

# PUBLIC SPACES IN CITY CENTERS



**MIRAN AHMED MOHAMMED**  
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## ➤ INTRODUCTION

A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. These are public gathering spaces such as plazas, squares and parks. Connecting spaces, such as sidewalks and streets, are also public spaces. In the 21st century, some even consider the virtual spaces available through the internet as a new type of public space that develops interaction and social mixing.

Well-designed and maintained public space is critical to the health of any city. Such gathering spaces allow for social mixing, civic participation, recreation, and a sense of belonging. It is necessary to fight spatial segregation through actions such as rebuilding districts in an integrated way; providing the most disadvantaged urban areas with quality public spaces and installations; promoting diverse uses of the land; encouraging social mixing in housing selection with the aim of having people from different backgrounds and socio-economic conditions live in the same districts; removing architectural barriers that may isolate certain areas. Public space can also be used for daily events or seasonal or annual fairs that bring together diverse populations of the city.



Image 01-Example of City Center Public Space

“A good city is like a good party, people stay longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves” Jan Gehl

### ➤ **CONCEPT OF A PUBLIC SPACE :**

It is practically impossible to specifically pin down the meaning of a public space through one single definition. According to Wikipedia, 'A public space is a social space that is generally accessible and open to people. In a broader sense, it is a space in which people can choose to be at, regardless of their ethnicity, age, ideologies and gender. It is a space that allows and facilitates a coexistence of different categories of people. Generally, when one thinks of a public space, it is automatically assumed to be a city square, a park, a boulevard etc. This is where the question of what exactly a public space is arises. A public space doesn't necessarily only mean a typical square or garden but can also be spaces of everyday use such as streets, sidewalks and subway platforms to spaces such as a public library.

The problem lies in the thinking of public spaces mainly influenced by a set notion of a public space as a gathering space. It is difficult to exactly demarcate the boundary of the meaning of a public space. These spaces have an inherent quality of democracy. Who can occupy a public space is an open ended question. The meaning and the use of a public space is not fixed but is in a state of flux. A particular space can be used differently by different groups of people at different times. The meaning and the users of a public space are always subjected to ongoing change.

Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A. (2001, p40) explain that 'Citizens create meaningful public space by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes'. (1)

A public space acts as a stage in which people occupying that space at that moment have a dual role to play. They perform the roles of both the actor and the spectator. Public spaces are spaces in which one can 'see and be seen'. Gehl, J. (1987, 2011 revisited ed. p17) says that 'As opposed to being a passive observer of other people's experiences on television or

video or film, in public spaces the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating. (2)

An important change in the way of perceiving a public space can be noticed in the recent years. Public spaces are being looked at upon as a consumable good. We can see an increasing demand where people want to step out of their private realm and use or 'consume' public spaces. This can be related to the experience of the 'other' in the public realm. Many researchers, philosophers and urban planners have often spoken about the concept of encountering the 'other' in a public space. Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A. (2001,p12) comment about the unique place that the public realm occupies in society and say that 'It is the sphere where we encounter the proverbial 'other' and where we must relate to 'other' behavior, other ideas and other preferences'. (3)

It is a place that provides a platform to experience something new and introduces a feeling of discovery, adventure and reflection in people. It gives opportunities for the unfamiliar to mingle freely but at the same time have control over their privacy. It is a space where society is created. According to Gehl, J. (1987, p17) "The presence of other people, activities, events, inspiration, and stimulation comprise one of the most important qualities of public spaces altogether'. (4)

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(1)-Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 40

(2)-Gehl, J, (1987, 2011 revisited ed.) Life between Buildings: Using Public Space (transl. by Koch, J.) New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, pg 17

(3)-Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 12

(4)-Gehl, J, (1987, 2011 revisited ed.) Life between Buildings: Using Public Space (transl. by Koch, J.) New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, pg 17

## ➤ VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACES

We often hear people repeat Aristotle's famous phrase 'Man is by nature a social animal'. Human beings are incapable of being in isolation and need to be in the presence of others.

Public spaces provide a platform or space in which people can come in contact with the social world outside and experience the opportunity of being with, seeing and hearing others which instils stimulation. It is a space that gives people a chance to see something new, to feel differently, to learn and to be inspired.

They provide people many opportunities to come together and engage with the community. If public spaces are successful they are inclusive of the diversity of groups present in our cities and create a social space for everyone in the society to participate in.



Image 02-Example of well-designed Public Space

*There are many factors that contribute to a successful public space, some factors are:*

- **The accessibility of the space**

This includes how welcoming the space is and whether people can access the space the way they feel comfortable in. This includes disability access and making a space for everyone regardless of their circumstances to be a part of the society through public space. One good way to ensure public spaces are accessible is to provide good seating in them so that people can enjoy the space for a long time and seek respite (as illustrated in the image below).



Image 03-Times Square, New York City

- **The comfort of the space**

This is the ability for people to be themselves in the public realm. One of the greatest joys of going to a public space is so that people can express themselves fully. This might involve meeting new people, rekindling with old friends, participating in activities in the space or interacting with the public art in the space. These are all ways that people can be comfortable in the public sphere. One example of being comfortable in a public space is engaging with public art. The Bean Sculpture in Chicago is a great example of where people are comfortable to express themselves. Public art tends to create a very comfortable atmosphere for people to express their true selves and interact with the objects while bringing out the best in people.



Image 04-The Bean Sculpture, Chicago



- **Creating sociability**

Many scholars in human geography have explored this idea of 'sociality' in the public sphere. It is basically the interactions people have in the public space and about the connection this forms between the person and the space. This might include the social networks people form on the street or city squares. Creating an opportunity for people to meet new people in the public space is important because this adds to the sociability of public space.

Having social events in the public space such as music concerts or hosting movies are also a great way to get people to engage with one another. This creates an intricate connection between the space and the people in it forming a sense of 'togetherness' in the space as stated by Doreen Massey.



Image 05-Movie at a public space

Project for public spaces has illustrated these factors in the following diagram which explains the concept of a successful public space.

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE?

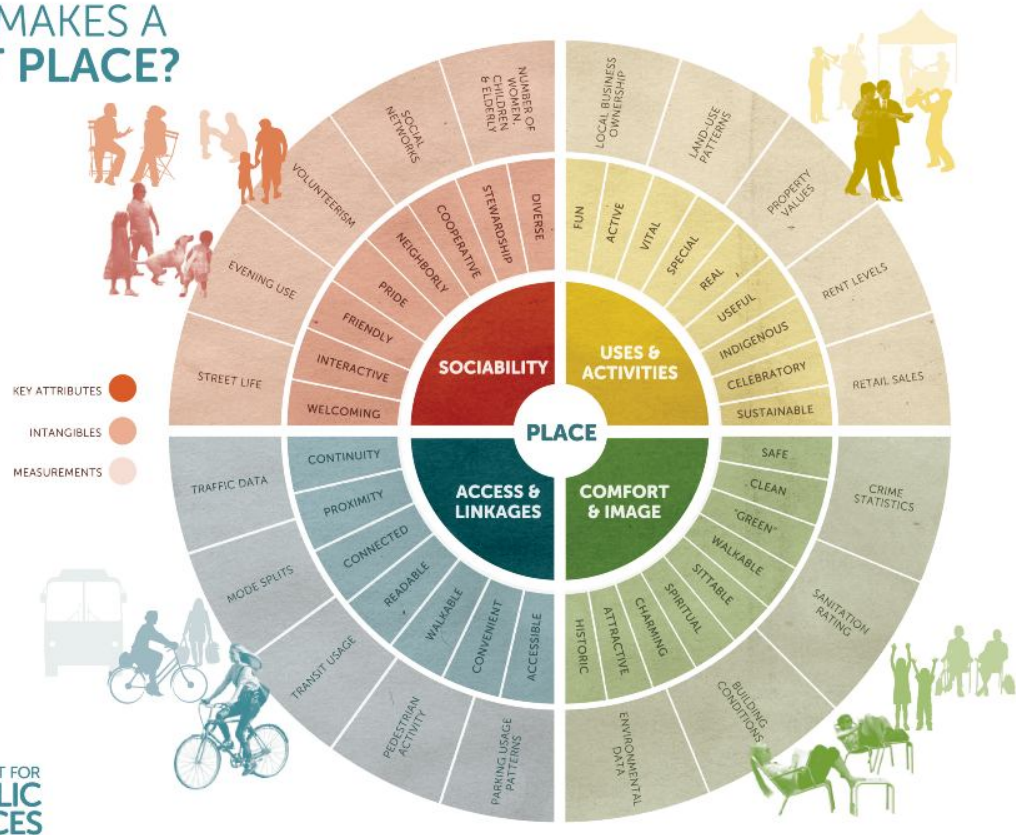


Image 06-Diagram

This indicates that when urban planners and architects construct public Spaces, they should keep the above factors in mind in order to make it Successful. There are many examples of successful public spaces around the world, From Trafalgar Square in London to New York's High Line Park and Times Square, which embody all the factors mentioned above. While there are many other ways to be creative in public space, these are just a few examples to increase the overall quality of public spaces.

Therefore, public spaces should be a valued asset where cities embrace the concept of creating more vibrant and welcoming spaces for everyone to use. This can also be a powerful way to create more positive environments for people to assimilate and come together as a society as described above.



Image 07-Trafalgar Square in London



Image 08-New York's High Line Park

## ➤ CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS OF A PUBLIC SPACE

As important as public spaces are, they are also faced with innumerable constraints. Designing and maintaining a public space is highly challenging. Public spaces need to be protected against various impediments such as crime, misuse, deterioration, violence and climate. Among all, the safety of the users of public spaces is the key challenge.

The assurance of the feeling of safety is a precondition for public space to be utilized to its highest capacity. As seductive as the experience of the 'other' can be, it can be equally or more controversial in nature.

"...Public domain experiences occur at the boundary between friction and freedom. On the one hand there is always the tension of a confrontation with the unfamiliar; on the other, the liberation of the experience of a different approach"(Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A, 2001, p116).(5)

A major constraint of the public realm is the presence of thieves, muggers, illegal drug peddlers and other dangers in society. Public spaces need to ensure the safety of its users and protect it against misuse by the 'undesirables'. It becomes an extremely tricky situation where public spaces need to be protected against crime by filtering out the undesirable activities but at the same time not losing the public character of the space. This precarious situation can be handled with different approaches.

The immediate move would sometimes be to fence up the place and restrict the usage of the space. This would not be the ideal way of handling it. Instead of discriminating between groups of users, surveillance cameras, good quality of lighting, clever organization of space, metal detectors or patrolling of security guards can be utilized. This way the original meaning of a 'public place' is not lost and at the same time, safety is ensured.

Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A. (2001, p120) voice that 'The battle of Tompkins Square Park is a famous and almost classic example of the battle for the meaning of public space'. (6)

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(5)- Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 116

(6)- Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 120

They explain the riot that broke out over Tompkins square Park in the late 1980s in New York. The park had been occupied by the homeless, alcoholics and drug addicts. At the time the police attempted to take control over the situation by closing the park at night. Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A. (2001, p120) question this action, 'was the police intervention really intended to fight displacement? Was it really about the protection of public domain? Or did it in fact undermine that very notion?' (7)

Thus the challenge lies in balancing the need between the 'public' and the 'space' battling safety through restricted access and the ideology of democracy. This issue should be carefully addressed with a strategic design that allows both visual and spatial security.



Image 09-Tompkins Square Park, Top View



Image 10-Tompkins Square Park, Top View

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(7)-Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 120

## ➤ CRITERIA AND DESIGN APPROACH FOR A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SPACE

How does one decide if a public space is a good or bad? How can we say that one public space functions better than the other? Is it because there are more people using that space or because it is safer or aesthetically more appealing or more inviting in the eye of a tourist or because it is more 'public' than the others? What is the criteria for a successful public space becomes a complicated question.

The success of a public space becomes a question of its contextual design approach and its manageability. A public space should be a space that people don't just use as a transitional space to pass by but a space that tempts people to slow down or stop and experience the place. A place that in some way enriches the lives of the people using it. This almost completely depends on the design of the public space in terms of aesthetics, accessibility, comfort, safety, diversity etc. The minutest aspects like the spacing of street lights, arrangement of street furniture, design of landscape, pattern of paving, material finishes and zoning of activities play a vital role in how these spaces are used and their level of success.

Referring back to the example of the Tompkins Square Park mentioned in the earlier part of the essay, we can see how the character of the park is transformed by mere rearrangement and zoning of activities. After the violent confrontation, the park was closed for two years for renovation.

Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A. (2001, p120) explain how, now 'The park has been given a new lease of life'. (8)

After renovation, the park has been subdivided into different zones. The various groups using the park have found their own places in the park: the dog owners can be seen in the enclosed sawdust plot, the tiny benches along the pathways are occupied by the homeless, families sit in their glass plots keeping an eye on the children playing in the playgrounds and the basketball courts are occupied by children and teenagers.

Each group of people be it young or old or rich or poor, have found their own use in parts of the park and coexist maintaining the privacy they

need and at the same time displaying the diversity of that community in one small park.

Hajer, M. and Reijndorp, A (2001, P120) argue that 'Tompkins square is an example of the value of compression and moderated parochialization'. (9)

This example throws light on the importance of the details in design for public spaces. As important as the actual layout of the separate spaces may be, the integrated interrelationship between these separate spaces is more important.

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(8)-Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 120

(9)-Hajer, M and Reijndorp, A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. Netherlands. NAI. pg 120



## ➤ 10 Factors of Public Space which Connecting People and the Streets

Our impressions of a city are formed mainly by the quality of public spaces. If they are not pleasant and preserved, or if they transmit a sense of insecurity, we will seldom return. Good planning of these spaces should be the rule, not the exception. In the series "Public Spaces," originally published in Portuguese by TheCityFix Brasil, we explore different aspects related to public spaces that determine our daily experience in cities.

Among city buildings, there is a network of spaces that create and strengthen connections at different levels of influence. In a book, they would be between the lines: the implicit meaning between concrete. Public spaces, which fill the urban gaps with life, are directly associated with the construction of what we call a city and influence the relationships that are created within them.

"When we refer to the streets and other public spaces of a city, we are actually talking about the city's own identity. It is in these spaces that human exchanges and relationships, the diversity of use and the vocation of each place and the conflicts and contradictions of society are manifested," explains Lara Caccia, Urban Development Specialist, in her dissertation urban mobility: public policies and the appropriation of space in Brazilian cities.

Public areas shape community ties in neighborhoods. They are places of encounter and can facilitate political mobilization, stimulate actions and help prevent crime.

They are environments for interaction and exchange of ideas that impact the quality of the urban environment. While not considered "public spaces," cafes, bookstores and bars have similar impacts.

Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people create and maintain public spaces. PPS discusses The Power of 10: a good public space needs to present at least ten possibilities.

This includes different things people can do in it, and ten reasons to be there. Without the ten things, these areas become places of passage

where people do not want to be for the simple fact that there is nothing that makes them stay. “The existence of quality and usable public spaces, with greater urban vitality, will increase the perception of security and Democratization of these spaces,” says Lara. It is a two-way street: people will be on the street if they feel safe and the street will be a safer environment the more people use them. Below, is presenting ten principles that should be considered for a high-quality public space. The elements relate with each other – active facades and constructions on the human scale, for example, are directly related to the

### **1. Diversity of uses:**

Blending residential, office and commercial areas, such as restaurants, cafes and local commerce, attracts people and makes the environment safer and friendlier. The diversity of uses generates external activities that contribute to the safety of spaces: more people on the streets helps to inhibit crime.

This diversity, however, needs to cover all times of day. If the spaces are inviting and only busy during the day, they will still be unsafe places at night. Planning public spaces in a way that encourages the coexistence and the permanence of people is also a way of investing in security.

### **2. Active facades:**

Connection between the ground level of the buildings, the sidewalk and the street contributes to safety and the attractiveness of urban design. Visually more interesting streets are used more often by people. In addition, this relationship influences people’s perception of the city and how they are to use it: Jane Jacobs says that it is mainly streets and sidewalks that indicate how public space is perceived and used.

### **3. Social dimension and urban vitality:**

As an aggregator of people, public space has influence over the social dimension. Wide, accessible streets, squares, parks, sidewalks, bike paths and urban furniture stimulate interaction between people and the environment, generate a positive use of space and increase urban vitality. In addition to focusing on high-density, urban areas, it is crucial to consider the peripheries, guaranteeing quality public spaces to the population that does not live in the city center.

#### **4. Human scale:**

High-scale, high-density construction can negatively affect people's health. In his field studies, Jan Gehl noted that people tend to walk faster when passing empty or inactive areas, in contrast to the slower, quieter pace of walking in livelier, more active environments. Human-scale constructions have a positive effect on people's perceptions of public spaces: they feel that they were considered in the planning process of that space.

#### **5. Lighting:**

Efficient and people-oriented lighting facilitates the occupancy of public spaces at night, enhancing safety. When installed on the pedestrian and cyclist scale, public lighting creates the necessary conditions to move more safely when there is no natural light.

#### **6. Stimulating the local economy:**

Quality public spaces not only benefit people by offering leisure and living areas, but they also have the potential to boost the local economy. The safe and attractive conditions foster walking and cycling, leading to easy access of local commerce.

#### **7. Local identity:**

Public spaces should be planned for the small businesses that characterize the neighborhood. Large enterprises (such as supermarkets or other chain companies) can contribute to the economy in general, but they have little participation in the scale of the neighborhood. Small businesses and ventures have significant long-term impacts, as well as add to the personality and identity of the place. When planning a public space it is necessary to take into account the social dynamics and cultural specificities of the area, in order to generate a strong relationship between people and place.

## **8. Complete streets:**

Wherever possible, public areas should be thought of following the principles of Complete Streets and “shared spaces.” The Complete Streets concept defines streets designed to ensure the safe circulation of all users—pedestrians, cyclists, drivers and users of public transport. Sidewalks in good condition, infrastructure for bicycles, street furniture and signage for all users are among the elements that can compose a complete street.

## **9. Green areas:**

In addition to contributing to air quality and helping to ease temperatures in the summer, vegetation has the power to humanize cities by attracting people to outdoor activities. As cities become denser, access to green public spaces will become even more important as urban forestation can lower people’s stress levels and enhance well-being in cities. In addition, trees, plants and flowerbeds are strategic for urban drainage and maintenance of biodiversity.

## **10. Social participation:**

Involving residents in the design, planning and administration of urban public spaces or the neighborhoods in which they live is essential to maintain the quality of these spaces. Public spaces have different uses and meanings in each neighborhood and community.

Resident involvement ensures that the nature and use of public space will meet the community’s distinct needs. If a space does not reflect the demands and desires of the local population, it will not be used or maintained.

Social participation is a central element for the construction of safer, equitable public areas. The way we live in cities is reconfigured every day, through the transformation of society and the emergence of new policies, technologies and alternative transportation options. Urbanization, densification and high motorization rates create planning challenges and instigate cities to think about new development models. In the midst of constant transformation, however, the importance of public spaces for quality of life remains constant. They continue to be spaces for exchange, coexistence and meetings. They continue to be vital for urban well-being. Beyond the walls that surround us, on the street is where life happens.

## ➤ EXAMPLES OF GOOD PUBLIC SPACES

The cities like Barcelona, Copenhagen and Melbourne with their imaginative public space policy have managed to become pioneers in urban regeneration standing as an example to inspire other cities in the world to pay attention to the quality of the public realm.

Explicitly in the case of Barcelona, successful regeneration of the urban space was achieved through a change in new public space policy. During the election in 1979, a new government led by socialists came into power. This government appointed Oriol Bohigas as the new city counsellor for urban design. Bohigas adopted a policy that wouldn't depend on the interest of the private industry but instead on the public sector for the renewal and creation of new parks, squares and other public spaces.

Gehl, J and Gemzoe, L. (2000, p29) quote Pasqual Maragall, elected mayor in 1982 expressing the underlying philosophy of the policy as "We want to recreate the lost dignity of the urban landscape and to stimulate and direct the energy of the marketplace". (10)

A twofold process was implemented; existing squares were renovated in conjunction with building underground parking spaces and new squares, parks and streets were created by demolishing dilapidated warehouses, apartments and other buildings. Art and architecture have played a vital role in designing the public space of Barcelona. Gehl, j. and Gemoze, L (2000, p29) convey that new parks and squares were created under the motto "move museums into the street". (11)

This is a classic example showing the importance of the role of the government in creating public spaces for its citizens. Although a public private partnership makes the maintenance of public spaces easier, the government should take more responsibility and not solely depend on the private sector for the creation and maintenance of public spaces.



Image 11- Placa dels Països Catalans, Barcelona



Image 12- Placa dels Països Catalans, Barcelona

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(10)-Gehl, J & Gemzoe, L (2000) *New City Spaces Copenhagen*, Danish Architectural Press, pg 29  
(11)-Gehl, J & Gemzoe, L (2000) *New City Spaces Copenhagen*, Danish Architectural Press, pg 29



Image 13- La Rambladel Mar, Barcelona

Another unique example of how a museum is developed into a public domain is The British Museum at Great Russell street, London. Although it is a museum and not a typical typology of a public space like a park or a square it has certain characteristics of such public spaces. The British museum not only behaves as an attraction for tourists but is also utilized by the locals to commute between the 2 streets it is located between. Its majestic atrium acts as a sort of a public plaza where people could stop and get a cup of coffee along the way.



Image 14- Atrium of the British Museum

Collective spaces such as multiplex cinemas and malls are becoming complete worlds unto themselves cutting off any sort of conversation with the outside world. The Centre Pompidou is an interesting example of an avant-garde multicultural complex that generates a public realm engaging its interior world with the exterior surrounding. The circulation of this building is designed in such a way that it fills the space with activity giving it the true character of a successful public space.

The Centre Pompidou illustrates how even such collective crowd pullers can be a part of the public realm of the city.





Image 15- The Centre Pompidou

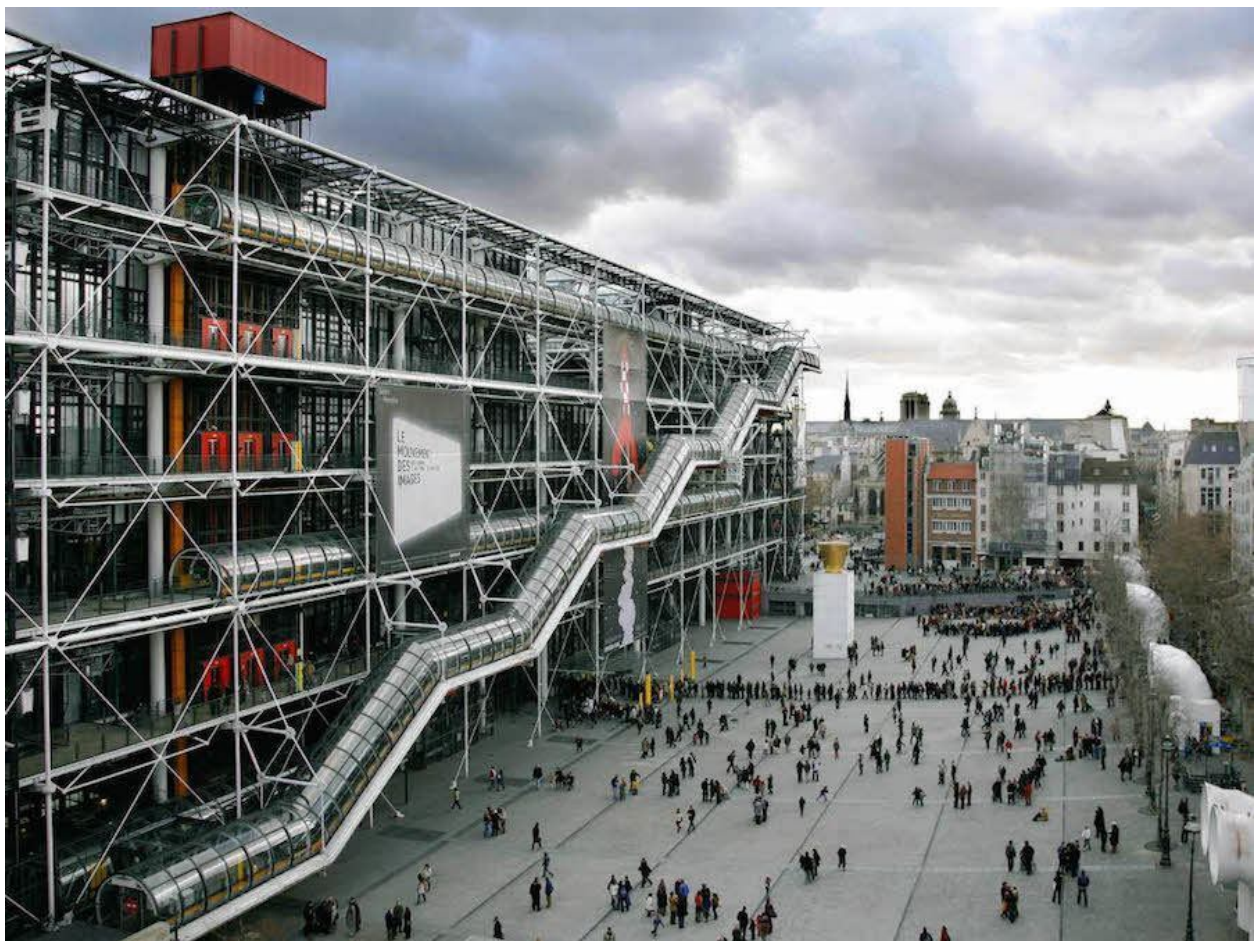


Image 16- The Centre Pompidou

## ➤ PUBLIC SPACE IN SLEMANI CITY CENTER

At the beginning of establishing the city year 1784, the one of the first elements of the city which has been built was (Sara Building) which was a government building where they govern the Empire.

Sara building has a square in front of it which is called **Sara Square** or (Bardarky Sara) where people use it for gathering and other purposes.

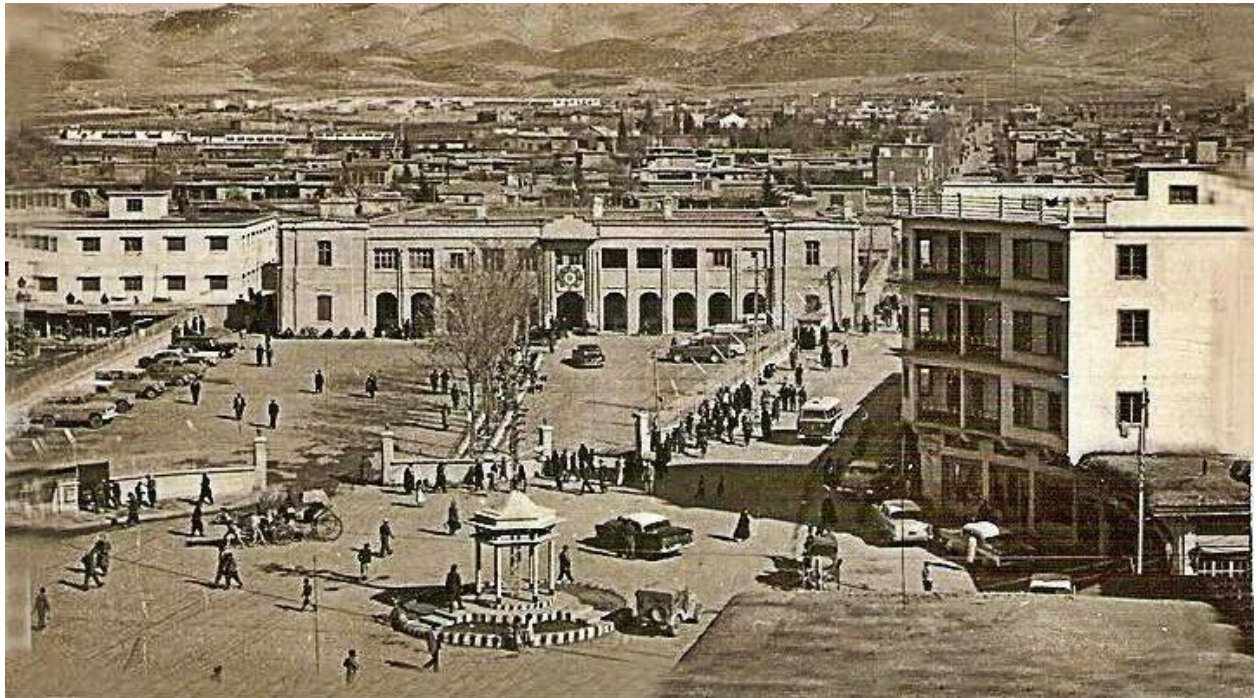


Image 17- Old photo of Sara Building and the Square

Sara square is still the main public space in the city center.

The other square built opposite to Sara building which still called Sara square.

Now the square in front of Sara building is opened to public especially after the renovation of Sara building the square renovated as well as there are restaurant and cafe which became as an attraction for tourists.

The square which is opposite to Sara building (Bardarky Sara) is highly using by public for different purposes, it consists of (sitting benches, shading areas, trees, part of it as flat grey square for gathering, and also one of the main element of the square is a large portrait of King Mahmud) at the edges of the square to the walk way there are many

open air book stores where they sale books and newspapers which is becomes as a part of the city culture. Since the early morning till the mid night the square is full of people especially eveningis a peak time.

The square is also used as a meeting point for those who want to meet then start walking in Bazar.

Close to Sara Square opposite to **Big Mosque** (Mzgwaty Gawra) there is another open space which is now already became a Bazar.

### **Salim Street,**

The main corridor of the city with a length of almost (4.4 km), we can consider it as a public space all over the length of the corridor especially in these focal points:

- Saholaka, there are many fast food shops, fashion shops and cafeterias& restaurants with open air sitting places.



Image 18- Salim Street, Saholaka

- Nali Park, in front of old cigarette factory. There are trees, sitting places, walk ways and place for art sculpture.



Image 19- Salim Street which shows Nali Park at left

- Public Park (Baxy Gshty), a public park at the end of Salim Street at the city center, it was created at 1939.



Image 20- BaxyGshty, Bird Eye view



Image 21- Baxy Gshty, pedestrian corridor

### **Mwlawy Street,**

Starts when Salim Street ends. One of the most popular road at the city center with a length of 800m and one direction regarding traffic flow.

The street is highly used for pedestrian by local people and visitors also and its conceder as a public space and a Bazar area.

Kawa Street, Saboonkaran Street, Orzdy Street and Piramerd Street are other important streets at the city center with high capacity of pedestrians.

These public spaces mentioned above is used by local people and the visitors as a place for ( walking and gathering, social and cultural activities, meeting point and Bazar), but in terms of quality are poor and in terms of design are not well designed and in terms of size are not enough compare to city population.

## ➤ NEW DESIGN FOR SARA SQUARE

Slemani Municipality planning to renovate Sara square and recently prepared a new design for that purpose.

The design is prepared by local architectural bureau in a joint venture with international consultant.

The aim of the project is to widen the square and rearrange the area by having a new design. The new plan is consists of (Green area with lawn and trees to create shade area for sitting places, water fountains, wide grey flat square for gathering and multiuse activities) at the end of the square to eastern side there will be a five story building which is call 'Sara Mall' and it will have a historical façade by using the old architectural elements of the area.



Image 21- Sara Square, New design

## ➤ CONCLUSION

Now that the value of public spaces and the importance of design and planning in creating them has been established, it is vital to remember that the design approach for creating these spaces should be very site specific.

Each public space has its own inherent meaning and use. The design of one space cannot simply be imitated and plugged into another just because it is functioning successfully in that particular place.

Merely mimicking the characteristics of one successful place into the creation of another public space is not the solution and can often result in a disastrous misuse of the space. Such spaces should be carefully created considering the type of usage, lifestyle of users and the context of its surroundings.

We can now see the complexity that lies in the subject matter of not only designing, creating and maintaining public spaces but also in their fundamental definition itself.

Public spaces offer great cultural, economic and social values restoring the identity of cities and enhancing the lifestyle of its citizens giving them opportunities for new experiences."...Public spaces are needed. The need for spaces of all types and sizes is obvious- from the little residential street to the city square". (Gehl, J. 1987, p51). (12)

Although it is quiet challenging to urbanists, architects and governments, creating new public spaces and maintaining them should continue to be taken very seriously.

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(12)-Gehl, J, (1987, 2011 revisited ed.) *Life between Buildings: Using Public Space* (transl. by Koch, J.) New York: Van Norstrand Reinhold, pg 51

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[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

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[www.wikipedia.org/Slemani](http://www.wikipedia.org/Slemani) City