American city has only reflected larger currents of American culture. American culture has indeed put a premium on difference, in the identity-talk which emphasizes distinctions, particularly between that familiar friend whom we love to hate — the white, middle-class heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon male — and all those whom he has, at least in theory, oppressed.

But identity-talk of the American sort leads to isolation rather than interaction. Our culture prefers clear pictures of self and social context. For the sake of this clarity, for the sake of identity, we sacrifice democracy — democracy in Aristotle’s sense of the dialogues, debates, and shared deliberations which might take us out of ourselves and the
sphere of our immediate self-knowledge and interests. Writers from other cultures urge us to break out of identity ghettos. Stuart Hall does so in his writings on the hybrid identities of people who move geographically or socially. Homi Bhabha contests the ghetto of the self by exploring the positive aspects of uncertainty when a person is in the presence of an alien other. But these writers have not found a general public in their adopted country.

In 1980, when I went to Jerusalem, American ways of denying the agora were partly why I fell silent when challenged by Mr. Nusseibeh, an admission that I had come to him empty-handed. This he accepted in good grace by dropping the distasteful subject and returning tactfully to the origins of Surrealism in Paris.

Yet going to Jerusalem was an important event for me as an urbanist. The city challenged my belief in the agora, at least as a school for democracy. Jerusalem’s old city within the walls is filled with the human differences which thousands of years of conquest, migration, faith, and trade have laid upon the land like a thick impasto on canvas. In its covered shopping streets, Jews and Muslim shopkeepers mix together in pursuit of trade and tourists. On the Via Dolorosa, processions of Christian pilgrims stream past the small shops of non-believers who acknowledge the pilgrims’ faith by leaving them alone in silence. When the right-wing Israeli government has sought to dig beneath the holy Islamic shrine of Al-Aqsa, many Jewish residents in the city have turned out in protest. All these are signs of the living presence of the agora.
Jerusalem, however, is hardly at peace. The spirit of the agora permeated Sarajevo before the civil war, or in a more moderate fashion exists in post-communist Berlin. All of these places have known daily and painful encounters with difference, yet the encounters alone have not bred civic bonds. If these cities have various modern versions of the agora, they lack any effective equivalent of a Pnyx. I do not mean to suggest I suddenly stopped believing in the value of living in difference, but that psychological virtue requires something else to be realized as politics.

The trouble was that, for my generation of the sixties, an ordered, focused space like the Pnyx was anti-democratic precisely because it was disciplinary. We believed freedom lay in breaking the bonds of discipline. Foucault’s surgical dissections of disciplinary power frightened us. Moreover, we had an ambivalent relation to linking politics and theater. There was indeed a lot of political street theater in my generation, particularly in protests mocking the Vietnam War. But then, as now, political theater also summoned up images of spin, the manipulation of public sentiment through clever role-playing, inflamed rhetoric, and artificial scenarios of doom or glory.

These political games may be perennial; they certainly took place in the Athenian Pnyx, despite its architectural rigor. Such vices as spin are unfortunately abetted by progress in its modern guises. The easy editing of televised imagery, particularly digital images, strengthens the politician’s capacity to conceal rather than stand
nakedly revealed. Unlike the ancient Pnyx, those watching television's glowing box cannot see each other directly. They rely on what the screen tells them for that sense of polity. It is sometimes said that the Internet might be a new space of democracy. But sociologists tell us that screen communities emphasize denotative statements and short messages, and that in these communities the intensity of connection can be easily diminished. To exit from painful confrontation, you need only press a key. Easy, quick decisions are encouraged by such visual conditions, but not the difficult ones requiring time and commitment.

The most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate on rather than 'surf' social reality. To pay attention and to commit means our culture needs in a broad way to revise its fear of discipline. Indeed, that change occurred in Michel Foucault's own final thoughts about the disciplined care of the self. The polity also requires that care. It is for this reason that I have come to believe that designers need to pay attention to the architecture of theaters as possible political spaces. Live theater aims at concentrating the attention of those within it. To achieve sustained attention, to commit people to one another even when the going gets rough or becomes boring, to unpack the meaning of arguments, all require a disciplinary space for the eye and the voice.
I would like to illustrate the possibility of creating a modern Pnyx by discussing some innovative theater architecture created in the last twenty-five years. It is work which addresses in different ways how to make an urban theater appropriate for the cities of our time. Even though entirely contemporary in form, these buildings are imbued with the ancient idea that the theater can be used as a space of political congregation.

Perhaps the most innovative is the Kara-Za Theater recently created in Tokyo by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando. This is meant as a multi-use space, and so Ando’s emphasis is on how to make speech from the audience as clear as speech from the central stage. Like the ancient Greek theater, Ando uses as much natural light as possible, based on his belief that people can dwell comfortably in a space for longer periods of time in natural light than in artificial illumination.

Though Ando’s theater is meant, of course, for plays, its other programmed uses include political meetings, and this political program relates to its most unusual feature. This is a portable theater which can be taken down and re-erected in different parts of the city. Portability has an important political dimension. Meetings throughout the city can be organized under common physical conditions. Portability serves a certain equality of discourse.
“I kept in mind the memory of Kanamaruza in Shikoku, one of the oldest remaining Japanese theaters that had greatly impressed me. Within the simple wooden shelter actors and audience were close together and this established a highly intense relationship. It was there that I learned the true nature of dramatic art... After the experience of Kanamaruza I wished to create a theater that would ring to the sound of human voices”

— Tadao Ando
When we think about the urban dimension of theaters used as meeting spaces, the integration of the theatrical space into the fabric of the city becomes an important consideration. In London’s East End, such a theater has been constructed recently which attempts this integration both in its siting and in the very articulation of its walls. This is the Half Moon Theater which was designed by Florian Beigel Architects with the Architecture Research Unit. Every window looks and functions like a door. For both plays and community meetings, people walking outside have only to look in to see what is happening – rather like the law courts in the ancient agora.
The architectural concept for the design of the theater is an archetypal scenic street. The design provides for a progression of spaces from Mile End Road, through the gateway into a courtyard open to the sky, through the curtain wall to the theater. As one opens the large doors at the end of the scenic street, one has a view of the historic cemetery beyond. The progression of spaces constitutes an assortment of performance areas, a little world of theaters. To see and be seen is the essence of this concept. It inspires performers and audiences alike. It activates both the relationship between members of the audience, and between the audience and performers.

— Florian Beigel
Ground level plan
1 foyer, box office and bar
2 courtyard
3 theater
4 garden
5 Young People's Theater
For Americans, these urban theaters may seem alien because so few of us live in the midst of dense cities. The suburban condition is one of dispersion. The densities of the shopping mall or of the big-box store, which aim at keeping customers moving rather than sitting and talking, are like crowd-islands. In one of his most remarkable projects, the architect Louis Kahn addressed this problem. He sought to make in an isolated place a theater in which something like a city is contained within the theater’s walls. The inner spaces surrounding the auditorium shell are articulated like the streets of an Italian hill town. The program for this theater in Fort Wayne, Indiana imagines these spaces open to the public at all times, even when there are no events in progress. By creating an agora surrounding a Pynx, the program envisions that the theater itself would then become a familiar and natural place in which to hold meetings – large inside the auditorium, smaller in the multiple spaces which traditionally are seen only as foyers.
"The plan is a society of rooms. The rooms relate to each other to strengthen their own unique nature. The auditorium wants to be a violin. Its lobby is the violin case. The society of rooms is the place where it is good to learn, good to live, good to work. The corridor has no position except as a private passage. The hall asks for equal position with the library. The society of rooms is knit together with the elements of connection which have their own characteristics."

— Louis I. Kahn
Returning from Jerusalem, our team tried to make an experiment of our own in political theater. It was an experiment dictated by the site. Outside the Damascus Gate, the triangular area of empty land on which we focused abuts the Arab central business district. Just to the east is the Christian Garden Tomb, meant to commemorate the Crucifixion. Next to the Garden Tomb is a Muslim cemetery, as well as the remnants of a bus station serving Palestinian East Jerusalem. The triangle itself was, at the time of our journey, filled with buses and parked trucks, overflowing each morning with goods passing through the Gate to the old walled city. Modern Jerusalem pressed in on this open triangle – pressed, and threatened to explode. This was one of the most hotly contested sites of the new Jerusalem.

Among the plans the Harvard teams generated for the Damascus Gate was a conference center fronting a new public plaza. The conference center was in form a semicircular theater, meant to be built low, so that it would not loom over the walls of the old city. Parking for trucks and a new bus terminal lay tucked beneath an open plaza. This was in many ways a project sensitive to its site. Hiding the vegetable and meat trucks below the plaza, for instance, helped cope with the intense heat of the sun. But the project lacked the political qualities of the theaters I have described. A monument to discussion, divorced from the urban fabric of buildings around it, this meeting place did not draw the outside inside. Its open side gave out onto an empty space, whereas it should have been turned toward the fabric of streets, or pushed much closer to the masses of people streaming in and out of the Damascus Gate to the old city.
I have come to understand, however, that these limitations, combined with the virtues of the other theaters, suggest one way of answering Anwar Nusseibeh's real question: What is urban democracy?

In the long course of Western development, democracy has been a relatively rare way of life, and a way of life which appeared mostly in cities. Democratic participation has held out the hope of gathering together all people in a city. Ancient Athenians cherished this hope, as did later the citizens of Italian medieval communes and of Reformation German towns. To realize this hope of coming together, urban democracies sought for a unifying political space to which all citizens could relate – the Pnyx, the parade routes of the communes, or the German Rathaus. Urban democracy meant centralized power in that sense of a single site, a single image, where all citizens could witness the workings of government.

In the modern era, the hope for democracy has become nearly universal throughout the world, but the nature of democracy people hope for has changed. National and even global visions of democracy are the old kind of urban democracy writ large, a unifying political force. But against those visions has been set another: decentralized democracy, which does not aim at such cohesion. Instead, as the ideal of decentralized democracy first appears in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and J.S. Mill, power is portrayed as becoming more democratic, in the sense of inviting participation, as it becomes more fragmented and partial in form.
Belief in local, decentralized democracy has radical political implications. Taken to the limit, such a belief rejects a single description of the good state, or it refuses to define citizenship in terms of rights and obligations applicable to each and every citizen in just the same way. Instead, it argues that differences and divergences will develop in practice. The national or global polity will resemble a collage difficult to resolve into a single image.

Decentralized democracy has a particular affinity to the modern city. Cities are very rarely coherent human settlements. That is what Aristotle tried to convey in the term *synoikísmos* – a coming together of differences, be they families or economic interests or political views. In the modern world economy, the fragmentation of urban settlements has radically increased. Decentralized democracy is an attempt to make a political virtue out of this very fragmentation, an attempt which appears in demands for local, communal control of schools, welfare services, or building codes.

Decentralized democracy also has a visual dimension. This democratic vision may prefer the jumbled, polyglot architecture of neighborhoods to the symbolic statements made by big, central buildings. It may reject the all-at-once, massive development of urban centers like Berlin’s Alexanderplatz, and seek instead for slower, less coherent growth throughout the city. The result of visual, decentralized democracy should be, ultimately, to shatter those images which attempt to represent the city as a whole.
Of course this is appealing; real life is local, concrete, particular. But the decentralization of power is in fact not so benign. Gated communities in the American suburbs exercise such local power. Such communities may decide, by quite democratic means, to exclude blacks, Jews, the elderly, or other undesirables. Even if the community is benign, the smaller a unit of power, the weaker it becomes. I think in this regard of the small communities in upstate New York fighting against IBM in recent years when the giant corporation has downsized local workers. The communities are simply too small to fight back effectively.

The word ‘decentralization’ suggests the effort to break up an existing, comprehensive power, or to limit its disciplinary authority. But, as de Tocqueville well understood, the process of attacking that central power, breaking it down to ever more local levels, can spin out of control so that ultimately there is no polity left at all. In the words of the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, there would remain only “individuals and families,” no image of the collective good with which individuals could identify.

This last danger is what theatrical architecture used for political purposes can attempt to combat. Theatrical forms can attempt to develop civic connections, not of the fleeting sort as in a public square, but of a more sustained and focused sort. But using theater for this purpose means innovating in its form.

As the designers of London’s Half Moon Theater understood, a community center for sustained interaction
has – in the context of the modern city – to be open to casual inspection and entry. A good local communal meeting place has to be integrative, especially when a city is fragmenting. As Ando has understood, a portable community meeting place might at least provide common ground in a fragmented city. We can never, I believe, make do with a city whose neighborhoods are identity ghettos of class or race. The more social isolation, the more possible are violent conflicts or sheer indifference to the fate of others. A portable political architecture therefore suggests a way of sharing political activity without unifying it. Ando wants people, as it were, to share a common mental ground in acting locally. And if there is lacking a public culture at all in a community, innovations in theater architecture can at least try to create something out of nothing. This was Louis Kahn’s vision of a theater set even in the isolated space of heartland America.
In arguing for the political virtues and design possibilities of theaters, I do not mean that we should forget about building public squares. Because cities gather together differences, strangers need a center, they need somewhere to meet and to interact. But the sheer arousals of the center are not enough to create an urban polity; the polity requires further a place for discipline, focus, and duration. Decentralized polities particularly need such places where people can concentrate.

Democratic decision-making, particularly at the local level, is not fulfilling, in that local acts cannot realize all we are capable of imagining about how we ought or want to live. Acting locally in the context of a city entails a loss of coherence, an acceptance of fragmentation. Democracy costs something psychologically. This is why, in exploring the characteristics of democratic space, I have wanted to invoke Mr. Nusseibeh’s own character. Here was a man who saw farther than the life of a manager of an ailing electric light company. His wealth and cosmopolitanism would have made it possible for him to have remained in Paris as an exile. Yet he submitted to the discipline of living locally, and so partially. Mr. Nusseibeh’s sense of the insufficiency of life as it actually manages to be lived seems to me relevant in this way to the experience of democracy. In a theater of democracy, his personally unsatisfying relation to others would be shared and sustained, notably by his Israeli captors. Perhaps this is what I should have replied when he demanded what an urban democracy looks like. He had only to look in a mirror; the answer to his question lay within him.

Richard Sennett
April 1998
The Raoul Wallenberg Lecture was initiated in 1971 by Sol King, a former classmate of Wallenberg’s. An endowment was established in 1976 for an annual lecture to be offered in Raoul’s honor on the theme of architecture as a humane social art. The following distinguished architects and historians have been invited to present the Wallenberg lectures to the College of Architecture + Urban Planning at the University of Michigan:

1972  Sir Nikolaus Pevsner
1973  Eric Larabee
1975  Reyner Banham
1976  Rudolf Arnheim
1978  Jacob B. Bakema
1979  James Marston Fitch
1981  Carl Levin
1983  Edmund Bacon
1984  Charles Correa
1985  Grady Clay
1987  Joseph Rykwert
1988  Spiro Kostof
1989  J. Max Bond, Jr.
1990  Elizabeth Hollander
1991  Joseph Esherick
1992  Denise Scott Brown
1993  James Ingo Freed
1994  Jorge Silvetti
1995  Daniel Libeskind
1996  Vincent Scully
1997  Michael Sorkin
1998  Richard Sennett
Raoul Wallenberg Scholarship

The Raoul Wallenberg Scholarship is awarded through a design competition which is held annually for undergraduates in their final year of study in the College of Architecture + Urban Planning at the University of Michigan. The following students have been awarded the scholarship:

1988  John DeGraaf
1989  Matthew Petrie
1990  Elizabeth Govan
1991  Paul Warner
1992  Dallas Felder
1993  Eric Romano
1994  Charles Yoo
1995  Matthew Johnson
1996  Jo Polowczuk
1997  Joseph Rom
1998  Michael Lee
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photo credits


13T Graffiti: “The Road is Long.” Courtesy of Ruia Halawani, photographer.


14 View of Jerusalem. Annie Griffiths Belt, photographer for National Geographic Society.

15 The Agora and its Environs, Athens, 2nd century AD. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.


18 The Agora, Athens, late 2nd century BC. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.


23 Entrance to gated community, Windermere, Florida. Courtesy of Andrew Bailey, photographer.

24 Praying at the Western Wall, Jerusalem. Courtesy of Professor Armand Lauffer, University of Michigan.


31 Kara-Za Theater. Courtesy of Mitsuo Matsuo, photographer.


33 Half Moon Theater. Courtesy of Peter Cook, photographer. © Phil Sayer/Blueprint.

34L Half Moon Theater. Mike Goldwater, photographer. Network/SABA.

36 Fort Wayne Theater, Fort Wayne, Indiana. © Craig Kühner, photographer.


39 Aerial view of Damascus Gate, Jerusalem. Marcello Bertinetti, photographer. White Star Archive.


45 Shuttered windows in Jerusalem. Courtesy of Professor Armand Lauffer, University of Michigan.

Publications

The Raoul Wallenberg Lectures
Richard Sennett, The Spaces of Democracy
Michael Sorkin, Traffic in Democracy
Vincent Scully, The Architecture of Community
Daniel Libeskind, Traces of the Unborn

The John Dinkeloo Memorial Lectures
Studio Granda, Dreams and Other Realities
Rafael Viñoly, The Making of Public Space
Richard Honden, Light Architecture
Patkau Architects, Investigations into the Particular

The Michigan Architecture Papers
MAP 4, Thompson and Rose Architects
MAP 3, TEN Arquitectos
MAP 2, Allies and Morrison
MAP 1, RoTo Book