THE PUBLIC PRIVATE PRODUCE

Reflecting on the contradictory nature of Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) in Midtown Manhattan

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Aspect 0: Introduction

The generic aim of this paper is a personal reflection of often intuitively applied research approaches and consequential outcomes during the final phase of the graduation thesis. By doing so, one is able to interrogate the relation between research approaches and the architectural design outcomes, which contributes to research-methodological awareness and ultimately allows to understand the scientific relevance and value of the project.

To begin with, a brief description of the project's intention and content is given, after which a substantiated explanation is broken down in five aspects that aim to account for the preliminary results of the research and design of the graduation project.

The Public Private Produce is situated within Midtown Manhattan, New York (NY). The main goal of the project is to create a mixed-use development that combines a contradictory program of a private datacenter office for the National Security Agency (NSA) with public housing and sports center. By doing so, the project explores the potential to let the constrains of the highly private functions generate positive public space.

Privatized public spaces are often considered a driving force of the declination of a city's public realm. Through this speculative project, the scientific ambition is to contribute to this debate on neoliberal urbanism, by extrapolating from the existing types of public space and allow urban changes to inform the design a new type of public space - a type that is in line with the contemporary tendencies. To understand how architecture can integrate the inevitable public-private contradiction of space in the densification process of a metropolis, the following main research question is posed: How could public space – on the scale of the block – evolve considering contemporary tendencies in Midtown Manhattan?

Aspect 1: the relationship between research and design

The complex nature of the architectural profession implies that there is not one singular research approach that addresses all relevant aspects of a project. Hence, it is likely that one will alternate between numerous different approaches, in order to acquire comprehensive and relevant information concerning the subject of study[1].

The main subject of study for this project has been Privately Owned Public Spaces, or POPS, in Midtown (Figure 1). The aim has not been to demonize POPS, but to interrogate them in a critical manner and use them as a medium for further understanding the metropolis and underlying mechanisms that shaped the city the way it is now. POPS are such a mechanism that contributes to the transformation of New York's urban appearance, not only by means of increasing the height of buildings, but by providing additional space to interact with the tall structures, whether these are experienced as either good or bad. Factual data collected through rigorous research reveals that circa 200 POPS exist in Midtown Manhattan, providing about half of the total area of public spaces. About 75 percent of this area consists of privately owned plazas; the other 25 percent is assigned to arcades, interior spaces and underground and through-block passages. The best part of POPS has been constructed before the early 90's, after which this explosive trend started stabilizing. POPS can be seen product of law – the zoning dictates the language of the public space. This has resulted in complex nodes of different types of POPS, scattered around the city like small islands, all interconnected by a network of the biggest public commodity - the sidewalk[2].

This rigorous and typological research helped to familiarize with the types of public spaces and their situation in Midtown. Furthermore, it functioned as an input for the generation of a site and a program. Nevertheless, this rigorous, factual methodology did not provide fertile ground for the speculation on how public space could develop in the near future, which can be considered as the greatest challenge of this graduation project. After understanding the current conditions of the types of public space, the main challenge is to liberate or extrapolate from the existing types and allow urban changes and history to inform the development of a new type[3]. This has been the biggest part of the graduation thesis and also shows the relationship between research and design that has been at the center of the past period: the production of research by practicing architecture, referred to as 'thinking by doing'[4]. Understanding how the transformation of Manhattan - from a monotonous office district into a mixed city for working, living and leisure – will occur, can best be understood by exploring physical possibilities.

Conclusively, indeed not one singular research approach can address all relevant facets of the design; it has been a combination of research methods that for the best part are infused with knowledge obtained through experimentation with architectural design, through thinking by doing.

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[1] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 2.

[2] Ringoir, V. H. (Spring 2019). Midtown Graduation Studio Complex Projects. Delft University of Technology, p. 304.

[3] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 4.

[4] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 2.
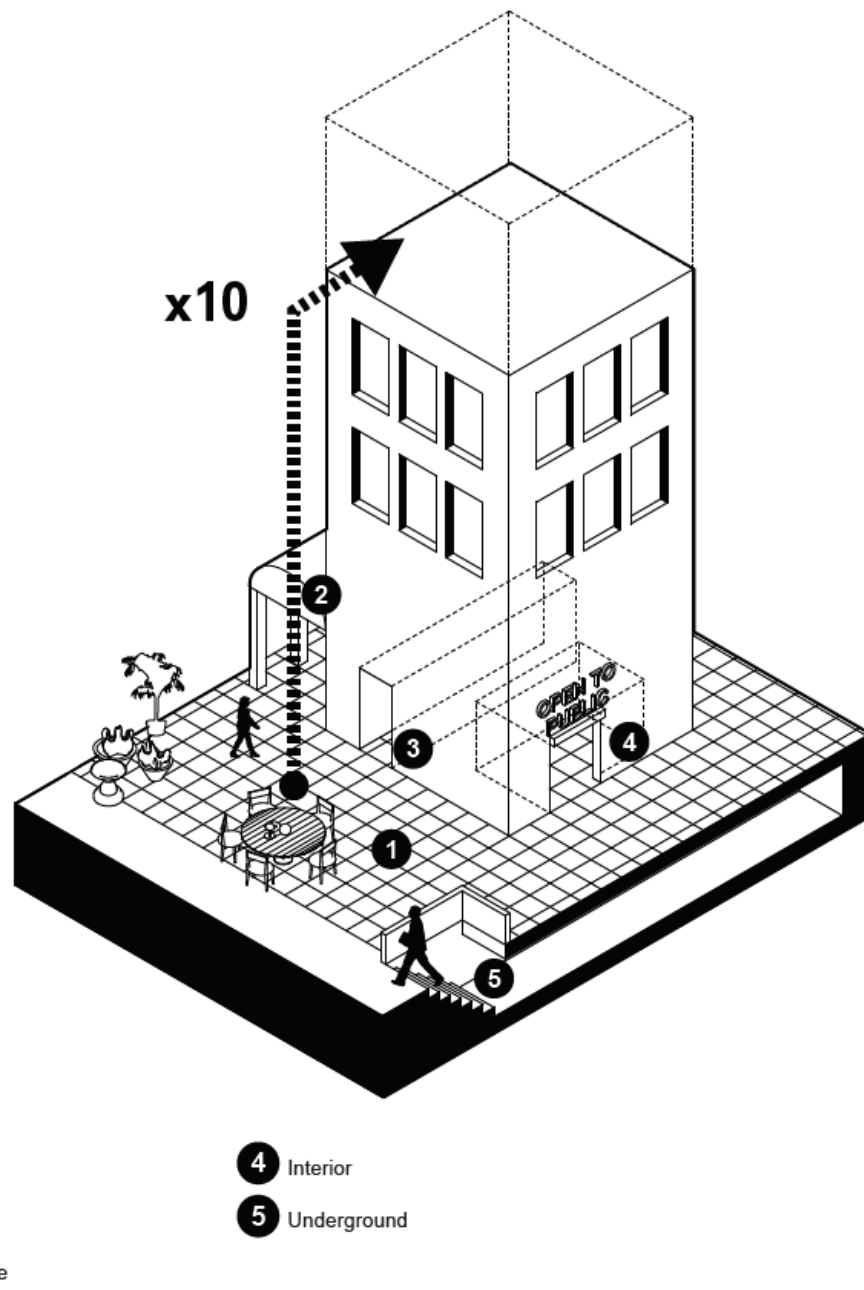
x10

1 Plaza   4 Interior
2 Arcade   5 Underground
3 Passage

Figure 1: The POPS-Mechanism as a medium for understanding the metropolis; different spatial types.

Aspect 2: the relationship between your graduation topic, the studio topic, your master track and program

The generic description of the studio's approach is a research-driven design approach that advances from the large scale of the city itself, to the medium scale of the site, to the scale of the building, serving as a basis for the design narrative. By doing so, the individual proposals are greatly informed by their context. Whereas the logic behind POPS originates from New York, the global occurrence of the Occupy Movement in 2011 revealed that the privatization mechanism is deployed in neoliberal cities all over the world, such as among others London, Tokyo, Melbourne and Hong Kong. These cities are all subject to the neoliberal doctrine aiming at privatization and deregulation, which is best reflected in the emerging processes of globalization and gentrification[5]. An improved understanding on my graduation topic, that of the contradictory nature of privately owned public spaces in Neoliberal cities, is one that is easily transferrable to other settlements around the world that are embedded in processes of globalization, which are often investigated by the Chair of Complex Projects. This studio approach that defies the scales when exploring a certain topic or area, allows for a coherent relationship between architecture and the city, between a single small artefact that is POPS and the larger processes and cultural tendencies underlying the physical manifestation of a city as a whole. Conclusively, it can be stated that the graduation topic matches the studio's generic topic interest of urban changes in metropolises, which is one that is easily disseminated to other places in the world and therefore has a coherent relationship to the global understanding of architecture.

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[5] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). The Public Private Space: on the anti-democratic nature of Privately Owned Public Spaces and Neoliberal Urbanism. Delft University of Technology (AR3AT060 Paper), p. 5.

Aspect 3: Elaboration on research method and approach in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry

To begin with, the Complex Projects chair does not demand for a specific research approach to be applied. Nor is there a requirement for a research design or specific research questions or problems. However, by providing examples of research done in previous years and by constant emphasis on factual information in the first 'hard data' phase during MSc. 3, the desire for an approach with typological analyses and quantitative data emerges evidently. In line with this desire, aiming for an intervention in a distant location, comes the singular etic focus, which implies one observes from outside the culture. During the MSc. 3, the explorative nature of the studio and the chair's general approach has resulted in a methodology-led research approach (comparable to previous Complex Projects studios) that has been projected on the given context of Manhattan[6].

In continuation of the previous, MSc. 4 commenced with a suggestion based on previous Complex Projects semesters, in which there has been a production of ten models for potential form, 10 models for potential programmatic organization and 10 models for potential material expressions . Rather than critically reflecting on what approach was needed for my own project, I started making these models in a way that was a misfit for my project, a project that has an extremely complex nature in terms of user experience and urban implementation, something that in retrospect was often mentioned by the studio's tutor. Nevertheless, I continued the abstract model-making approach. Added value in terms of scientific knowledge requires an adequate research design and question[7] - something which consistently lacked during the first phase of the MSc. 4. As mentioned before, the best part of research was obtained through experimentation with architectural design, through thinking by doing. Instead of clearly defining a research approach in advance, multiple designs were proposed that eventually contributed to understanding what the project needed in terms of knowledge and design. The pseudoscientific mantra of Kees Kaan's chair is to focus on the architectural narrative, which can be seen as a logical sequence of arguments. It aims to use (unvalidated) factual information as the basis for supporting one's design decisions[8]. It is by making a lot of options that did not work (Figure 2), I was able to understand and argue which direction was needed, which particularly became clear to me when applying more phenomenological approach onto the project; sketching experiential moments and trying to understand the users of the city and building will move and experience the design. In my perspective, the possibility for more phenomenological approaches, uninvolved with tangible facts, are often quietly eliminated by the chair's invisible hand that strongly reflects a practice-based perspective on research and design.

Conclusively, it can be argued that blindly following what is assumed to be desired by the studio (i.e. high quantity of iterations in models) was a failed approach for my project, resulting in a blinkered formal lens of approaching the project, which instead required a thorough understanding of the different natures of the mixed users of the building.

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[6] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 3.

[7] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 2.

[8] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). Master of Pseudoscience: a reflection on the invisible hand of the Complex Projects chair. Delft: Delft University of Technology (AR3A160 Research Paper), p. 2.
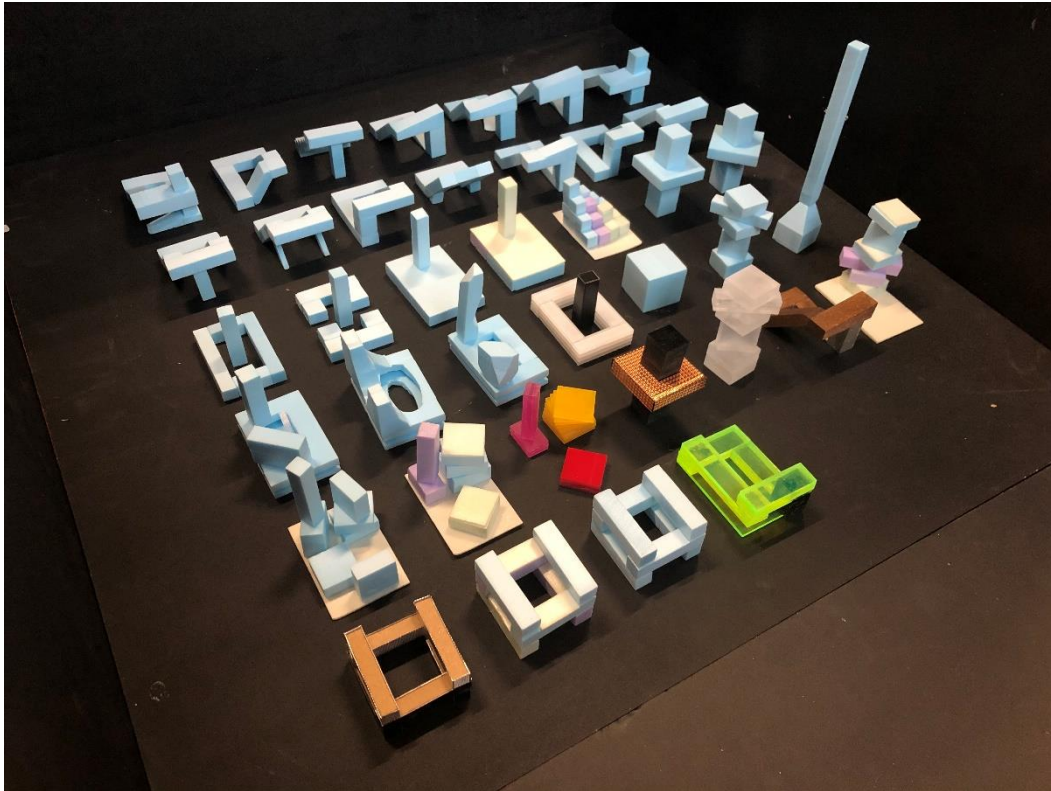
Figure 2: Thinking-by-doing; several of the proposed designs that oversimplified the complex nature of the project
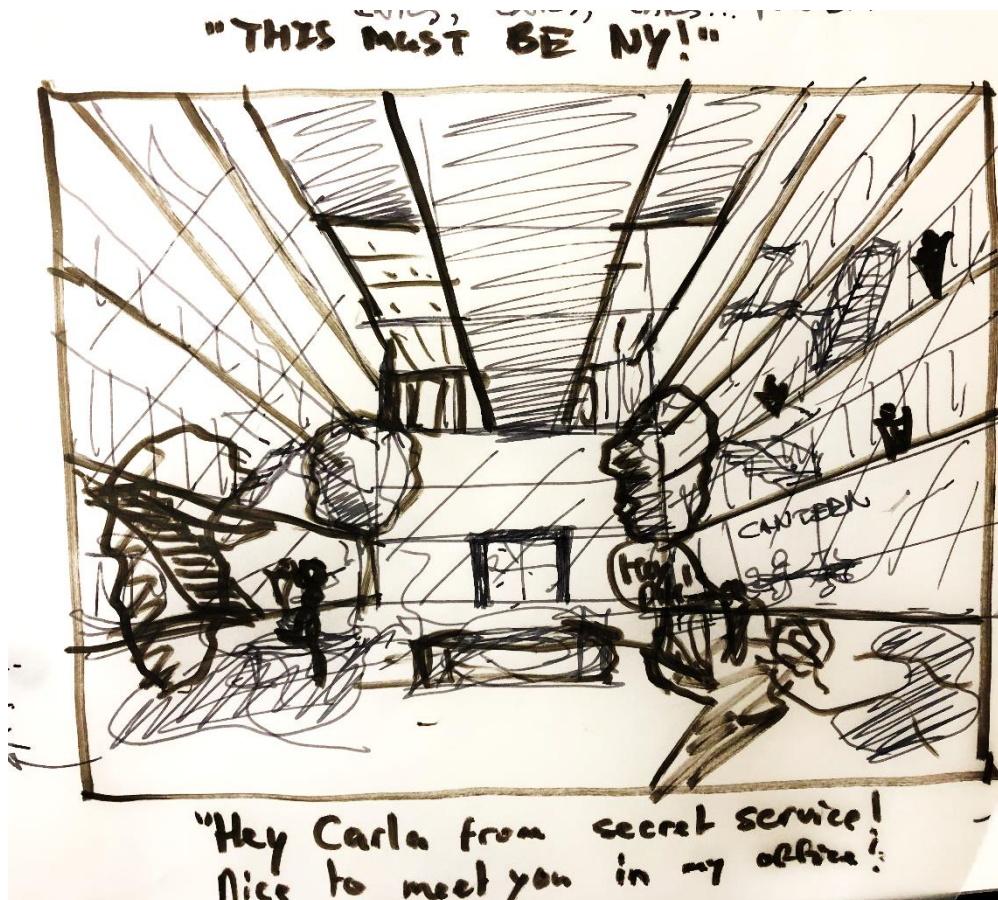

Figure 3: Phenomenological understanding of the project; a user experiential perspective (rather than formal)

Aspect 4/5: Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

The emergence of the neoliberal doctrine in the past decades is physically manifested in cities through processes of globalization and gentrification, resulting in homogeneous city centers in which the right to private property appropriates the urban commonalities, disallowing interaction between the different social classes of the broader society and being unfit to accommodate a mixed-use living condition[9]. POPS, of which the fascination initiated the graduation project, are a paradigmatic example of the anti-democratic nature of neoliberal cities. Basically, the graduation project is a case study on the spatial-architectural potential of a new type of POPS (a sports promenade) to be integrated in densified urban conditions, with large private structures. The hypothesis that these private structures can actually become an asset for the public space in a city has been architecturally confirmed and it is definitely not limited to the applied type of program and the given site conditions; it is a speculative example on how to potentially deal with healthy densification of metropolitan cities, in which the provision of public space plays an essential role. In a spatial-architectural sense, it can be concluded that there are barely limitations to the private production of innovative public spaces that foster healthy densification of a city. However, the debate rather moves to the legislative and financial realm; it is mainly political decisions that will transform the city, through zoning regulations, incentivizing bonusses and liability precedents. On the other hand, the fact is that the city and its architecture itself can inform the political decisions. Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building (1958) served as the invention of the POPS-scheme incorporated in the 1961 Resolution. The Seagram Building can be seen as the architectural archetype of how tall buildings can engage with the space they are anchored in. The enactment of POPS was meant to pursue the potential as seen in the Seagram Building, however, this ambition is not always achieved. Up until this day, the 1961 Zoning Resolution and the accompanying POPS mechanism are still in effect, although they are subject to continuous legal amendments, as seen in Figure 4[10]. With the emerging increase of housing in Manhattan, another legal amendment might be necessary to accommodate liveable change of the public realm. This amendment can be informed by another prototype like Mies', maybe not exactly as proposed in The Public Private Produce, but definitely one that similarly pushes the contemporary boundaries of typical POPS.

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[9] Ringoir, V. H. (2019). The Public Private Space: on the anti-democratic nature of Privately Owned Public Spaces and Neoliberal Urbanism. Delft University of Technology (AR3AT060 Paper), p. 8.

[10] Ringoir, V. H. (Spring 2019). Midtown Graduation Studio Complex Projects. Delft University of Technology, p. 302.

QUANTITATIVE FOCUS   QUALITATIVE FOCUS

1961 1968 1969 1970 1971 1973 1975 1977 1982 1996 1998 unified bulk program 2004 2007 2009

PRIVATELY OWNED PUBLIC SPACES

legal distinctions

PLAZA as-of-right plaza, without functional amenities, no special cpc review OMITTED

ELEVATED PLAZA cpc design review OMITTED

SUNKEN PLAZA cpc design review

OPEN-AIR CONCOURSE cpc certification OMITTED

URBAN PLAZA cpc certification **PUBLIC PLAZA**

RESIDENTIAL PLAZA as-of-right and cpc certification

— primary space
— residual space ———— usable residual space
— northern plaza ———— visual residual space

ARCADE as-of-right and cpc certification

THROUGH-BLOCK ARCADE cpc design review

COVERED PEDESTRIAN SPACE cpc design review

SIDEWALK WIDENING cpc certification OMITTED

THROUGH-BLOCK GALLERIA cpc design review

THROUGH-BLOCK CONNECTION cpc design review

geographically tailored to special purpose districts

ARCADES, ENTRANCE RECESS SPACE, CORNER ARCADE, CORNER CIRCULATION SPACE, SIDEWALK WIDENING, URBAN PLAZA
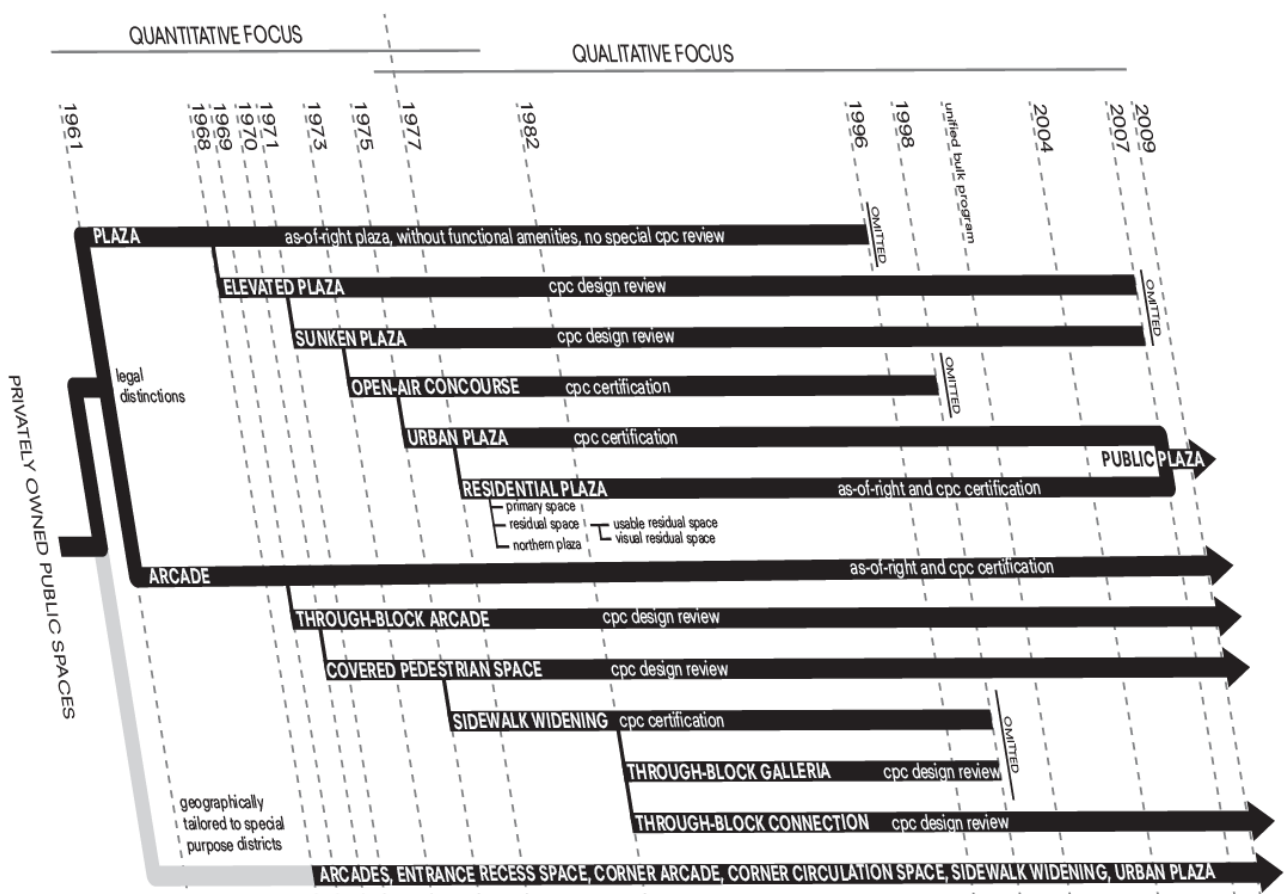
Figure 4: Genealogical overview of different legal definitions of POPS influenced by political decision-making – what will be the much-needed next step?