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# Review

## ***The Empty Place: Democracy and Public Space***

Teresa Hoskyns. New York: Routledge, 2014. 214pp.

### Asma Mehan\*

The relationship of public space to democracy is dominated by two competing, yet intertwined, theoretical bases: political philosophy and spatial theory. But how does the architect make political space? Can architectural practice create political space through design? In this book, Teresa Hoskyns theorizes that the converging point between theoretical foundations and democratic practices is “participation” within “social production of space.” Therefore, “participation” from joint perspectives of architecture and political philosophy has been studied in two different frameworks: the theoretical and the practical. Unlike most previous works on the relationship between architecture and democracy, Hoskyn’s book transcends the spatial and political interpretation of public space. By incorporating new theoretical approaches to representative democracy, it depicts a complex dialectic and multilayered picture of—“spaces of democracy” and the “democracy of space”—in her phrasing.

The book is divided into a theoretical part and a practical part. Part I examines the theoretical aspects of democracy and public space through political philosophy and spatial

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theory. Part II explores how democracy can be enacted through spatial practice. The first chapter explores the participatory roots of democracy by examining the public spaces of the political center of ancient Greece. The author describes a model of three spaces (the assembly, the agora, and the theater) as part of the democratic arrangement of Athens during the fifth century. To highlight the significance of “representation” versus “participation” within modern democratic theory, the conflict between the meanings of ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’, led to historical debates that turned into a democratic divide between East and West in the twentieth century.

Subsequently, in the second chapter, Hoskyns introduced “citizenship” as the key to the debate on democracy and public space. For answering the problem of “how” and “to what extent” public can participate in democracy, she focused on Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic model and the civil society of Jürgen Habermas. She argues that these different models of participatory democracy can coexist and are necessarily spatial. Hoskyns further explores the agonistic democratic model influenced by Lefort’s theory of “the empty place.”

In the third chapter, the author explores a counternarrative to public space discourse linked to multiple interpretations of democracy and public space. It investigates the place-based and non-place-based definitions of public space, which began with the examination of capitalist social relations and neo-liberalization of public space resulting in the dislocation of the public sphere from the public realm, and the visualization of the public space. Hoskyns’ particular contribution is to move beyond formal philosophical analysis of space production, and account for the role played by contemporary ongoing political debates. Hoskyns rightly explains the prevalent mistake of undermining the critical importance of availability of physical public space in our digital world.

In the fourth chapter, Hoskyns builds upon the previous chapters by summarizing the implications for the construction of democratic public space, which included three modes of production that can be linked to different democratic of public space: a universal model by architect Bernard Tschumi, a community model from atelier d’architecture autogeree, and an agonistic model from artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. The chapter is a worthwhile addition to the slim literature on the subject of production of democratic public space. From this supposition, Hoskyns moves to the compelling question of what is the role of architect in relation to the construction of political public space. However, according to the author, there is a lack of articulation about neo-liberalism, which has become firmly

embedded in the spatial fabric of the built environment.

Readers will find very helpful Hoskyns' semiotic and architectural approaches in introducing democratically produced public spaces opened to the European Social Forum in Paris in 2004. In this manner, the author introduces the "empty place of power" through the removal of power from space in Tschumi's Parc de la Villette and Wodiczko's projections. Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City," which became a global social forum movement in Porto Alegre in 2002, is discussed by the author as the connecting point between theoretical framework and case studies, a discussion that describes both the "democracy of space" and the "spaces of democracy." Hoskyns believes that the right to the city should take the form of participative action rather than right-based approach.

While the first part of the book (chaps. 1–4), provides a general framework and introduction to the discourse of democracy and public space, the second part (chaps. 5–7) investigates the ideas explored in part I through practice. It is devoted to the production of public space and democratic identity from the position of three collaborative spatial practices: architectural practice on Regent's Park Estate; the feminist art/architecture collective, *taking place*; and the participatory policies of social forums.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the investigation of architectural practices contribution in on-going conflicts on the estate and how these relate to the wider questions of democracy and participation. The author declares that the public open space project in Regent's Park State proves the possibility of constructing missing layers and reconstructing democratic relationships in problematic and homogenous environments. Hoskyns mentioned this practice as the starting point for her research.

Chapter 6 looks at the role of spatial practice in the construction of radical democratic identity as developed through the feminist art/architecture collective *taking place*, which is the name for a group of artists and architects occupying an area termed by Jane Rendell as 'feminist spatial practice'. It explores women identity as one example of the types of political groupings described by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Hoskyns brilliantly uses feminist theory and identity in relation to the project work of *taking place*, contextualized through historical shifts in practice. Rather than theoretical frameworks, the author's unique experience working with the project work of *taking place*, first as an actor, and second as an artist, led to rich discussions concerned with the production of a feminist space in which diverse identities and multiple voices can develop.

In Chapter 7, Hoskyns researches the participatory democratic practices of the social forums and Occupy Movement. Furthermore, she discusses how tensions within the social forums relate to different participatory models of democracy explored in chapter 2. Hoskyns effectively collects her research, which includes participation in the WSF (World Social Forum) in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2003), and all of the ESFs (European Social Forums) in Florence (2002), Paris (2003), London (2004), Athens (2006), and Malmö (2008). Hoskyns concludes that the public forum is key to her research on architecture and democracy. The author examines how social forums appropriate space for the practice of participatory democracy through the examination of social forums from the global scale to the continental and the city. In the rest of chapter, the author closely examines how democratic organization of the city is a major factor in participatory democracy. Hoskyns concludes that, since the lack of “plug in to the city,” there is a marked difference between social forums in Latin America and Europe, which have resulted in the Arab Spring and Occupy movement<sup>1</sup> in the United States and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the book is impressive in scope, offers original arguments and valuable interpretations, and makes a major contribution to the discourse of the relationship between participatory democracy and public space. With the author’s background in architecture, Hoskyns proficiently bridges architectural, political, philosophical and social perceptions of place; efficiently moved her role from being a theorist, architect and a spectator to actor and activist; and turns the attention to representative democracy and process of space production.

To her credit, Hoskyns effectively uses architectural, feminist and participatory spatial practices and examples to help the reader imagine the spaces and spatial democratic relations discussed in the book. A brief overview of its structure and a summary of the chapters in the introductory section could have helped the reader to better follow the narrative. Likewise, the title of the book is somewhat leading. Using the phrase “the empty place” implies the existence of a particular perception of space that is informed by the impossibility to occupy the empty place.<sup>2</sup> The book’s discussion of the empty place as the democratic public space puts forward a bottom-up approach for design methodology, which focuses on the political by engaging with the different spheres of activity, points of contestation and differences present in each of the projects. Regarding the fact that the issue of democratic public spaces has not received much scholarly coverage, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on public space and democracy. It offers a framework

applicable to other Western democratic spatial practices as well.<sup>3</sup> Hoskyns presents the rich insights derived from a synthesis of architecture, politics, and democracy studies.

#### NOTES

1. Occupy Movement is the international branch of the Occupy Wall Street movement that protests against social and economic inequality around the world, which is partly inspired by the Arab Spring.
2. There is an inspiring interpretation of the author about the notion of empty place as a necessity for democracy in the conclusion (175–81).
3. Recently, I have been involved in introducing Middle Eastern Spatial Practices into the literature on protest squares as part of my Ph.D. thesis.