

Public-private relations and urban form

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Public-private distinction, in all its different shades, has been a key determinant of urban form since the dawn of cities. This paper investigates this distinction as applied to cities today. It is organized in two parts. The paper first outlines the defining features of public and private spheres and investigates how making the distinction between these spheres shapes urban space. Public and private spheres are primarily defined in terms of access, which finds physical and institutional expressions in the city. The ability to control what is accessible to whom, and the balance between concealment and exposure, is an essential part of social organization, contributing to the way urban form is configured. The paper then discusses the problems and tensions of the current approaches to public-private relations in the context of major political, economic and cultural change. As the solutions to economic problems have been sought in the marketplace, the public-sector's role has been cut back and the private-sector has been stimulated in the hope that its dynamism would lead to economic revival. The resulting change in the balance between public and private sectors in the political economy, however, has had considerable social impacts and inevitable spatial consequences. The challenge for democratic cities is how to deal with the changing public-private relations while providing common goods such as public spaces for all. Rather than a mere configuration of the physical environment, urban form is a window into the urban society, reflecting as well as framing social processes.

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