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, a novel form of choreography, that seems to be inspired and informed by the human energy it describes.

According to Baird’s empirical readings, ‘public space’ manifests itself 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, is it certainly one key. I am trying, through the use of both Arendt and Benjamin in my theoretical argument, to show what modest psychological increments of self-awareness in public the ‘epic’, as you call it, can gradually take shape.

‘Europeans are over-anxious about diversity’

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 the 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 Torontonian - 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._

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By George Baird
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