

Public Performance

George Baird's new book argues for the enduring importance of public space.

Words Freek Lomme

Canadian architect, critic, educator and author George Baird attempts a close reading of people as they negotiate public spaces. A newly released book, *Public Space*, offers his interpretation of urban choreography dating back almost a decade and seems to be inspired and informed by the human energy it describes.

According to Baird's empirical readings, 'public space' manifests as a theatre of sociability. Here, sociability becomes epic (or narrative) through its choreography and performative aftermath, and performance becomes political. Whereas architecture often neglects to acknowledge the dynamics of urban movement, Baird builds upon traces of public movement, as recorded in photography, and presents his unassuming speculations.

Instead of simply commenting on the urban results of top-down design, Baird evaluates and rather favours a public emancipation of the private, as this enables further liberation of 'the public'. His approach is generously user-centred, and his latest book

is a call to engage in an underlying public script and to practise its politics.

Baird bases his speculations on a range of sources, from his readings of street choreography, as represented in photographs, to urban architecture and philosophy.

Is the urban epic people-specific or site-specific?

George Baird: I would say that it is somewhat man- or woman-specific and not particularly site-specific. There are some local culture-specific issues, such as degrees of the socially acceptable proximity of bodies in public space, but – assuming a supportive architectural frame – the urban epic is possible in many different places.

Is the performance of the epic the key to the user-centred accountability of urban architecture?

In my opinion, it is certainly one key. I am trying, through the use of both Arendt and Benjamin in my theoretical argument,

to show in what modest psychological increments of self-awareness in public the 'epic', as you call it, can gradually take shape.

You describe the presence of the plural and seem to acknowledge the presence of conflict. Is public space

inevitably a stage for political drama, and, if so, what does this say about

'Europeans are over-anxious about diversity'

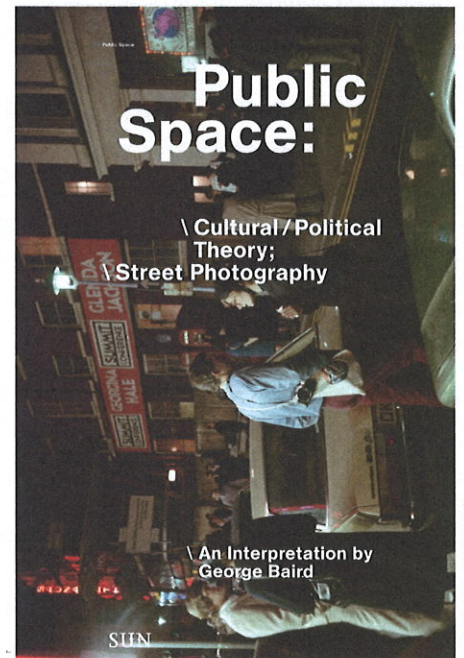
election in the Chicago street ritual formations engaged in conversation. Thus, for the first time in my sequence of images, the conditions of focused attention and mutual awareness has gone so far as to engage the key American concept of 'seesay'.

This brings us to the heart of one of the central problems of classical street photography: the question of whose sociability 'we' ultimately witness. The images I have intended to represent sociability in my survey is not a classic one, but rather, an example from the fascinating contemporary work of the American photographer Hans S. Suter, who has developed a modest approach in which she sets up photographic situations in a wide range of social settings, only to have photographic taken by a friend or a bystander – and with herself always present in the image.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANS SUTER



The photograph I have chosen is from her 'Historical Portrait' and it aptly captures the essence of a famous passage in sociology by the German sociologist Georg Simmel:



current political views on the urban that try to narrow the scope of the practice of liberty to diversity?

Yes, I would say that it is such a stage, albeit one that can enact such drama – even potentially high drama – from a very modestly quotidian point of departure. As for narrowing the scope of the practice of liberty to diversity, for me this would be quite inappropriate.

However, as I am a Torontonionian – we believe we live in the most diverse city in the world – I have to say that like many of my Toronto friends, I find Europeans over-anxious about diversity. We would argue that you should just relax and try to act magnanimously.

Are your interpretations meant as a manual to bring about sociability in public space or as a guide to understanding it? What do you want of your readers?

Again, I would say both. I am particularly interested in encouraging architects and urban designers to reaffirm their confidence in the vast potential of public urban space in our time. But, like everyone else in the world, we designers are also citizens.

What does your reading of the area offstage – of social performance – say about the morality of the actors?

Not much, I would venture to say. As Hannah Arendt so tendentiously observed, political action is not so much about doing good as it is about seeking glory. _

Public Space: Cultural/Political Theory; Street Photography
By George Baird
Published by Sun Architecture
ISBN 978-9-46105-174-5