



# Notes on the Origin of the Public Space in the West

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## The Public Square Today, A Space of Representation (Use and Abuse)

A public square is an open space. As it is public, it does not belong to anyone in particular or to any one group but to everyone. It is a place of passage where people come to exchange goods and ideas. An empty square symbolises that nobody has been able to implant any sign of belonging.

The occupation of a square is always regulated: it lasts for a limited time. Markets, fairs, “entertainment” activities, concerts and diverse types of events are held, regularly or occasionally, in this space provided that the public authorities, in keeping with all citizens who they represent whether they have voted for them or not, have clearly stipulated this, without the edict giving rise to conflictive interpretations.

In all cases, those who occupy the public space know that they have to leave it after the agreed time. In contrast with a private space, nobody can take root in a public space. They can only pass through; the interruption of movement is momentary. A public space is always empty; in other words, available to anyone who wants to express an opinion, to exhibit merchandise or even themselves (games and theatre were authorised in the Roman forum but not in the Greek agora in the classical era, although they were before the 5th century BC). The great contribution to coexistence

introduced by the agora in urban life is actually the definition or delimitation of a space, which no one, citizens or representatives, could appropriate. All voices and all decisions were welcome, provided none dominated. One of the great conflicts in history, Achilles’ refusal to fight along with his comrades-in-arms in the sacking of Troy, was because Agamemnon briefly took the lead in the agora (in this case, an empty space on the beach where the Achaean ships had moored in front of the wall of the city of Troy) or, rather, he imposed his voice when he should not have because, in the agora, everybody participated or performed in an ordered and orderly fashion.

However, it is true that public squares are taken over by demonstrators, on some occasions for an almost indefinite time. Let’s recall the occupation of Tiananmen Square in Beijing. In most cases, the aim is the abolition not only of a government but a whole political system, almost always dictatorial, in favour of another democratic way. The change is substantial. The prevailing order and law are no longer accepted. The occupation is not, therefore, illegal because legality is not recognised.

However, in the case of the 15-M Spanish demonstrations, the aim was not to denounce a political system but to exalt it, cleansing it of imperfections, distortions and corruptions. Everybody took the democratic system for granted, so much so that any decision was not



taken into consideration if it was not voted for (by a show of hands, a system unacceptable to Athenian democracy). They sought to preserve the heart of the system. Therefore, the objective was not to annul or abolish the law, or to confront it, but to refine it. But this law that was extolled by returning its purity was at the same time challenged when a space that cannot be occupied but rather shared was occupied.

The presence of demonstrators in the Spanish public squares in 2011, as a response to the economic crisis and the measures taken by the right-wing Catalan and Spanish governments, gave rise to interesting legal cases. Settled indefinitely, they erected what some demonstrators called a “city”. A “city” governed by some rules, divided into neighbourhoods or activities, with areas for food or rest, debates, trade and leisure (mainly concerts). Perhaps it was not really a city but a camp but it was of course a regulated area. Regulated, however, by rules that were not those of the city because, by law, the public space cannot be occupied permanently. So in the event of conflict – of occupation of the public space by a group of legally non-representative citizens –, what law must be applied? The law approved by the city or the law that the demonstrators had issued for a space that belongs to everyone but that cannot hold everyone, at least physically? This should not have been a problem. Those occupying the square might have been the representatives of all citizens or groups. But were they? Which law supported them? Who had appointed them? They might have been elected but the election had not been made visible. Moreover, which law could be invoked by those moving around the square but who were not demonstrators, or those attending what was happening without being agents? Public law or the law that prevailed in the square?

The debates were public. They took place in full view of those who wished to attend or observe. They were, therefore, performances

(it is significant that in classical Athens some citizen assemblies were held in a theatre). What mattered was what was said or debated but it was also important for the debate to take place in full view of everyone, not to be followed or discussed by everyone, but rather to be seen, symbolising a “state” of protest. What was said mattered as much as the performance of what was said; that it was discussed and that the image of the event appeared on the front page of the press.

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We live in the world of image, amidst a performative event. The square is a big stage where people always debate in front of an audience. Demonstrators were (are) representatives or acted as representatives. They assumed a role. They were known as representatives. But they probably represented themselves; they represented themselves as citizens who debated. While those who debate in the fora usually do so because they are (elected) representatives, in this case when debating they become representatives. Action gave meaning to them. This is why the demonstrations should have lasted forever; their end was not foretold. The aim of the action was to last forever.

The protest was just or unjust; this is not the issue, because the issue concerns the occupied “space”. The debate, then, occurred as a performance. Those taking part assumed a role. Real debates are always public. They take place in spaces arranged as a theatre, as we have seen (such is the shape of many modern parliaments: the members of the parliament are at the same time actors and members of an audience, watching themselves acting). Halls of de-

bate, congresses and assemblies have stands and a stage. The orators “go up on” the dais. What happens possesses the truth contained in art: it imitates or enacts life. But, for this to happen, those taking part must have been elected. They must have been recognised by the whole audience; that is, by the citizens. In a debate taking place in full view of everyone, the city, through its representatives, offers itself as a performance; and the play is the city under debate.

Is this exactly what happened in the case of the 15-M demonstrations in spaces that were public or taken by those attending? Occupants appropriate a space. They make it their own. Thus they “steal” or take it from the enjoyment of others. This action is legitimised if the occupants have been designated for the role or the function they take on. Was it so in those cases?

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Of course, the demonstrations symbolised a breakdown of public law. The crisis was not only economic but moral. The laws were jeopardised. They were not applied. They could not be applied. They were replaced by others. The blame, perhaps, lay with those who represented us; in other words, it concerned everyone when we elected representatives who are afraid to apply the law – who feared conflict, that is, the debate –, but they did not dare change it. By leaving it be, the city dissolved itself and once dissolved there was no longer room for images of something that no longer existed. The “city” in the public square only has a meaning if the city exists. By rejecting its existence, it rejects

itself; although, paradoxically, the fact that the square was occupied by a small “city” was proof of the goodness of urban life, a goodness faced with which the occupation of the square should have been meaningless.

### The Mesopotamian Square: Between High Street and Junction in Southern Mesopotamia

The great archaeological missions of the 20th century interwar period in Iraq cleared and excavated large areas thanks to hundreds or thousands of workers. A famous photo taken in the city (or site) of Ur, during the discovery of the royal tombs from the mid-third millennium BC, in a place unknown today, in the late 1920s, illustrates the enormous task. In a few years the political and religious centre of this very extensive and highly populated metropolis was revealed.

The excavations, however, progressed rapidly. The discoveries of valuable objects and inscribed tablets were essential to prevent the patrons who were privately funding the missions from cutting the funds. The architectural structures were of less interest. Although temples, palaces and tombs, often visible because they were – or were meant to be – in the upper areas of the city and stood out markedly in an arid and flat environment, were not negligible, the urban fabric, the residential, trade and crafts neighbourhoods attracted much less enthusiasm.

For this reason, and given the conditions of the Mesopotamian sites today that impede or make new studies or the review of the plans drawn up one thousand years ago difficult, Mesopotamian town planning is almost unknown. Only a few limited urban fabrics in some cities such as in Ur, Uruk, Kish and Mari and in Sumerian colonies in northern Mesopotamia have been explored and studied.

The French archaeologist and historian Jean-Claude Margueron believed he had discovered an outstanding – unique – space in the city of Mari: a triangular open space in the urban fabric of Mari that he interpreted as a market square. In my view, it is difficult or impossible to be sure about the function of this space, which has certainly not been found in any other city.

The few neighbourhoods explored reveal a dense network of dwellings linked by inner courtyards, barely open towards narrow alleys whose arrangement would be capricious if it did not seem to follow the light slopes of the ground through which the waters were naturally drained during the big annual rains and that seeped into the clayey soil with difficulty. The neighbourhoods seem like the prelude to the later Arab medinas and kasbahs, and the Early Middle Ages cities.

Although the archaeological remains hardly enable us to discern the Mesopotamian town planning, the vocabulary might provide us with a clearer picture of how Mesopotamians conceived the urban fabric. Although several Sumerian and Acadian words are always translated as street, *esir* and *tilla* are perhaps the most common Sumerian terms. They partly reveal what the city should be and how they imagined it. *Esir* is a compound word. *E* is a very common term that means house (also used to designate the temple, because this is the simple house of the deity). *Sir* has, among others, the meaning of uniting, of joining. Thus, a street is a link between houses. The street does not seem to have its own entity. The house is the unit that constitutes the town and the street, the environment that manages to move from the house to the town, keeping these basic units together. The city is a grouping of houses, and urban life takes place within them, although they are not entirely enclosed in themselves but possess a bond with other spatial units.

Square was usually designated with the Sumerian words *salidagal* and *tilla*, already used in the most ancient texts from the first half of the third millennium BC. We already know the latter: it also means street. Since Ancient Greece, the difference we establish between the street and the square does not seem to exist. Both spaces are designated with the same term, which means that there were no squares, just longitudinal alleys between dwellings. These might be linked by squares, certainly, but they have not been found in the excavations.

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The question about the differentiated existence of the square, as a town development element with its own formal, functional and symbolic characteristics, might be clarified if we comment briefly on the aforementioned word *siladagal*. It is a compound word. We also know the first element *sila* is translated as street and *dagal* means wide. It is a term related to the word *damgal*, which comprises the adjective *gal* (big).

Thus, the square would be a wide street, a boulevard as we would call it today, the high street (the Roman *cardo* and *decumanus* that crossed, or should have crossed, in the forum). The squares would be unusual urban elements because the streets, at least in the third millennium BC sites studied, were very narrow. We must not perceive this narrowness from our perspective but as a quality deliberately pursued.

The square would barely be distinguished from the street. It would fulfil the same func-

tion. It would not be a space of exchange, negotiation and debate, as the Greek agora and the Roman forum were later, but it was planned, built and imagined perhaps as a more rapid transport link, or planned for chariots – from the mid-second millennium –, between the foundational elements of the city, of any human settlement: the houses.

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In any case, *tilla* – street or square – also has another sense that can help us understand what a square in Mesopotamia might be like, or to what it would be equivalent today. *Tilla* also meant junction: a meeting of two streets. The space is not physically wider than that of a street, although it is at a visual level. The functions of the agora and the forum might have taken place in the street crossroads, points where the movements were temporarily interrupted to negotiate; they were not limited spaces, with their own value, that people headed to but places where people met. Of course, in Rome, the junctions were different from the roads (and the squares) and were under the protection of their own divinities or spirits that only acted and were effective at these points. A junction enables both a change of direction and a rearrangement. The world can change based on a junction. Necessarily, like the myth of Hercules suggests, a junction involves stopping, reflecting and choosing a direction to the detriment of others; it requires a decision, which may determine the route. The path drawn up is interrupted and makes us think about where we are going and where we come from. A junction is a physical space

with not only spatial but also moral values or qualities. Thus, in Mesopotamia a square would be a stop on the journey. It would not veer from the route, like the square, but would require awareness of the place where we are, of the place we occupy in the world.

### The Mesopotamian Square: Between the Square and the Garden in Northern Mesopotamia

Despite all the efforts by archaeologists and epigraphers, neither the texts nor the archaeological remains of Mesopotamian cities from the fourth and third millennia reveal the existence of urban public spaces (squares, markets, gardens, Fields of Mars or parade grounds, etc.). The cities have streets and undeveloped areas within the perimeter of the wall – probably grazing crop fields useful in the event of siege –, and the temples have many spacious courtyards, but the residents were not allowed to enter them or the sacred rooms and spaces, separated from the rest of the city by walls, although the whole town belonged to the deity. There was no separation of the urban space into sacred areas and profane areas, as in Greece.

Some ancient Greek authors argued that the public space, specifically the agora, was a characteristic feature of the Greek city that distinguished it from the Mesopotamian city. However, such a statement has been qualified today. The search for eastern public spaces must not be carried out in the south of Mesopotamia but in the north. The Assyrian and neo-Assyrian capitals, from the second half of the second millennium until the fall of Assyria around the mid-first millennium, were founded and built following the models of the previous southern cities. Walls, palaces and temples with a ziggurat characterised Assyrian cities. However, these had a space that had not existed before: gardened public spaces, different from

the palace gardens (hanging?, in other words, located on promontories). These gardens must have been similar, profusely endowed with a large variety of trees, including fruit trees. The imperial gardens could only be enjoyed by the emperor, in contrast to the public gardens: areas within the urban fabric, at street junction, like today's central squares, which freed spaces opposite some temples. No building spoiled or constrained them. Neither were they residual spaces but rather well planned within an often orthogonal layout in the neo-Assyrian cities founded. Access to these collective spaces was free.

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However, these “public green areas” were different from the Greek agora, even though they were almost contemporary (the neo-Assyrian city flourished in the 8th and 7th centuries BC while the Greek city excelled barely one century later). The agora had no owner. It belonged to the group, to all citizens (who did not account for the whole population, certainly, as women and slaves could not use this central space). The “municipal government” was in charge of developing and maintaining the agora. Meanwhile, the Assyrian garden or urban park was an emperor's gift, who surrendered its usufruct to the community.

Moreover, just like the agora, despite the temples devoted to gods that kept watch over trade and work and monuments to the city heroes, was a profane space – thorough which any citizen could walk –, the space of the whole Mesopotamian city belonged to the gods, who delegated care of this space to the emperor. Thus, the neo-Assyrian emperor offered a space to his subjects that was not his property but

had been entrusted to him by heaven, which probably reflects a true belief. In this manner, all citizens could benefit from divine generosity and give thanks to heaven by honouring it ritually.

## The Greek Agora

Specialists agree: the agora is the major contribution of the Greek city. It is a new kind of space, or a new concept of space, which no longer belongs to the gods or their true representative on Earth, but consists of a community space. The community, which only includes free men born in the city, directs and occupies this place. Gods have their own place (the acropolis) but it is in the heights, separated from the daily life of the city. The central location of the agora is a symbol that does not belong to anyone in particular, that does not incline towards or embrace one group rather than another. Moreover, nobody can appropriate the agora, not even temporarily, for their benefit or exhibition.

The agora is surrounded by public buildings. It also houses holy spaces belonging to the deities that watch over the verbal and trading exchanges taking place there. Similarly, many monuments and sculptural groups are arranged in the centre and on the outskirts of the agora. They represent gods and heroes of the past linked to the mythical history of the city, such as the Altar of the Twelve Gods, the Altar of Zeus Agoraios (Zeus of the agora) or the Monument to the Eponym Heroes. It also exhibits personifications of citizen values, such as Justice or Health.

What perhaps has not been sufficiently emphasised is the very pertinent exhibition of monuments (divine and heroic statues) in the agora. These only take on meaning in this place.

The agora is a place of exchange and meeting that not only accommodates living beings.

A city not only comprises living citizens but also includes the dead and the gods, each one in their own space: the acropolis and the necropolis, to which citizens go to meet invisible beings. However, the most direct and intimate meeting occurs in the agora. It is symbolised and manifested in the agora. The statues that populate it are effigies of beings from another time, a time before humans, when the Earth was only inhabited by gods and heroes. But these beings are still alive, are still in the city as spirits. The statues grant them a body thanks to which the spirits or souls and the disembodied and, therefore, invisible beings are embodied: they are shown full length among the humans, the citizens. The meetings between citizens in the agora repeat those established between the living and the dead or, rather, between mortals and immortals.

These meetings can only take place in the agora. Mortals can dialogue with immortals; immortals enlighten mortals by example; they inspire them, advise them, give them guidelines of conduct, models of ethical action, which must later govern intrapersonal relations. Thus, the agora is a meeting space “at all levels”. And these “high level” meetings, between men and heroes, give meaning to, rule and determine later meetings between men. The agora is thus a training space that turns man into citizen because, after having dialogued with the heroes, after having seen how they behaved, how they were on Earth, what they were “like”, he can then be similar and create communities of human beings.

## The Agora of Athens

After the end of the Mycenaean world, in the late second millennium, when the kings were judges and priests, they lived at the top of the acropolis, and after a period of decay – unless it corresponds to a little known period, partly be-

cause of the apparent disappearance of written texts –, the capital of the city-state of Athens was again arranged very differently from the mid-7th century. The three powers, civil or political, judicial and religious, were located in different places (although worship continued to define the most apparently civilian events).

Thus, the acropolis was entirely devoted to the gods, mainly of the city (at the dawn of time Athena and Poseidon competed for the possession of Attica; Athena won because her present, an olive tree, was preferred to that of the god of the seas, which was a well of salt water, unfortunately).

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The neighbouring hill of the Aeropagus was occupied by the assembly of justice. It was there where the god of war, Ares, was forgiven for the death of a daughter of a god of the seas, and it was also there where Orestes, son of Agamemnon, leader of the Greek army in the Trojan war and of Clytemnestra, was tried for having murdered his mother after she had previously taken revenge on him because the king had sacrificed her daughter in order to obtain the benevolence of the winds to sail to Troy. Finally, the valley where the agora was located, at the foot of both hills, Acropolis and Aeropagus, housed the market and the political institutions where the laws of the city-state were discussed.

The agora was not, however, a profane space, exclusively in the care of men. What happened is that while the hills were in the care of celestial gods (the Olympic gods), the valley of the

agora was under the protection of infernal gods and, in particular, of mother goddesses. Thus, the Legislative Assembly (called the Boule) operated in a space that housed a sanctuary devoted to a mother goddess, or mother of the gods. She was located, as an engendering deity of the cosmos, in the bowels of the Earth. From the underground, she watched over the goodness of the transactions and the laws that governed them. Thus, the goods marketed came from the Earth, and the Earth was the deity that ruled their production and exchange. The agora also housed the Altar of the Twelve Heroes, immemorial mythical figures that protected the life of the city and citizens.

Finally, the Temple of Hephaestus stood on one side. He was a son of Zeus, the father of gods, but he never lived on top of Olympus. He was not a celestial god but, as the god of the forge, educated by infernal deities such as the Cabeiri on the handling of fire, from the interior of the Earth, a god with close links to the underworld. His own limp and deformed figure, due to the hard work of handling forge irons by the fire that scorched the skin and gave him a possessed appearance, related him to underground rather than aerial forces. At the same time, as a blacksmith god, he protected the craftsmen who traded in the agora.

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## The Meaning of the Square

Is the square inseparable from the city? Does it need it? Rome – and the European medieval city – curiously recovered the eastern urban form. It has often been argued that Rome (at least before Nero's urban reform after the big fire) was closer to an Arab kasbah than to a well-

planned city with an orthogonal layout around an empty central space. The Roman city had a forum – or several – but these were located on its outskirts, where the markets were in the Middle Ages, at the city gates or even outside the wall. The imperial fora were in the centre of Rome but they were not public but rather holy spaces. They had the same function as the courtyards of the eastern sanctuaries: they provided access to the temples, a privilege for only a few.

Rome did not have an agora or squares. It possessed markets, Fields of Mars – where military parades were held –, spaces for bloody games (of a religious nature), always in peripheral places, while the city centre was made of insulae or blocks grouped together.

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This model endured, with exceptions, until the early urban growth plans and the Spanish colonial green field cities in the Renaissance.

The square was not necessary. The street was the meeting point, as were the market, the public baths – which lasted until the Early Middle Ages, when the Church no longer tolerated these “promiscuous” sites, openly discussed or disputed. The festivals, processions and Saturnalia were held in the street, day or night. In fact, the urban layout, even in Greece, had been established based on the procession paths that linked the intramura and extraurban sanctuaries, often built or delimited before the city itself. The dances, processional parades and the wandering of the choirs determined the layout of the city. It was built based on chants and parades.

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The square is an empty, dead, space. Nobody knows how to plan it. The square was meaningful in absolutist governments because they showed themselves in broad empty spaces, necessary for such manifestations of ostentation. But the trade and debates, which in Greece took place in the open air or within view of all, are today held behind closed doors. So, is the square necessary?

In New York, for instance, the most vibrant spaces are not squares but streets: Times Square

is not a square but a long space that is the result of the temporary confluence of streets that separate again after a few hundred metres. One of the most vibrant public spaces is an open elevated park (High Line).

The street takes the pulse. A city can live without squares but not without streets: the Arab city does not have squares. Squares are often fenced, as if they were empty plots: places in front of whose limits the city stops. The city comes to a complete halt when the street is taken over. During the 15-M demonstrations in Spain, the cities did not stop: the tents occupied the squares, spaces almost always indifferent to urban life. In Barcelona, plaça de Catalunya is a big empty space; in contrast, plaza de la Villa in Madrid has life because it is the origin of all the roads and arteries that run through the city and link it to other cities.

The square had a meaning in classical Greece. Does it have one today? Is this not proof of idleness or incapacity to plan the city?