Private affairs in public spaces

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Have parts of downtown Victoria – Centennial Square for example – been conceived as though their creators thought the best way to experience them would be from the privacy of a moving car?

If I asked you to define public space, would your great-grandparents recognize it? Would technological innovations colour your definition? Technologies shape cities, but how would you describe their more evanescent effects on Victoria?

Take the technological innovation of cars. We know that too much traffic chokes cities, and everyone knows Victorians hate competing for parking. But consider cars and public space. Sing along loudly to the radio while driving down Douglas and no one will notice. Do so while walking and you will attract attention. Cars create inflated privacy bubbles for people who are in public. Cars conjure private space, whether in the front seat while driving... or in the back seat while parked.

Many years ago, one of my professors condemned the Walkman, saying it was anti-social (and a form of privatization) to make yourself deaf to public streets. It’s a quaint battle-cry considering today’s ubiquitous iPod. Cellphones, too, everywhere allow a person to drop out of public space into temporary privacy spheres – which unfortunately the rest of us are then also forced to endure. Distinctions blur.

Anonymity is a necessary buffer in cities: imagine the nightmare scenario of knowing everyone, or being known, when in public. But anonymity is different from privacy. Ballooning entitlement to one’s “space” alters expectations around public space.

For cities, much comes back to the car. Its privacy-enabling mobility lets urbanites escape: literally, to the suburbs, but also from public.

Cars also changed the cityscape. Like other technologies, cars helped unravel ideologies defining public and private space.

The automobile in particular allowed individuals to be in private, even while they were in public, and in cities everywhere, space was redesigned to give priority to this new way of being – and seeing. The car window’s frame, like a television’s, puts the world at a remove. Cars gave cities people who didn’t need to rub shoulders with other people on the street. Cars shaped people capable of navigating public streets from within a privacy bubble. And they gave cities people who glanced at buildings in passing, without much need for detail or visual density.

Details become unwanted: the word “streamlined” described appliances and architecture. The low-rise RBC Building at the south east corner of Fort and Douglas, which replaced a taller tower that had the street-level visual detail of a heritage building, exemplifies this tendency. Its upper storeys arranged in horizontal slabs, the blank walls and flat shop windows seem designed to be seen in passively casual glances, from the windows of speeding cars.

Danish architect Jan Gehl writes that cities must be inviting places where “we can meet our fellow citizens face to face,” providing for direct experience through human contact. He adds, “First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works.” Fortunately, the bus exchange at Fort and Douglas creates a hub for people, although waiting for a bus isn’t the height of urban vibrancy. Observe the area on a quiet Sunday and you’ll see “space” and “buildings,” but little “life.”

Consider Centennial Square, a public space designed when modern technologies (and the liberating ways they encouraged informality) triumphed. Compared to old City Hall, the layout and additions of Centennial Square have an almost suburban look. Set back from the sidewalk and sporadically defended by shrubbery, the new City Hall looks like a municipal town hall.
"Like other technologies, cars helped unravel ideologies defining public and private space."

At the western end, council chambers are perched over a ground-floor void ringed by arched openings on three sides. (Perhaps a dawning "Age of Aquarius" desired symbolic "suspension" of government, lest it get "heavy"?)

But the evacuated void doesn’t invite gathering citizens: it attracts transients. Across the square, a somewhat sinister colonnaded frontage lurks under the overhang of a city parkade. These structures are meant to be held in some sort of relationship to one another by an open space whose main virtue is that it is, well, open.

Exiting from new City Hall into Centennial Square, a visitor finds herself adrift for it’s unclear whether any one direction is better than another. She won’t know that Chinatown is around the corner, or that lively Broad Street starts just to the South. She sees before her a slab fountain, bounded by an aerodynamically sculpted white ring. Would she have any reason to wander over to it? Can she make out shops or restaurants under the overhang to the North? Does she wonder why a lone evergreen set in a trim patch of lawn fronts Douglas Street to the East? Can she possibly recognize that the brick boxes to the West belong to the Royal McPherson Theatre? Is she going to make the effort to cross this space, or make a mental note henceforth to avoid the square?

It’s instructive, in contrast, to drive down Douglas and note how much more appealing the assemblage of buildings, fountain, and open space can appear. Turn down Pandora and observe, from your car window, that the arched void has a kind of flair. But from the pedestrian’s perspective, Centennial Square leaves much to be desired. It exemplifies a type of public space best enjoyed from one’s car.

If cities are experienced second-hand, from privacy bubbles (cars, for example), they suffer. As Gehl noted, they don’t put “life first.”

It could be argued that we’re beset by a surfeit of pseudo-privacy – both the kind created by technological innovations (cars, iPads, cellphones, computers), and the kind created by and for economic reasons (malls, publicly accessible private plazas fronting buildings such as the Empress or Astoria/Belvedere). In terms of quality visual staging, the latter compete with true public spaces. Why is that? Is it because it’s possible to enforce rules of behaviour in those spaces? Are we settling for less in “real” public space?

People in cars are mediated, but “first life” requires public spaces that can also serve immediate purposes. Technology facilitates privacy-in-public, but maybe we should pay more attention to how this alters the experience of space. We’ll avoid public space if we have no reason to enjoy some immediate moments there, if it offers nothing for the senses and nothing to share with another person. If there’s no reason to make a space into a destination, or to use it as a passage from one point to another, we’ll also avoid it – or quickly mediate it through personal privacy. When that happens, privacy-in-public is both a further weakening of public space and a protest against its failures.

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