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Public space privatisation: are users concerned?

Els Leclercq ^a and Dorina Pojani ^b

^aFaculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands;

^bSchool of Earth and Environmental Sciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

Academics have decried the erosion of public space under the neoliberal practices that have taken root since the 1980s in cities around the world. However, it is unclear whether users are concerned about the ownership of the urban spaces they use. To find out, this study surveyed users and observed their behaviour in three types of public spaces in Liverpool, UK: one entirely private development, one public-private partnership, and one urban renewal project taken over by a grassroots organization. The findings indicate that users appreciate privatised areas for the pleasant, clean, and safe environment they offer, as well as for the socialising opportunities. At the same time, privatised spaces send subtle signals to users that certain activities, people, or behaviours are not tolerated or encouraged. To reinforce the democratic essence of public space, values of appropriation should be safeguarded in all types of urban spaces, including privately produced ones.

KEYWORDS

Urban redevelopment;
public space privatization;
user perceptions;
environmental psychology;
Liverpool, United Kingdom

Introduction

Academics have decried the erosion of public space under the neoliberal practices that have taken root since the 1980s in cities around the world. Many have charged that the inclusion of private actors in public space production and management has served to override values such as accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion (e.g. Davis 1992; Sorkin 1992; Mitchell 1995; Bodnar 2015).¹ This is because private or semi-private open spaces tend to be consumer-oriented: their primary, if unstated, purpose is to encourage users to spend money on goods or services for sale. To the extent that the use of a space compels or presumes purchases, it excludes those with lesser means. Moreover, explicit or implicit codes (of conduct, dress, speech, and the like) may apply in privatised space. Surveillance is ever-present too (Minton 2009; Leclercq, Pojani, and Van Bueren 2020a, 2020b) – constraining users, highlighting inequalities, and even undermining the public sphere and democracy itself (Low 2006; Minton 2009). Governments, which have allowed private interests to take over public spaces in order to save on planning and management funds, are accused of having sold out public interests.

By way of definition, the public sphere – what Habermas (1989) called *Öffentlichkeit* and we term “publicness” – is a physical or virtual area in which individuals can come together to freely identify and discuss societal problems, and potentially bring about

political action. As a socially constructed notion (Boomkens 2008), publicness is subject to adjustments over time, depending on socio-economic, political, technological, and cultural changes (Staeheli and Mitchell 2007). In the past, the main setting in which publicness was displayed was the physical public space of cities. Therefore traditionally, in the West at least, “public space” was interpreted as space open to all people and/or controlled by the state on people’s behalf (Madanipour 2010, 8). The differences between public and private space were based on notions of ownership, control, accessibility, and generally accepted norms of behaviour (Low and Smith 2006).

Now, the boundaries of the “public” and the “private” are becoming increasingly blurred, not least because of the advent of virtual public space (Kohn 2004). Twitter and other social media platforms, curated via algorithms, are complementing or replacing the town square. In actual space, new hybrid forms are emerging, which are referred to as semi-public spaces or Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS). These are usually open to the public but privately owned and managed (shopping arcades are an example.) These new forms of space cannot be fully described by applying conventional land-use labels – e.g. factory vs home vs park, etc. (Iveson 2007).

A highly theoretical debate about these issues is ongoing, with some academic commentators going as far as proclaiming the end of public space as known in the Western hemisphere since Classical Antiquity (Bodnar 2015; Mitchell 2017). Other commentators are more positive and argue for an expanded and more nuanced taxonomy of contemporary urban spaces, which considers “use” and “users” in addition to the notions of ownership, control, and accessibility (Kohn 2004; De Magalhães 2010; Németh and Schmidt 2011; Langstraat and Van Melik 2013; Varna 2016; Lopes, Santos Cruz, and Pinho 2019). However, only few studies have actually engaged directly with the users of public space in order to understand their perspective and experience (see Pugalís 2009).

While public space privatization is supposed to have hurt urban populations, privatized commercial centres, theme parks, and “third spaces” are often full of life and activity (Pojani 2008). Presumably, by “voting with their feet”, people are communicating that they enjoy these spaces – either for their aesthetics and neatness, or for the interactional opportunities and stimulating programming. Privatized spaces might, therefore, also be significant to people’s lives (Watson 2006). On the face of it, rather than opposing the top-down corporate control in privatised spaces that takes place through ubiquitous surveillance and the choreographing of urban experiences (Davis 1992; Van Melik 2007), users appear to be indifferent, or perhaps even revel in the sense of security that these spaces provide.

One wonders whether the democratic functions of public space (and the public sphere) have declined to the point where people have become entirely apathetic and unconcerned about the ownership of urban spaces they use (Sorkin 1992; Sennett 1977). Alternatively, users may have been appropriating and renegotiating these spaces in subtle ways, thus reasserting their right to the city. Examples of small-scale appropriation include busking, skateboarding, picnicking, flower planting, and even graffiti. In order to explore these issues it is essential to survey the space users themselves, and to observe their behaviour in a systematic rather than an impressionistic way. Urban design scholarship cannot be based only on theory and expert opinion (see Marshall 2012; Hooi and Pojani 2019).

By applying an empirical rather than theoretical approach, this study contributes to ongoing academic debates on the role of contemporary public space. In particular, the study focuses on the perception and experience of space by its users. Are users concerned about public space privatisation? If more surveillance and control tools are used by both private actors and public authorities in charge of public space management, does this affect users' perception of space and the way they use space and interact with other users? These questions are important because the current Covid-19 pandemic and its associated disruptions have revealed that public space remains vital for both human well-being and for democratic engagement in cities. On the other hand, people use the public spaces of a city because they, presumably, enjoy being in these spaces – either owing to the space aesthetics and programming or to the (potential) interactions with others – and enjoyment can be present whether space is produced and managed in a public, semi-public, or private mode (Lofland 1999).

Methodology

The analytical framework, case study settings, and data and analysis procedure are discussed below.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework that guided this research considers users' passive and active engagement with public space, regardless of the space's mode of production and management (Figure 1). The three key themes of the framework: "space quality and maintenance" (Carmona, de Magalhaes, and Hammond 2008), "safety and surveillance" (Zuboff 2019), and "appropriation and publicness" (Sennett 2018) are unpacked below. These are the emerging concerns in contemporary society, whereas other themes

<i>PUBLICNESS OF SPACE</i>	<i>RELATED ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS</i>	
SPACE QUALITY & MAINTENANCE	Perception of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attractiveness - pleasant - publicness - maintenance - safety & surveillance 	<i>PASSIVE</i>
SAFETY & SURVEILLANCE		
APPROPRIATION & PUBLICNESS	Presence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - users - activities - (multiple) public (s) Signs of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - renegotiation - reproduction 	<i>ACTIVE</i>

Figure 1. Analytical framework. Diagram by authors.

relevant to public space, such as “diversity” and “land-use mix” have been discussed at length for the last five decades (starting with Jacobs 1961).

Space quality and maintenance

Within the context of neoliberalism, safe, clean, and well-designed urban environments are key in attracting private investment (Madanipour 2003; Carmona, de Magalhaes, and Hammond 2008). Given continuous cuts to public funding, management and maintenance tasks are often outsourced to private actors, thus trading public control for service quality (Carmona, de Magalhaes, and Hammond 2008). Private owners or private management companies naturally prioritise business interests above public values. Therefore, privatised public spaces often feel “sanitised”, homogenised, and devoid of opportunities for social reproduction (Minton 2009; Crawford 2008).

Safety and surveillance

Since Sorkin (1992) proclaimed the militarisation of public space through the introduction of safety and surveillance measures, these measures have only amplified. Both private and public actors involved in public space management now use CCTV cameras, hostile design (e.g. spiky ledges), and security guards to police public space, as well as “soft” mechanisms in the form of behavioural regulations and prohibitions of busking, skateboarding, political gathering, picture taking, etc. (Minton 2009). These measures are purported to safeguard public interests but in reality they promote particular forms of friction-free, docile, and predictable sociability by excluding people who are conceptualised as “troublesome” or “threatening” (Iveson 2007).

Appropriation and publicness

Users can experience public space passively by enjoying (or disliking) its design quality, maintenance, and safety features. But they can also actively engage with the physical context and other users, in a spontaneous and temporal manner – within the bounds of decorum and local cultural norms (Lofland 1999; Leclercq and Pojani 2020b). In other words, users can adapt, re-produce, and even appropriate public space to suit their needs, provided that they are allowed to do so (Lefebvre 1991; Crawford 2008). The more “public” the space, the higher the levels of its appropriation by users (Leclercq, Pojani, and Van Bueren 2020a).

This analytical framework, and its three themes, are tested in three redevelopment cases in Liverpool, England.

Case study settings

Liverpool was a once-flourishing port city. In the post-war period, as maritime activities left for more profitable locations, the city entered a spiral of economic and spatial decline. To combat decay, in the 1990s the local council adopted a series of “urban renaissance” strategies, which were advocated by the national government at the time (Towards an Urban Renaissance 1999). These strategies were based on the notion that the private sector must become a partner in urban affairs in order to reduce public costs. While Liverpool was historically a left-leaning city, privatization and private involvement were the cornerstones of Thatcherite politics and Tony Blair’s Third Way approach, respectively.

Accordingly, private actors have been engaged at various degrees in Liverpool's development in the past three decades. This makes the city ideal for investigating the research question set forth above. Its context allows for research into a range of approaches to public space provision and management. The projects – Liverpool ONE, the Ropewalks, and Granby4Streets (Figure 2) were developed around the same time and therefore within the same political regime and policy context. However, they are quite different in their type and degree of privatisation: one is an entirely private development, one is a public-private partnership, and one is public project taken over by a community organization. The selected projects are considered as mixed-use areas. However, Liverpool One is predominantly a retail centre, the Ropewalks is a nightlife district, and Granby4Streets is predominantly a residential neighbourhood.

Liverpool ONE is a typical example of new-era shopping malls which seek to emulate public space (e.g. are open-air and incorporate sitting, eating, and green spaces). Comparable projects are encountered around the world, in places ranging from Los Angeles (The Grove) to Manila (Greenbelt Mall). The Ropewalks also represents a typical PPP arrangement, in which the public sector provides seed investment in an inner city district in the hope of stimulating private investment. Similarly, the early stage of Granby4Streets's redevelopment was a standard, top-down urban renewal process, which involved bulldozing parts of a lower-income neighbourhood. This heavy-handed approach was widespread across American and European cities at the height of comprehensive-rational planning. Later, after the 1981 Toxteth riots, a grassroots process focused on small-scale improvements replaced urban renewal in Granby4Streets. This has also been the common practice, or at least aspiration, in Western cities more recently.

Given this background, these three urban areas offer rich settings in which to explore users' perspectives. The cases contrast with one another but are fairly typical within their category. Different production and management regimes applied in each case provide an opportunity to assess and compare the urban design quality of spaces which were developed with differing levels of public and private control. Beyond Liverpool, the UK is particularly interesting for studying the consequences of public space privatization, because it embraced this approach earlier and more profoundly than other West European nations.

Data and analysis

This study employs the following two datasets:

Surveys of space users

The survey was administered face-to-face in the three case study areas (Liverpool One, Ropewalks, and Granby4Streets) on eight weekdays in May and June 2016, during day-time (10am-7pm). Weather conditions were sunny on two of these days and rainy on the other two. (Fewer responses were collected on the rainy days as surveys were conducted outdoors.) While the users of each area were obviously self-selected, survey respondents were picked randomly among the pedestrians in these areas. Every third person passing by or sitting on a bench was approached with a request to complete a paper-based survey. A team of three researchers conducted the data collection. The response rate was nearly 100% and 193 completed surveys were returned. Thirteen additional surveys were



Figure 2. Case studies in Liverpool.

completed online, through a website set up for this purpose (www.coloryourspace.com). To invite space users to complete the online survey, 900 flyers were distributed to passers-by and posted at cultural venues, bars, and cafés. A total of 206 surveys were thus obtained: 37 in Granby4Streets, 74 in Ropewalks, and 95 in Liverpool One. (Fewer responses were collected in Granby4Streets because the area contained a large number of vacant properties which did not fill up until after the survey – in late 2016). The survey contained 11 closed questions (including qualitative follow-ups) and 1 open question (on any suggested improvements to the space). The questions sought to gauge perceptions around the quality of the space, the levels of maintenance, the safety and security, and the level of “publicness”. Users were also asked to note the reason(s) and frequency of their visits. The survey took 5–10 minutes to complete. The full dataset was exported to Excel and analysed by using pivot tables and Structured Query Language (SQL), a standard language for relational database management and data manipulation. The responses to the open question and the follow ups were treated as qualitative data. The basic demographic profile of the respondents (Table 1) shows that they were younger and more educated than the city average – though the age distribution was more even in Liverpool One.

Systematic observations of spaces and users

On the same days as the surveys were conducted, items of interest including the number of users and their behaviour, and the visual appearances of the three spaces were recorded through field notes and photographs (see Leclercq and Pojani 2020b). Users engagement with one another has been observed in different constellations: in private, public, or semi-private spaces (Lofland 1999). Any changes, however minor, that users made to the spaces in order to accommodate their needs have also been noted and mapped, as well as any acts of spontaneous and temporary appropriation of the spaces. Formally organised events, such as street performances or pop-up book exchange points, were excluded because they do not involve bottom-up interventions in urban space.

Findings: user perceptions of public, semi-public, and private spaces

The findings are structured into the three main themes contained in the analytical framework: (1) space quality and management; (b) safety and surveillance; and (c) appropriation and publicness. These are discussed below.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents compared to city averages. City of Liverpool data are based on the Census (2017).

USERS	GENERIC DATA	LIVERPOOL ONE	ROPEWALKS	GRANBY4STREETS	CITY OF LIVERPOOL
Gender	Male	37%	50%	54%	50%
	Female	63%	50%	46%	50%
Age (in years)	18 – 25	32%	39%	19%	14%
	26–40	24%	31%	51%	40%
	41–60	24%	26%	22%	30%
	60–90	20%	4%	8%	16%
Level of education	High school or less	29%	34%	46%	42%
	Undergraduate	20%	22%	11%	25%
	(Post) graduate	51%	44%	43%	33%

Space quality and management

Liverpool One, the most “private” space among the case studies, is by far the most highly rated in terms of quality (Figure 3). This is followed by the Ropewalks, the space developed through a public-private partnership. Users feel somewhat less positive about Granby4Streets, a space which first succumbed to top-down urban renewal and later was taken over by community initiatives. In this case, a “more privatised” space was more attractive to users. The question is why.

A key reason may be the maintenance regime of urban spaces. The provision of “clean” public spaces is often an important reason to outsource maintenance tasks to private companies – or to fully privatise public spaces. Private companies are often regarded as more capable than the public sectors at delivering cleaning services in an efficient and cost-effective manner (De Magalhães 2010). In this study too, users rate the cleanness aspect much more highly in Liverpool One than in the other two spaces, in which the public sector is involved (Figure 4).

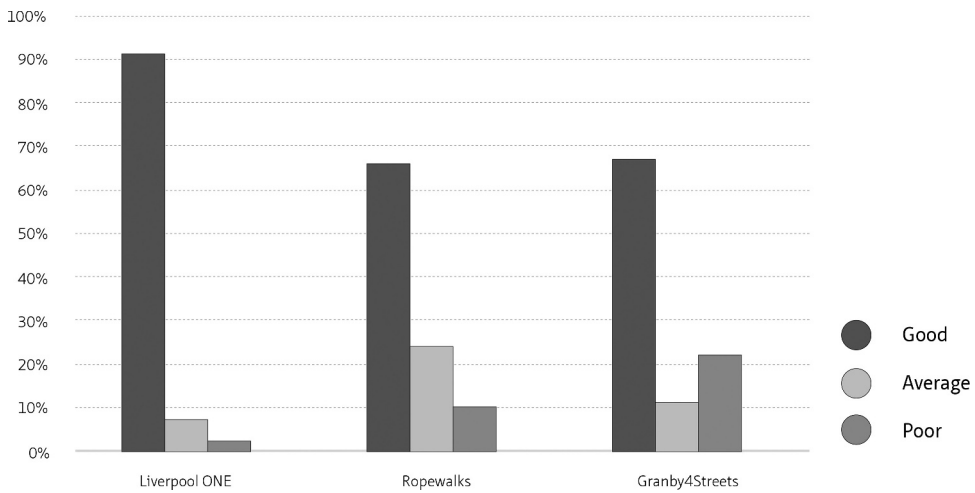


Figure 3. Users' ratings of the three spaces.

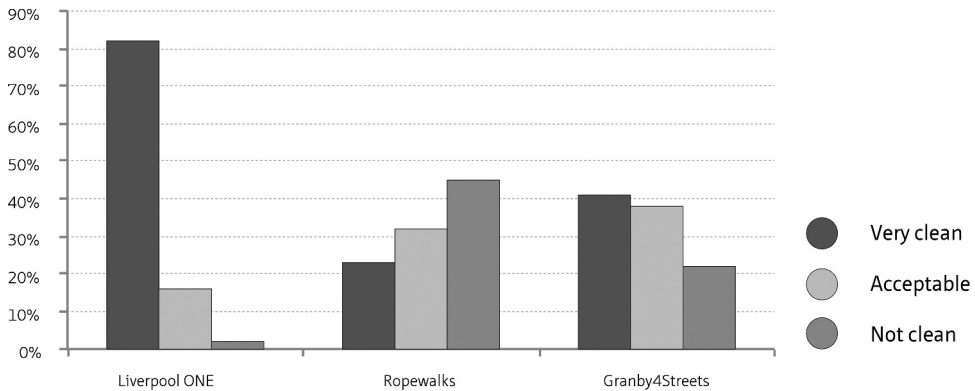


Figure 4. Maintenance perceptions.



Figure 5. The “blue coats” at work in Liverpool One. Photo by authors.

Liverpool One is kept meticulously clean by professional cleaning staff employed by the space’s private owner. The “blue coats” are visible throughout the day in the area, picking up litter and tidying up (Figure 5). By comparison, the Ropewalks is perceived as unclean by a whopping 45% of users, although at the time of the survey, the Liverpool City Council had outsourced maintenance and management tasks to a private company. This shows that outsourcing does not guarantee maintenance levels at an adequate level (as gauged by users). (More recently, the Council terminated the contract with the private company and created a public company to take over the Ropewalks maintenance.) Granby4Streets users, who are served by the Liverpool City Council, are more positive about maintenance than the Ropewalks users – although not as positive as Liverpool One users. This sentiment may owe to the fact that locals here take pride in their community-led initiatives to improve the area, and feel a collective responsibility for the public spaces.

When asked what potential improvements should be made to the area, Liverpool One users suggest the provision of additional seating and greenery. While a large park (Chavasse Park) is within the Liverpool One boundaries, the shopping streets are perceived as barren. Trees have been planted throughout the area but are still relatively small. At the moment, many visitors sit on stairs and on the wide edges of planters in Chavasse Park but this is not perceived as ideal seating, as it lacks a backseat. Although Whyte (1980) observed that the provision of a variety of choice in seating spaces (including stairs and edges of planters) is important in order to attract users, the users may prefer comfortable, purpose-designed seating. Granby4Streets users are more concerned about the lack of communal facilities (library, post office, playground, park) in their area than urban design furniture such as seating and greenery. This finding suggests that a bottom-up revitalisation process has fostered a stronger community spirit in this area, and users are willing to look beyond the surface when requesting improvements. Or it may simply reflect a greater inadequacy of these facilities in Granby4Streets – historically a more economically disadvantaged area than the other two. The concerns of the Ropewalks



Figure 6. Cobbled street in poor condition in the Ropewalks. Photo by authors.

users centre on management and maintenance standards rather than urban design amenities and features. They would like to see less litter and fewer potholes along the streets (Figure 6). They suggest the refurbishment of derelict buildings and activation of inactive frontages. Quite a few respondents lament the Ropewalk's transformation into Liverpool's nightlife quarter and wish that local residents' concerns (as opposed to clubbers' preferences) were taken into more serious consideration. Respondents are critical of the Council's failure to enact commercial rent control, in the face of increasing rents which are pricing out quaint shops and creative businesses.

These findings are made more salient by the fact that the users of each area are self-selected, as noted. One might expect that Liverpool One visitors tend to prefer clean and tidy spaces, sanitised even, whereas the Ropewalks and Granby4Streets users are attracted to "funkier" and more characteristic spaces. But despite their predilection, the latter users seek better maintenance and management too. This is a key lesson: users prefer clean and tidy spaces and might be willing to sacrifice "publicness" in order to achieve those.

Safety and surveillance

In Liverpool One, almost all users feel safe at all times (Figure 7). The area – lively in the daytime but largely deserted in the evening – is fully covered by CCTV cameras, and

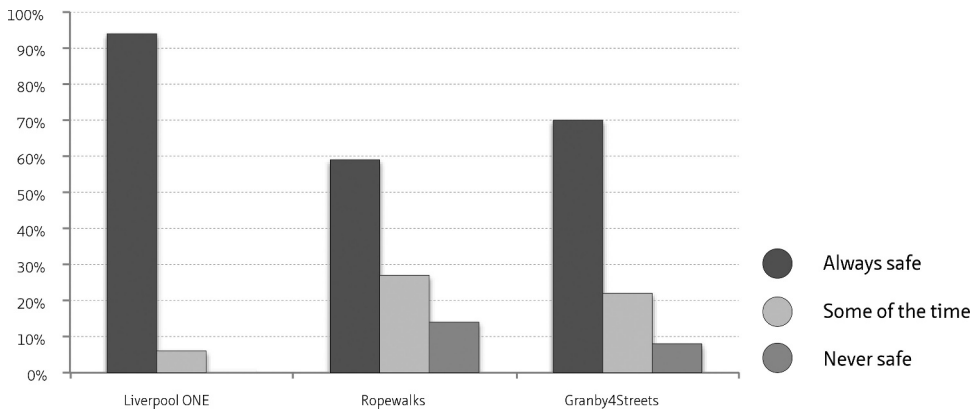


Figure 7. Safety perceptions.

private security guards (the “red coats”) patrol the space. Back alleys which are lined by blank façades are less popular with pedestrians – for the obvious fact that there is less to see or do along those, but also because they are potentially insecure.

The Ropewalks’ and Granby4Streets’ users do not feel as safe as Liverpool One users – although the perceived insecurity levels are not alarming by any means. Like Liverpool One, the Ropewalks features CCTV cameras but only in selected spots which are prone to incidents. The Ropewalks scores lower than the other two spaces – likely owing to its thriving pub and nightclub scene, which injects life into the streets but also disturbs locals due to drunken behaviour. In addition, the Ropewalks still contained (at the time of the survey) many vacant sites, parking lots, and derelict, unoccupied buildings with blank façades at ground level. These deter users (as revealed by observations) and may exacerbate any feelings of insecurity.

At the time of the survey, Granby4Streets also contained a large number of vacant dwellings, and a single CCTV camera was seen. The area was once notorious for drug dealing and drug-related violence, and had been subject to frequent police intervention. (During observations, a police patrol was recorded once.) Yet, safety perceptions are surprisingly high here, especially when compared to the Ropewalks. This can be attributed to users’ strong community feelings and sense of belonging.

The survey responses suggest that users do not necessarily take notice of control and surveillance measures in each area (Figure 8). Interestingly, the least aware appear to be Liverpool One users – although this is the most “privatised” and heavily surveilled space of the three. While CCTV cameras here tend to blend with the overall design and are therefore inconspicuous, the “red coats” are unmistakable. But users may have become accustomed to those, or simply do not care. Unlike public police, which may be perceived as hostile at times, private security guards are perhaps regarded as customer service employees, who are there to attend to patrons, rather than control the latter’s behaviour.

Granby4Streets users are more acutely aware of police presence, given the area’s history of clashes with the authorities. The Ropewalks users tend to notice the presence of CCTV cameras the most, likely because these are installed (probably intentionally) in highly visible locations (Figure 9). When asked whether seeing cameras and security officers (public or private) makes them feel safer, all users respond in the negative,

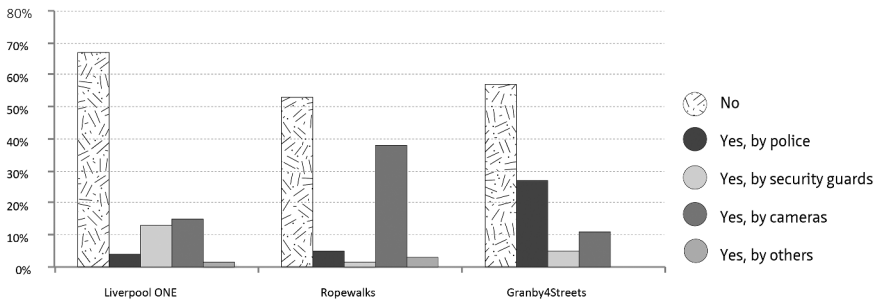


Figure 8. Control and surveillance perceptions.



Figure 9. Visible CCTV cameras in the Ropewalks. Photo by authors.

particularly in Liverpool One. Apparently, there is little relationship between safety perceptions and the presence of control and surveillance measures. Respondents say that it is the presence of other people – which, in turns, owes to uncluttered, active street fronts – that imparts safety feelings. These findings support Jacobs’s (1961) hypothesis that “blank walls” bring about alienation and fear whereas the presence of “eyes on the street” helps people feel secure – unless the eyes are those of inebriated and intoxicated pub and club patrons. Meanwhile, the presence of police, cameras, and private security

guards does not necessarily impart safety feelings (and may even be counterproductive) if other liveliness conditions are not met.

Appropriation and “publicness”

All three spaces are quite social. A flurry of activity and engagement is observed, at least during peak hours, and users vary from individuals to couples to families and other types of groupings, representing all spheres introduced by Lofland (1999). Liverpool ONE is attractive to users (individuals or small groups) by virtue of its retail offerings and many organised leisure programmes: table tennis, concerts, and tournaments (see Van Melik, van Aalst, and van Weesp 2007). At times, this space appears parochial in the sense that it only serves certain population segments, such as schoolchildren lunching in Chavasse Park or a group of mothers advocating their right to breastfeed in public (with the permission of Liverpool ONE owner). However, the area is certainly social: people can meet others and can engage in daily encounters here. The Ropewalks and Granby4Streets can also feel parochial during the evening due to their predominant land uses (nightclubbing in The Ropewalks and lower-income residential space in Granby4Streets). Also, Granby4Streets’ reputation as an urban destination has not entirely recovered since the 1981 Toxteth riots. However, a street market organised by local residents here is now drawing crowds from all over the city.

But users are quite aware that the Ropewalks and Granby4Streets are more “public” than Liverpool One (Figure 10). However, even in the latter space, half of the respondents believe that the space is in public ownership, and do not realise that it is an entirely private development – an open-air shopping mall, in other words. This is remarkable. A key reason why users have not come to understand the private nature of Liverpool One may be that there are no “private property” signs anywhere, or notices listing prohibited activities (unlike, for example, at the Bull Ring in Birmingham, with which some users are familiar). A lack of clarity may be seen as deceptive; at the same time, it may be considered as positive in that it makes users feel welcome rather than excluded.

During fieldwork, Liverpool One users found questions regarding space “publicness” to be perfectly legitimate. By contrast, in the Ropewalks and especially in Granby4Streets these questions were met with surprise; respondents found them peculiar. This suggests

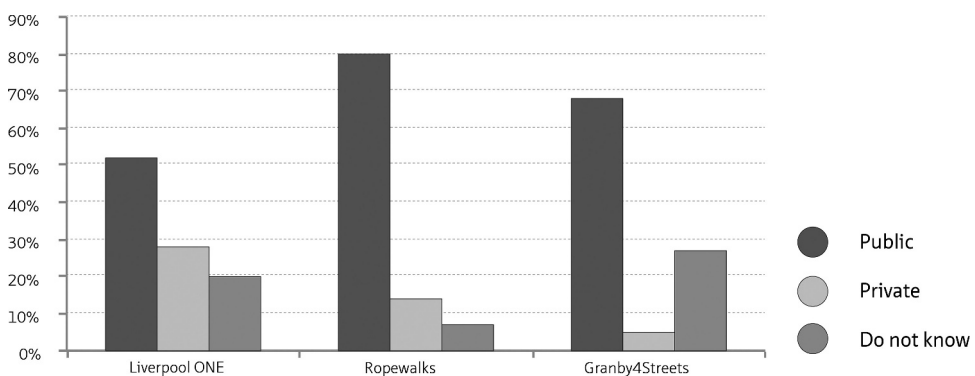


Figure 10. Users’ perceptions on public space ownership.

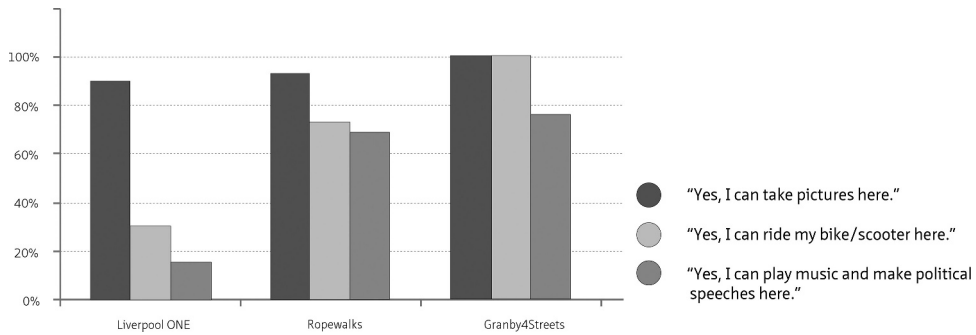


Figure 11. Behavioural restrictions as perceived by users.

that publicly produced spaces are tacitly recognised as such by users, even where they cannot articulate their feeling. At the same time, in more private spaces, users sense that there are implicit restrictions to their behaviour (Figure 11). Accordingly, they refrain from engaging in certain activities.

This finding applies to all the case studies but is particularly evident in Liverpool One, the most “private” of the three spaces. Here, the only evidence of users appropriating space to meet their own needs was the use of a low wall underneath an escalator as bench. It may be that citizens are unfamiliar with their public rights. Alternatively, a “reverse broken window” effect may be at play, where “manicured” spaces invite restraint. Or perhaps, a contemporary emphasis on the private sphere, introspection, and digital space may have undermined England’s long tradition of free expression in public space (epitomised in the “Speaker’s Corner” notion). However, in the Ropewalks and especially Granby4Street – which are more “public” – more signs of appropriation were evident, including graffiti, gardening, adding outdoor seating, skating, and busking (Figure 12). One can conclude that, the more private a space is, the fewer opportunities for appropriation it offers. It follows that more public spaces are more democratic spaces – and users are able to perceive and embody the difference.

Discussion

In summary: a “blurring of the public and the private” (Kohn 2004) is evident in all our case studies.

Liverpool ONE displays all the attributes typically associated with privately produced and managed public spaces, which are much decried in the academic literature: exclusion, homogenisation, parochialism, commodification, and total control. Everyday confrontation between different users or social groups is purposefully minimised. However, the area is hardly unpopular, unattractive, or devoid of entertainment. Plenty of staged events are commissioned by the corporate owner (Van Melik, van Aalst, and van Weesp 2007), and users are generally happy with the space and what it has to offer. More than half of the respondents regard the space as “public” although they intuitively sense that certain uses – skateboarding, delivering political speeches, playing music – are unwelcome here. Consequently, users unconsciously re-adapt their behaviour – a phenomenon known as self-policing (Zuboff 2019).



Figure 12. Examples of users' appropriation of space in (left-to-right) Liverpool One, the Ropewalks, and Granby4Streets. Photos by authors.

In the Ropewalks, where public and private actors compete to attract visitors through the “experience market” (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001; Boyer 1994), the users perceive the standards of design and maintenance to be adequate. At the same time, users are more likely to appropriate the space than in Liverpool ONE – or at least be aware that they can exercise their public rights here. This area does feel parochial at times too, and hard control measures (e.g. CCTV cameras) are in place. However, users are much less concerned about surveillance and control here. Implicitly, the government is regarded as a more benevolent and lenient urban space owner than private corporations.

Granby4Streets was also appreciated by its users in terms of spatial quality, safety, and cleanliness. Further, the area provides a good example of public space reclamation (Lefebvre 1968; Iveson 2013). Local residents here have fiercely resisted top-down urban renewal and appropriated the space to suit their needs rather than an abstract government agenda. Their right to the city was not immediately obvious to the authorities: it took three decades of struggle for residents' voice to be heard and their initiatives to be implemented.

The foregoing issues notwithstanding, it must be noted that, in a complex society no space ever is equally accessible to all members of the public; no space ever meets the demands of all users. Hence, conflicts and contradictory claims are to be expected. These need not be seen as negative in all cases. As Lefebvre (1968, 1991) notes, not only does urbanity produce conflict but this may be a necessary ingredient of urban life.

Conclusion

Are users concerned about public space privatisation? How does this affect them? The data indicate that users appreciate a privatised area for the pleasant, clean, and safe environment it offers – not to mention shopping and entertainment opportunities. Privately-produced and -owned spaces can therefore be characterised as social spaces, in which one can meet others and engage in daily encounters. These activities are a prerequisite of public city life (Lofland 1999; Crawford 2008). A high level of maintenance and control is certainly regarded as positive by users. Publicly produced spaces might need to match private maintenance standards in order to attract and retain users. While privately owned and/or maintained spaces are oft-criticised in academic literature, this study shows that these spaces can be a valuable addition to cities. This conclusion is in line with the findings of Lopes, Santos Cruz, and Pinho (2020), whose recent study was based in Oporto and Newcastle.

While caring about hygiene and order, users are less concerned about “publicness”; the meaning of “private” and “public” space is not necessarily clear to all. However, they do sense that more behavioural constraints exist in private spaces. Apparently, even in the absence of explicit signs or actions, privatised spaces send subtle signals to users that certain activities, people, or behaviours are not tolerated or encouraged. To the extent that public spaces boost spontaneity and freedom, they reinforce the very essence of the democratic public sphere. These values should be safeguarded even in privately produced urban spaces if all citizens are to continue enjoying their right to the city (Németh 2012). The importance of public space has come into high relief in 2020, when due to the Covid-19 pandemic, people’s ability to move freely around the city has been curtailed in most countries. It would therefore be valuable to extend the empirical examination and comparison beyond Liverpool in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of public and private spaces.

Note

1. This is assuming that public space was ever open to all, including women, people of colour, etc.

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Notes on contributors

Els Leclercq is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Delft University of Technology and Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions, The Netherlands. She conducts research on topics related to the transition towards a sustainable urban environment including circular economy, digitalization (“smart city”), new democracy and citizen engagement. Her PhD dissertation, prepared at Delft University of Technology, focused on the privatization of public space in European cities. She is also Principal of StudioAitken, an urban design consultancy based in the Netherlands and the UK.

Dorina Pojani is Senior Lecturer in urban planning at The University of Queensland, Australia. Her research interests encompass built environment topics (urban design, urban transport, and urban housing) in both the Global North and South. She completed her graduate studies in the US,

Albania, and Belgium, and her postdoctoral residency in the Netherlands. She has held guest teaching and/or research positions in Austria, Chile, and Italy. Prior to joining academia, she worked for several years in urban design and planning in California.

ORCID

Els Leclercq  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0605-7123>

Dorina Pojani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2018-6338>

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