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COMMENTARIES Jardins Publics

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Jardins Publics: Art, Space and Edinburgh

Introduction

Sometime in 2003 I was interviewing the architect Lord (Richard) Rogers about urban public space in Britain, a topic in which he had much interest – he had then been recently the chair of the government's Urban Task Force. By way of conversation he asked where I was based. 'Edinburgh', I said. 'Ah', said Rogers, approvingly, 'public space city'. He meant a city that, at least in its central parts, better resembled a continental European than a British one, with its density, its lively streets, and above all, its public spaces. During festival time each year, it is hard to disagree. The population temporarily doubles, and every inch of street in the centre appears to be taken over for some kind of performance or event. The city becomes a spectacle of life lived in public.

Yet even as a newcomer to Edinburgh, it was clear to me then that the city's notion of public space was more complex than it at first appeared. I already knew, for example, that the sense of plenitude generated by the festival was by its nature, temporary – a sporadic outpouring of public sentiment uncharacteristic of the city during the rest of the year. I also knew that most of the city's famous public spaces were not legally public at all. And I had come to understand that the local notion of public space had, more often than not, to do with an expression of order rather than liberty. The regulation of public behaviour, by legal means or by social conventions, was a big deal and public space as a result was rarely understood as an expression of freedom, but rather as an expression of a well-regulated society. Edinburgh is often held to be a model city, but this commonplace rarely gets questioned. Hence *Jardins Publics*, an exhibition which tackled for the first time in the history of the Festival, some of the complexity of its public realm.

Edinburgh's Public Realm

Let's consider Edinburgh in some more detail. Let's move beyond the Festival, and the face the city presents to tourists, to think about how the city is used and understood by its inhabitants, and especially the public cultures it has developed. Think first about a few structural elements, starting with its parks. Edinburgh's characteristic late-Georgian development, in both Old and New Towns, has a typical set piece, a large square defined by four-storey neoclassical tenements overlooking a garden. The square form varies considerably: it is a literal square in George Square on the south

side, a circle in Royal Circus, an oval in Ainslie Place, and an elongated rectangle along Queen Street. But the principle is the same – residence overlooking a regularly-shaped, shared green space.

Driving along the great avenue of Queen Street, it would be easy to read this as publicly-accessible parkland in the same manner as St James's Park off the Mall in London. This would be a mistake. Fenced off by high railings and dense foliage, this inviting half-mile strip of park is in fact private, accessible only to those with a key. Immaculately kept, it is barely used, as is clear to anyone peering in from outside. The same is true of virtually all gardens in the New Town. Spaces of exceptional beauty, they exist mainly, it seems, to be glimpsed by outsiders.

George Square outwith the New Town is the exception. Located on the south side, and now overlooked by big university buildings it's still privately owned, but open to the public. But it's open to us on sufferance – a stern notice makes clear that access is a privilege, a privilege that may be withdrawn in response to inappropriate behaviour. You struggle to find a way in. There are only a handful of gateways, and they're poorly signposted, as if the owners wish to discourage anyone from entering. George Square closely corresponds to that of a number of other spaces in the city. The Botanical Gardens, on the north side, just beyond the New Town, is one of Edinburgh's most spectacular public spaces, created from the estate of the former Inverleith House, and with probably the best views of the high ridge of the Old Town. It is immensely popular, a *de facto* crèche for the children of middle class north Edinburgh. The Botanics is also an exceptionally regulated space, whose scientific role has long been usurped by its status as a school of polite behaviour. Its rules, which are prominently displayed at the entrance, regulate opening hours (daylight only), eating and drinking (not permitted except in designated areas), bodily movement (no running, no ball games), the sound environment (no radios, no noise) and relations with animals (no dogs, no feeding the squirrels).

One's presence in the Botanics is therefore subject to a remarkable degree of discipline. This isn't to say that it's not a popular or successful space, but that it is barely a public one, unless one's understanding of public is entirely separated from notions of liberty. In the same way, many other of the key public spaces of the city turn out not to be public at all, but variations on private space. The great city centre wilderness of Arthur's Seat is a Royal Park, whose existence and

character still has a great deal to do with the affairs of Holyrood Palace. In Edinburgh, you are rarely in publicly-owned space, whatever the outward impression. More often than not you are in space temporarily made public subject to certain conditions, and in which your rights to it may at any time be withdrawn.

Now this is an argument we have often heard against modern shopping malls, and the privatisation of space they supposedly represent.¹ But the more you explore it, the less Edinburgh's public realm actually appears any different. The view from the Botanics is punctuated by an amazing collection of schools. No other large British city has its architectural landscape so defined by its schools. In the same way Windsor's landscape is defined by Eton as well as its castle, Edinburgh's is defined by Heriots, by Fettes, by Stewarts Melville, by Donaldson's school for the Deaf, by Edinburgh Academy. These are the most extraordinary and demonstrative buildings, making an obvious claim on the city. They make a huge contribution to its civic culture, educating virtually all of the city's middle class at high school level. And they are all – crucially – private institutions. So here again, you could say, is a manifestation about the city's peculiar understanding of public and private, an example of its definition of the public realm as something inherently exclusive, something in which one may only really participate in an appropriately mannered and polite way.

Private Meets Public

The peculiar politics of Edinburgh's public space are best seen perhaps not in the public, or quasi-public realm, but in the transitional zone where private and public realms meet. This can be seen in the domestic sphere. The defining building type of the central city is not the castle, or the medieval close, or the church but the tenement. A stone-faced block of what would now be called apartments, it rises to a height of twenty metres or so, over typically four storeys. Its origins lie the medieval closes of the Old Town, but it reaches its zenith in the expansion of the city in the late nineteenth century.

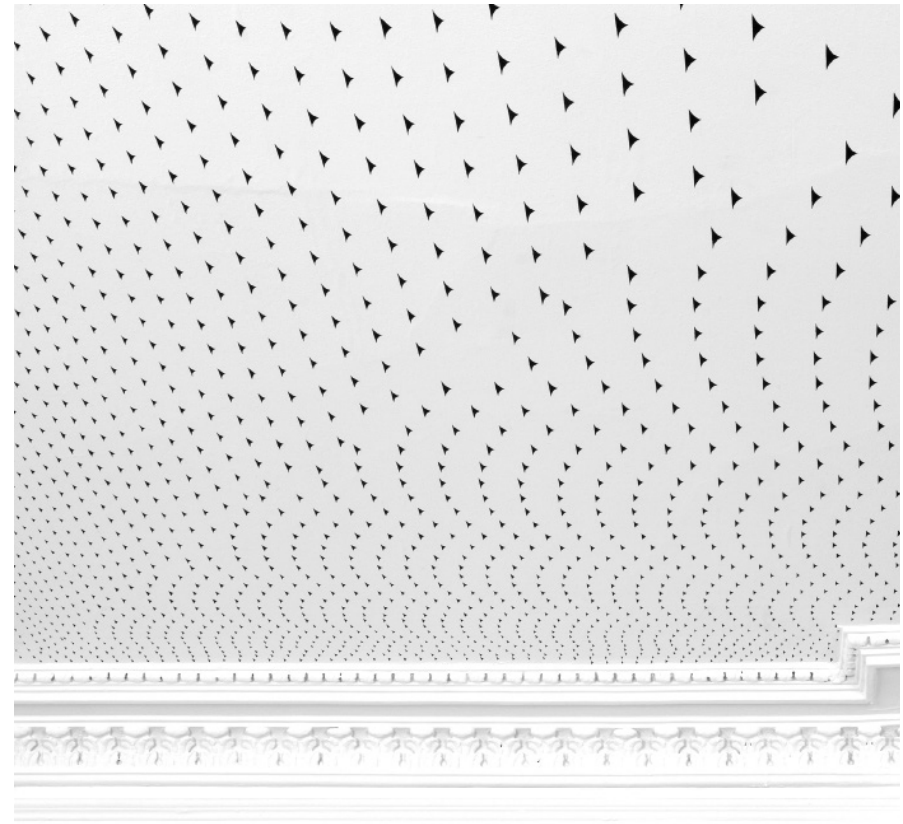
The tenement block, whether the neoclassicism of the New Town, or the undecorated form you see in Gorgie, has real consistency. It's stone fronted, defined by a central internal stair, off which there are invariably two apartments per floor. It exists as a form for all social classes, with differentiation expressed by both the size of the internal apartments and the external detailing. But the principle in each case is remarkably consistent.

The tenement defines the boundary between private and public worlds. It is a domestic form housing private functions, but accumulated, it defines the public form of the street, making a public architecture. Behind the stone façade, it conceals both the private apartment and (very often) some element of shared space. When four tenement blocks are arranged to form a classic European perimeter block, the interior space is invariably a private garden, which cannot be accessed from the street, but nonetheless constitutes an important shared space with some public character.

The Edinburgh tenement façade marks an unusually abrupt transition between private and public. Almost without exception it comes straight down to the street. Roger Scruton's fascinating study, *The Classical Vernacular*, describes in English neoclassicism an essential politeness. In England, a row of neoclassical houses, he writes, will define a street, but also mediate the relation between public and private. Deploying a varied and commonly understood vocabulary of walls, doorways, stairs and windows, here one is encouraged to linger, there to hurry – but there is never a sense of compulsion.² In the brutally attenuated classicism of the Edinburgh tenement, there is rarely such modulation. You are either in or out. There are few if any liminal spaces. You don't sit on New Town tenement steps. You don't saunter or linger when out. The public realm is in general a place to be hurried through.

I'm exaggerating, perhaps. However there is also something in the way tenements are inhabited that underlines this architectural anxiety to separate private and public. For some years I owned a flat in the final, 1935, extension of the New Town. Architecturally undistinguished, my block formed one side of a square, which contained, in the classic manner, a shared garden. It was shared between all the residents of the upper flats, while the lower ('main door') flats had their own rather smaller gardens, separated from the shared green by a fence.

Nothing – and least of all the building's deplorable structural condition – caused the residents so much anxiety as the boundary between the shared green and the private gardens of the ground floor flats. Since 1935, the residents' committee had been principally concerned with policing this boundary, and would, with monotonous regularity issue a stern letter reminding everyone of the strictly limited franchise for the use of the green. It was a franchise that many on the committee wished to restrict further after an illicit *football*



was seen on the green, then a bottle of *beer*, and most alarming of all, *a young man sunning himself*.³

Now this was not a public space per se. But it serviced a large population, and its scale and generosity positively encouraged a variety of quasi-public uses. In its design imagination (if we can use such a phrase) it was certainly no less public than that of genuinely public spaces such as Chessel's Court (of which more later). It represents in microcosm many of the broader anxieties about the public realm in Edinburgh. Firstly, it represents the desire to define as closely as possible the rights to a space, secondly, the desire to police it, and thirdly, the ready recourse to sanctions to do so.

Public Art

Edinburgh is therefore a challenging context for an exhibition of art in the public realm. The notion of public art activated by *Jardins Publics* was also one distinctly different to any generally in operation in the city – it was certainly distinct from the monument-building tradition in which the city is rich. The exhibition's methodology derived from work done mostly in 1960s New York, and a lively discourse deriving from Minimalism about the role of art in relation to the public. In the hands of artists such as Robert Morris, Minimalism represented a more or less systematic investigation into the relationship between art and space. It was an investigation that had by 1967 or so begun to argue in favour of the dissolution of art objects in favour of temporary 'situations' that might well include the viewer.⁴ Morris's sculpture represented his arguments in a literal form, so see a trajectory from more or less well made sculpture in the mid-1960s to temporary arrays of matter, or accumulations of debris by the end of the decade, in sometimes unusual surroundings. The experience, rather than the object was what mattered.

By the early 1970s, the most interesting and highly regarded art in the USA and Europe comprised temporary interventions in the public realm, not always necessarily legal. The material character of such interventions was negligible, but which stood in critical relation to their surroundings. This art itself drew on earlier things – surrealist or Dada performance, theatre etc. – but was developed into a de facto tradition. It also had an overt politics, at least in the beginning. For the art critic Lucy R. Lippard, as she made clear in the essays that frame her book *Six Years*, to make an artwork with no lasting value was to refuse its incorporation by the market; and to do that was a means, however oblique and small-scale, of challenging the

so-called military-industrial complex. To make lasting objects, by contrast, was to be irredeemably reactionary.⁵ The key images in the formation of this tradition are now well-known, if only in photographs: Richard Serra flinging molten lead in a New York warehouse; Michelangelo Pistoletto rolling a ball of newspapers through the streets of Turin; Gordon Matta-Clark shooting out the windows of New York's Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies;⁶ Daniel Buren's enigmatic stripe paintings, affixed in unlikely locations all over European cities. The tradition survives in (anti-) monumental form in the public projects of the agency Artangel, who amongst other things commissioned *House* by Rachel Whiteread, a temporary cast of the interior of a terraced house in London's East End.

The radical moment Lippard described was short-lived, partly because of the changing landscape of radical politics, but mainly because the art world found ways of commercialising temporary works. A contract, for example, might be drawn up by a lawyer, describing a proposed artwork, where it might be located, its size and construction and so on. Such a contract would then typically be the object sold. From that moment on, public art lost whatever radical edge it once had. However, the radical impulse survives in the fundamental attitude that this is an art that exists in order to question its surroundings. It may no longer be an art that exists in fundamental opposition to the order of things, a challenge to the existing order analogous to – say – terrorism, but it exists in order to provoke, to destabilise, to unsettle, to ask that its viewers think differently about the world. It makes these demands now to an essentially humanistic end, arguing that it is good to challenge one's assumptions for personal development and growth.

On Jardins Public

Public art may no longer be a dangerously radical tendency, but it still might have something to say to a city like Edinburgh. So over the course of a month, *Jardins Publics* set up a number of temporary experiences that in some small but memorable ways challenged the ways the city thinks about its public life. A key idea for the curator was contained in an enigmatic statement by Ian Hamilton Finlay: 'we talk about certain gardens as retreats when they are really attacks.' In other words, the garden might be thought of in critical relation to the world, rather than something that merely offers solace. It is this sense of the garden as a radical object that motivates the show. So in Princes Street Gardens, Michael Lin built a brightly painted spiral structure around a



tree. A form redolent with utopian and libertarian possibilities, like Oscar Niemeyer's architecture in Brazil, it stood like an emissary from another world, its surfaces decorated with over-sized renditions of exotic textile designs. It certainly provided some alternative seating arrangements in a garden that likes to seat its visitors, military-style, in serried ranks, bolt upright, facing the castle. It offered a place for people in the heart of the city, as well as a challenge to the pompous neo-baroque HQ of the Bank of Scotland – an institution which happens to own the south side of the gardens. It did, on the occasions I saw it, frame some attractively unselfconscious behaviour. On the last day of the exhibition, small children assaulted the spiral while a German hippy, oblivious to them, hugged the tree at the centre of the piece, motionless but smiling beatifically.

At Chessel's Court, Apolonija Šušteršič created a work in the finest traditions of the Enlightenment. A magnificent table surrounded by herbs in a semi-public garden, it was intended as a polite space to frame public discussion, a fragrant reiteration of the eighteenth century London coffee house – or something. Any doubts I had to its social potential were challenged on the opening night when I found myself almost immediately drawn into a debate about public art which – fuelled by champagne and scones made by the residents – lasted a good three hours. The declared scepticism of the discussants was belied by the range and ferocity of the debate. As a result of this, and other discussions through the Festival the residents have now chosen to retain all of their new-found garden.

Richard Wright's two works engaged with two of Edinburgh's most picturesque sites, the New Town, and the walk along the Water of Leith. His insertion of a coloured window into the normally closed St George's Well opened up a tiny, quiet corner of the city to the public. His painted ceiling and walls at 26 London St. occupied a particularly fine house. For Edinburgh residents, the experience uncannily replayed one of the city's favourite bourgeois rituals, the Sunday afternoon viewing of properties for sale, a ritual that like the artworks of *Jardins Publics* involves a temporary dissolution of private/public boundaries. The same elements were all there: the elegant flat emptied of clutter, the sale particulars (or in this case, a leaflet describing the work), an agent politely admitting visitors. The engagement was oddly similar to a Sunday viewing, but uncanny because there wasn't – or couldn't be – a sale, or even the thought of one. There couldn't be a resolution in other words, so visitors behaved in some curious

ways. Some went brusquely in and out. But some – including myself – ended up on the floor gazing upwards, temporarily lost in the universe Wright had created, accompanied by the distant sounds of the street. These works strongly recalled Morris's minimalism of the mid-1960s: in their formal restraint, in the way they downplayed the status of the art object, in the way they elevated 'experience' in terms that were as bodily as they were visual, Wright's works showed in the clearest terms how the simplest things formally might be productive of the most complex experience.

If one of the aims of *Jardins Publics* was a humanistic questioning of the city, then a late addition to the exhibition was important. St Bernard's Well, a pretty neoclassical monument designed by Alexander Nasmyth in 1789 is well known externally, but the extraordinary, shrine-like interior is not. *Jardins Publics* opened it up, at least temporarily, and the general response was striking. Why, visitors wondered had they not known about this before? Why had they not been allowed to see it? And – gazing with now active curiosity at the private gardens on the other side of the river – what other things might they now be allowed to see? To open the well was a quietly subversive act that well represented both the overall intentions of the show and its reception. The intellectual debates about the public realm can be both fraught and arcane, and rarely of popular interest. But you can stage the debate through an exhibition like this. By allowing visitors access to places normally hidden from view, *Jardins Publics* suggested an alternative experience of the public realm of the city. The memory of those experiences should persist for a long time.

Richard J. Williams is Professor of Contemporary Visual Cultures and Head of History of Art at the University of Edinburgh

1. See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1998)

2. Roger Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular: Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994)

3. The author was a member of the committee 2002-6.

4. See Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture Part 2', in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 11-22.

5. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972...* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. vii-xxii.

6. See Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001)

'Jardins Publics' was commissioned by the Edinburgh International Festival for its 2007 programme.

Apolonija Šušteršič and Meike Schalk
'Garden Service' 2007
Chessel's Court, Royal Mile
Photograph by Ruth Clark

Richard Wright
'no title' 2007 (detail)
gouache on ceiling and walls
26 London Street
Photograph by Ruth Clark

Michael Lin
'East Princes Street Gardens 10.08 – 02.09.07'
emulsion on plywood
Photograph by Ruth Clark