

Intersecting realms:
Public space, Education and Protest



A study into the the evolution of protest and occupation in public educational institutions, and the wider public context.

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How has the occupation of public educational institutions as a political domain changed over time and why?

Introduction

Humans' use of public space to fulfil democratic processes and express their political views has existed as a phenomenon for centuries. The public realm that encompasses public space, however, is constantly evolving, shifting and converging with alternative spheres and realities, making it increasingly harder to distinguish public spaces, and the values, behaviours and environments they represent, and how the political acts of occupation and protest fit into these changing narratives. The area of public space this dissertation will be focusing on is that of public educational institutions and the complex interplay of political discourse within them.

Often overlooked, the presence of political activism in educational public spaces can act as a vital source of grassroots democracy, educating, preparing and influencing the wider public context of political protest and collective society on a broad scale. By investigating the occurrence of protest in these spaces over time, I can observe any historic trends, key drivers of change, and assess the current state of protest within these spaces, in order to identify if any modifications should or shouldn't be encouraged for the benefit of future demonstrations or occupations in public space.

The dissertation will begin by dissecting what it means for something to be public, to gain an understanding of how the differing connotations of public are applied and appropriated to fit specific scenarios of public space. Using this examination, I will delve into the historical origins, specifically looking at the Greek Agora and Roman Forum to observe how their depictions have informed public space today. A key part of this research is to examine the catalysts of change over the past several decades, to better understand the current socio-political climate, and observe how general and educational public spaces have adapted or rejected them. I will then research the various methods of protest in exterior and interior contexts through the use of case studies and precedents, which will assist me in showcasing the undisputable importance of academic freedom and the right to protest in the progression and innovation of contemporary societies, and why they must be preserved.

01 What Defines Public?

When discussing something as public, it is routinely spoken about as harbouring a singular, definitive meaning that is understood universally. However, it is essential to recognise public as an umbrella term spanning a multitude of contexts articulated through a series of practices, discourses, institutions, spaces and materialities (Madanipour, 2023). The ability to identify the various contexts of public will help to inform the question at hand and explain why there is so much tension tied to the categorisation of public and occupation/protest together. The aim is not to crown one form of public as having higher significance over another, but to decipher the ways in which the concepts intersect and communicate with each other, navigating how they apply to public spaces, particularly in relation to the public educational settings or institutions I will be referring to in my investigation.

Ali Madanipour's book, 'Rethinking Public Space', examines public space as being separated into three categories: totality, authority, and openness, in which totality lays the groundwork for the other two concepts to feed off. Totality alludes to the idea of a "united but invisible body made of people as a whole" (Madanipour, 2023, pg.46). With emphasis being placed on the 'invisible body', as there is no tangible boundary clarifying who is included in this whole entity that the public phenomenon encompasses. Additionally, when addressing 'the public', it is often implicitly referring to a specific demographic of people rather than the entire human race, which is further supplemented by legislation, territories and unified interests, placing extra limitations on the public entity, and challenging the use of totality as a defining factor. The same restrictive evaluation of totality can be applied to public spaces. They bear the same values and barriers that are present in the inanimate public sphere, but instead exist as a physical reality, engaging with

real people and scenarios. As a result, public spaces often act in parallel to the public sphere, rejecting the accessibility of all individuals as a whole and are vulnerable to the infiltration of the private realm, contaminating public activities (Mitrašinić, M. and Mehta, 2021).

The dominating question behind the public is not only who or what the public is, but the question of power. Who does the public belong to? And who is in control of the public realm if not the public themselves? The components of society, state and nation are working parts in the autonomy of the public realm, each fulfilling various purposes and measures of authority. It is when tensions and disagreements between these categories and their constituents occur that the public idea becomes tougher to decode. Society is often affiliated with public; the difference lies in society's capacity to distinguish the public into refined groups of individuals who are associated with one another through a certain syllabus, such as shared history, beliefs, traditions and qualities, as opposed to a singular public entity. It suggests that there are, in fact, multiple public groups that are constantly evolving as the nature of social interaction bends to the demands of industrialisation, globalisation and modern ideologies that have mobilised and diversified the trajectory of present-day societies. However, the acknowledgement of these various groups doesn't naturally equate to a state of equality between them, with historical privileges and embedded hierarchies leaving imbalances of opportunity and power among the different groups (Madanipour, 2023).

In order to exercise the power of the public and the societies within it fairly, a common ground among the individuals of these collectives must be enforced, for their individual needs and demands to be heard or implemented. To be left to human nature, entailing each person for themselves, would result in cycles of chaos and disorder. Therefore, individuals must confide in a sovereign power to serve and govern the public,

introducing the state. The state acts as the agency in which the power of the people is manifested and united through institutions and services devoted to the people through the public sector. This includes the services of public spending, education, healthcare, transport, governance and more, suggesting that the public reflects the united authority that represents the people in their totality rather than the people themselves (Madanipour, 2023). A bridge between the agency of the people and the agency of the state is, in turn, formed, with constant negotiations and compromise required to maintain civilisation. The concept of public as openness materialises on this bridge, often acting as the stage of mediation between the two entities of power. Openness alludes to the feeling of exposure, of being heard or seen by everyone, forging a grounded sensation of reality for individuals, where they can be perceived as an independent person with freedom to express themselves in emotions, actions and participation, exhibiting why public spaces that are considered open or accessible to the people are commonly utilised as a public domain for free speech and protest, because pressure can be applied to real people and institutions instead of a metaphorical public realm (Mitrašinović, M. and Mehta, 2021).

Equipped with a deeper understanding of public, I can identify how its copious meanings have been applied to public spaces, and the institutions within those spaces, looking at which connotations have been more heavily instilled into the livelihoods of specific groups, and how this relationship has and continues to impact the socio-political realm. Alongside comprehending the definition of public, it is vital to also understand what constitutes a public space and uncover the notions that took place in historic societies and cultures that led to the emergence of them. Through factoring in the analogies of public mentioned above and researching different examples of public spaces across different time periods and locations around the world, it provides insight into how varying demographics of people cu-

rated and experienced public spaces, particularly in a political sense and how those contexts have informed public space in the present day.

Traces of public spaces

The Greek Agora

The earliest recorded evidence of a space intentionally designed and curated for the public domain dates back to ancient Greece around 600 BCE in the form of the Greek Agora, particularly the Athenian Agora, which was undoubtedly the vastest and most influential of its kind, welcoming thousands of visitors every day. (Fazio, Moffett and Wodehouse, 2014). What grew to become the beating heart of urban civilisation, the Agora cemented itself as a primary catalyst of urban society, substantially influencing the development of public spaces thereafter and marking the inception of the first established democracy (Neils and Kelrogers, 2021). The principle of the agora as a settlement began as a designated assembly point, typically located in a central or monumental location within a Greek polis(city), commonly linked with religious significance. Civilians would take part in the congregation and participate in the exchange of philosophy, politics, religion, commerce and other various social and judicial activities (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). An expansive open space would hold impermanent infrastructures and events ranging from the conduction of ostracisms, organisation of civic meetings, erection of market stalls and even political murders, (Dickenson, 2014) demonstrating just how entangled the various aspects of society were and how these crossovers contributed to generating several forms of political and philosophical discourse, laying the foundations for communities across ancient Greece (HOMER A. THOMPSON AND R. E. WYCHERLEY, 1972).

One of the primary factors that enabled the Agora to prosper as a public space was the collective collaboration between citizens. Mandatory expectations were placed on citizens to attend and partake in the legislation and operation of the city, with access to law courts being appointed as essential since

the early 6th BC. A multitude of external and internal political institutions coexisted in Athens, including the Pnyx, an open-air venue, where the Athenian assembly (ecclesia) was held for the chosen public to debate civic affairs. Further accommodated by the bouleuterion (council house), governed by an appointed council (boule) of 500 citizens, each selected at random from differing tribes to represent the city/state for one given year, with the intention of equally distributing power and opportunity among society, and actively mitigating against tyranny (Neils and Kelrogers, 2021). The spatial strategy of the bouleuterion aimed to create a platform for individual dialogue to transpire whilst simultaneously remaining as a collective entity. Fulfilling a square/rectangular shape, tiered seating flanked three sides of the building, strategically positioned to face a central speaker (dais). The spatial hierarchy granted each member of the boule to be acknowledged and viewed all at once, involving all participants in the negotiation of the agenda to be presented at the assembly (Martin-McAuliffe, S.L. 2017).

The proximity of these political institutions to the social and commercial buildings or infrastructure in the agora was infectious, driving citizens from varying backgrounds and social classes to cross paths, interact and discuss present issues and news with one another, inciting non-institutional politics (Gottesman, 2014). The overlap was so evident that it was implied that “justice was sold alongside other commodities at Athens” (HOMER A. THOMPSON AND R. E. WYCHERLEY, 1972). It became a continuously contested issue in Athenian society (specifically for those of higher status or class) whether the scale of this form of political discourse was beneficial or appropriate with many attempts being made to segregate the two spheres into separate agora’s, one for religion/political means and another for social/ commercial, in an effort to exclude the trading classes from central government relations (Dickenson, 2014).

It becomes clear that despite being an inherently fluid and open public space, the Agora did not exist without flaws and attained a heavily underlying element of control.

Grappling with the inevitable factors of power, greed and hierarchy, The Agora was implemented with a series of physical and metaphorical rules and regulations in an attempt to establish order. A multitude of measures were enforced to shape the atmosphere and behaviour of its visitors, beginning with restricted accessibility. Access to the Agora was strictly prohibited for women, enslaved people and resident foreigners, leaving only select male citizens to facilitate public life and ruling (Neils and Kelrogers, 2021). Focus was also placed on creating sharper boundaries between the bustling Athenian street and political infrastructures or affairs, with Physical barriers including temporary structures, wooden fences and ropes, dictating access to ostracisms, assemblies and other facilities whilst events took place (Gottesman, 2014). During this time, citizens were expected to behave a particular way once the barriers were in effect, constricting who was allowed to speak and what it regarded (Neils and Kelrogers, 2021).

Permanent interventions included the Stoa, a prominent feature of ancient Greek architecture, comprised of a colonnaded pathway that would line the central open space of the Agora, often housing a variety of shops, market stalls or artefacts along its outer wall. The pathway initially acted as a buffer, segregating the formal from the informal. However, in forging this undetermined space, the Stoa became an occupied public area of the Agora in its own right, existing as much more than a mere promenade but a staple of societal life. The flexible nature of the Stoa endorsed the presence of numerous activities unanimously, unlike other architectural structures of the agora devoted to specific uses or ventures at one time. The porous façade of the colonnades blurred

the realm between indoor and outdoor space, with occupants frantically dancing between the two as their perspective shifted from framed views of the lively, open agora to the people and objects loitering beneath the canopy. This duality, entertained a state of constant presence with one's surroundings, making it an ideal location for philosophical dialogue that demanded the input of external ideas and context to function effectively (Martin-McAuliffe, S.L. 2017).

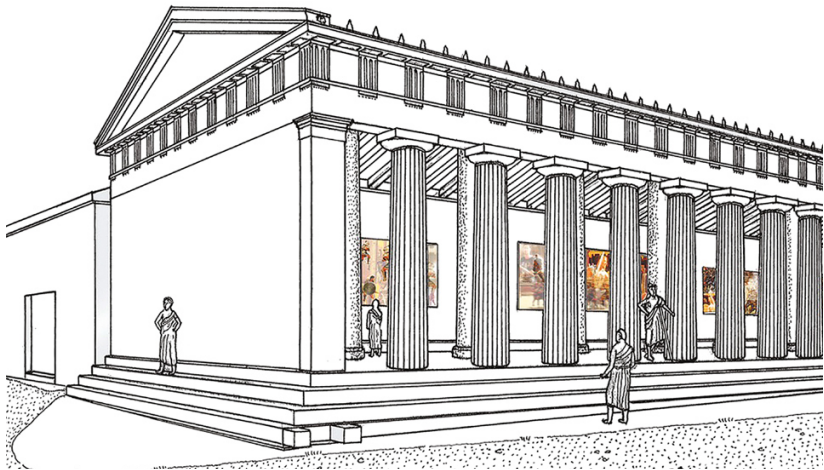


Figure 1 - Stoa(American School of Classical Studies, n.d.)

Therefore, it was unsurprising that the Stoa adopted an educational narrative, commonly occupied by Greek philosophers, strolling and disputing views of philosophy, ethics and science, sheltered from the harsh sun and weather under the covered walkway. Socrates (Greek philosopher) and his companions used rhetorical language to converse with the people, leading many to question their internal beliefs about traditional Athenian frameworks and those in authoritarian positions. Due to the confronting and challenging nature of the Socratic method, leaving entities in power to feel threatened, Socrates was charged with corrupting the minds of the youth and defying the Greek gods worshipped by society, resulting in his

execution, subsequently at the hands of his own expression (Martin-McAuliffe, S.L. 2017). A contradiction therefore stands between the democratic values Athenian culture claimed to obtain, and the ability of an Athenian citizen to protest ideals that oppose the ones laid out for them, questioning the democratic integrity of the public spaces within the Agora, as well as the validity of its identity as a 'public' space. Despite Socrates' demise, his teachings and occupancy of the stoa left an irrefutable mark on the public sphere, influencing the formation of the philosophical schools of stoicism and the peripatetic institution, both of which utilised the spatial qualities of the original Stoa, with education taking place under public covered walkways, empowering speakers to loiter, contemplate and stroll freely during practice.

Investigating the Agora has emphasised the broad and volatile range of public spaces that were available to citizens, yet also highlighted the limitations tied to many of these spaces that impose on their public principle. Despite many efforts to alienate the constitutional sector of the Agora and confine certain activities to specific spaces, the power of communication was severely underestimated, and neglected to acknowledge that in between meetings and assemblies, citizens would continue to converse and relay with one another the matters at hand no matter where they are, showing that "physical barriers limited the access but not the flow of information" (Gottesman, 2014, p.81). Demonstrating that the interplay of knowledge between individuals in and around the public built environment of the agora unintentionally formed an educational epicentre for society to inform and learn from one another, exemplifying how necessary public space was and continues to be in developing solidarity and relationships that construct communities.

The Roman Forum

Over the course of the Athenian Agora's existence, it was confronted with a myriad of invasions and conflicts from various powerful leaders and empires, eventually being seized under Roman control around the second century BC. The Romans substantially modified the Agora, altering its urban fabric and architectural language to fit their cultural preferences and ideologies (HOMER A. THOMPSON AND R. E. WYCHERLEY, 1972). In spite of this, they had a clear admiration for many elements of Greek society, injecting ideas from the Greek agora into their own manifestations of public space, which leads me to examine the renowned Roman forum, recognised as the focal point of civic life, where Roman citizens exercised all aspects of their livelihoods from worship and education to business and leisure (Favro, 1988).

When assessing the forum as a public space, clear distinctions appear between the periods of republican and imperial rule, as the environment of public spaces drastically shifted during the fabrication of the Roman Empire. The republican forum fostered strong connections between place, spirit, religion and memory, behaving as a "container of collective consciousness" (Favro, 1988, p.17) for citizens of the republic. The public (as a totality) had an eminent admiration towards certain sites and architecture, obtaining religious significance and symbolism, for example, the Capitoline Hill, located just outside of the Forum Romanum. Consequently, the forum and its built environment became sacred places through association with the gods, and the compartments of state and religion became intrinsically linked, meaning those who affiliated with divine monuments or buildings were idolised. A fact which many local elite and leaders exploited to gain power and respect from society (Hayes, 2011).

The transition from a republic to an imperial state saw the progression of public architecture into a reflection of imperial culture and ideology, mirroring the exchange of political power from the republican senate into the hands of the emperor. The built, public environment was moulded from loosely defined spaces and architectural interventions that encouraged free movement and participation (Favro, 1988), into rigid, confined spatial arrangements following a strict, symmetrical order (Häussler, 1999). The dismantling of individual autonomy eliminated the purpose of trials, hearings or debates of an autocratic nature taking place in large, outdoor public spaces, resulting in much political discourse being displaced into interior spaces where public freedom and access were constrained (Favro, 1988).

The demoted governing position of the Roman citizens resulted in the emperor being increasingly reliant on social ceremonies (festivals, feasts, parades, gladiatorial games, etc.) to foster a healthy relationship between civilians and the empire. As a result, an abundance of energy was funnelled into establishing a grand atmosphere that symbolised the magnificence and superiority of the imperial regime to the Roman population, through the monumentalisation of public spaces and buildings across the forum, where many of these events were held (Hayes, 2011). The purposeful manipulation of public architecture as a method of coercing civilians into exhibiting certain behaviours and social attitudes is extremely evident in the configuration of the Roman Empire's socio-political climate. This controlling nature is embedded into the global built environment, whether it's an intentional or subconscious act, the spatial arrangement and composition of public spaces inevitably encourages its occupants to follow a conventional order of conduct, a theory that will assist me in analysing how public spaces currently impact the ability of inhabitants to exercise political actions of protest and occupation in differing contexts.

02 The unrecognised territory of contemporary public space

The next line of inquiry is into the climate of public spaces today, from deciphering the various forms, purposes, and intended occupants, to identifying the catalysts that have shaped them. It should be acknowledged that the public sphere is extremely diverse and consistently fluctuating in accordance with the social, political and economic conditions of that period, alongside being supported by the preconceived ideals and patterns sourced from historic public spaces such as the Greek Agora and Forum Romanum, that continue to inform these environments in many ways.

What is a public space?

Spanning the extensive volume of literature available on public space, there is a general consensus that they exist as a “common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community”(Carr, 1992, p.XI). Whether it be group or individual activities, ample opportunities for ad hoc or planned encounters between the different fragments of society play out, engaging them with each other through spoken dialogue and physical interaction, or simply through observation and a shared acknowledgement that relates people to each other, formulating a mutual solidarity (Shaftoe, 2008). The principle of public space as catering to, and providing places for the pursuits of public life, implies that any space being monopolised by public life innately becomes a public space. The controversy behind this implication is its inability to account for inconsistent degrees of publicness, and the growing complexities connecting the parallels of the public and private realms that conflict with this assumption. The urban environment has been increasingly subjected to commodification on an unprecedented scale, to the point where a substan-

tial percentage of public spaces have been appropriated into privately owned public spaces (POPS), drastically blurring the lines of public and private (Carmona, 2014). This process has forced many elements of public life into private spaces that manipulate how humans can occupy them and exercise their daily routines.

Conventionally, when people conceptualise public space, they depict an image of outdoor, open areas that fill the interludes between buildings, such as market squares, plazas, streets and parks, overlooking the many branches of public space that are situated in interior settings or confined to more built up infrastructure. This narrative could be explained in two ways, one, being a result of the rampant daily use of these particular spaces from most societal groups passing through, causing increased exposure and heightened senses for individuals occupying the space, which reinforces their perception of public as openness and totality (Madanipour, 2023). Or two, the domestication of interior space is especially evident in Western society, which has in turn welded strong cultural associations between privacy and interior spaces (Carr, 1992), so much so that despite many public buildings actively facilitating public life, they fail to be recognised as public spaces. The irony lies in the fact that in modern societies, there is typically just as much, if not more, restriction on public action and behaviour in exterior contexts as there is in interior contexts. Where government run public spaces have been sold to private entities, the spaces are additionally subjected to certain codes of conduct set by these private agencies that may differ from governmental standards, showcasing some of the disparities the intrusion of the private realm has produced for public spaces that are privately owned.

Public life can be divided into necessary, optional and social activities. (Mehta, 2014) The necessary operations of education, healthcare, employment and transport are fundamental to

society's development and functionality and are materialised in the public institutions of schools, colleges, universities, and hospitals, along with their assistive networks and hubs of transport, spanning roads, pathways, bus and train stations, etc. (Mehta, 2014). On the other hand, the optional and social division of public life covers a wide range of activities, commonly oriented around leisure or recreation. Recreational public spaces can present themselves in the form of shopping malls/markets, libraries, museums, exercise facilities, parks and playgrounds, etc. The level of inclusivity and interaction varies across each strain of public space, as some are predominantly intended for their classified functions and users, whereas others tend to be more malleable to the demands of multiple activities and behaviours.

Nevertheless, human activity in both specialised and multi-purpose public spaces can be unpredictable and frequently disregards the proposed purpose of the space. The human behaviour of adapting spatial frameworks to suit individual needs is an incident observed across time, as recorded in the Greek Agora, where the colonnaded pathway of the stoa was exploited for philosophical activities (Martin-McAuliffe, S.L., 2017). It is evident that the various disciplines of the public realm persistently bleed into each other, superseding the boundaries implemented for them. However, the current privatisation of these public spaces has crafted increasingly controlled environments, with stricter tangible and intangible barriers between spaces and people, reducing the opportunity for cultural exchanges and overlaps of dialogue and activity (Mehta, 2014).

Power of public space

The alienation of public space poses a particular threat to its role as a socio-political forum. The political realm is inseparable from the public realm, meaning political undertones and pursuits emerge across all modes of public space. The exercise of political expression through discussion, protest and occupation is the specific utilisation of public space that this dissertation will be studying. Arguably one of the most pivotal practices to building a regulated and constructive society, the actions of political discourse and activism are universally prevalent, existing as a direct byproduct of public space by harnessing the platform, audience and sense of community that they provide, all of which empower these behaviours to transpire. The ability of civilians to engage in dialogue, reflect upon and acknowledge contrasting stances on societal or public issues is essential for healthy political discourse towards a progressive, informed public.

Instances where there is a clear deficiency of space and opportunity for these procedures to eventuate, jeopardise civilians' right to be heard by targeting their political outlet. This inevitably leads to growing tension between the people of the public and the state, inciting cases of civic unrest and violence, commonly ending with problematic outcomes for civilians, and instability within the public realm as a whole. Although there are many institutions dedicated to the political system and subsequent legislation (parliament, judiciary courts e.g.), in many present-day societies, access and input into these public organisations is heavily constrained and filtered. As a result, depending on the level of agency civilians hold and their capacity to influence authoritative decisions or policies, public spaces serve as a necessary forum for civilians to advocate their opinions and demands freely to the public, in hopes of instigating change and negotiation across certain aspects of public or private life (Madanipour, 2023).

It would be ignorant to imply that this democratic state of public space is ever achieved, or that the public right to speak, assemble or demonstrate is always authorised and encouraged (Elser et al., 2023). It begs the question of whether true public space physically exists or if it is a utopian concept that should be strived for (Carmona, 2014). From the inception of public spaces, protests and political demonstrations within them have routinely been faced with anti-protest measures and resistance from several directions. These social and political movements have generally required sufficient persistence and pressure behind them for any changes to be at all considered or enacted. All formats of protest unfold in distinctive ways, attaining individual spatial qualities and materialities based on the topography and practicality of their environment and the message they want to communicate. These different components merge to form protest architecture, dividing, consuming and intervening space in different ways.

Protestive strategies typically take on a mixed media approach, influenced by the DIY culture and anti-consumerist association of alternative architecture that intensified around the 1960s, sparking interest in the concept of mobile dwellings, and raising queries on the permanence of property and territory (Elser et al., 2023). Participants would use found or scrap items and materials (e.g. scaffolding poles, bricks, tarp, etc.) to build objects and structures of protest (Elser et al., 2023), an ode to the resilience and resourcefulness of protestors, who go to unfathomable lengths to reinforce their case. A memorable precedent of the strong symbolism behind protest architecture is the Gaza solidarity encampment that occupied the south lawn of Columbia University in 2024. Students set up an extensive encampment of tents, in reflection of the thousands of displaced Palestinians in Gaza who were forced to construct shelters from wood, metal sheeting and canvas to temporarily live in (Kaufman-Osborn, 2026). The tent wasn't just a con-

venience for protestors, but was a conscious choice made to forge a visual link, and a certain line of dialogue to amplify their case by tapping into the notions of territory and space that directly influenced the cause students were representing (Elser et al., 2023). Protest camps differentiate from other forms of protest architecture because they produce their own human ecosystems, facilitating daily life alongside their purpose as a protest.

The university particularly welcomed the intrusion of private interests, pushing students to utilise the encampment to host many of the educational practices that would soon be erased by management. A lending library, poetry readings, dances, teach-ins and film screenings were all amongst activities that took place in the encampment during this time, exemplifying that encampments harvest solidarity and close communal relationships (Kaufman-Osborn, 2026).

From blockades and barricades, involving stacking material to block access and provide safety shields, to inhabitable structures of tents and tree houses that are commonly used in active sit-ins and protest camps (Elser et al., 2023) (Norman, 2000), the common denominator lies with the people. Every act of protest requires an undisputed vulnerability. The individuals who partake in events of active demonstration, squatting, lock-ins, making of structures or even just by expression of solidarity, are potentially exposed to physical and mental warfare from the dangers of the protest itself, and from the opposition. The previously mentioned tension between the civilians of the public and the state is exponentially apparent in the display of movements of protest in public spaces. An obvious inequality stands, where the state's legislation and ability to counteract protests if they are deemed overly disruptive or conflictive with order and safety, take priority over the people's right to demonstrate or assemble.

Unlike protestors, in many countries, state authorities are permitted to arm themselves with the protection of weapons and face coverings, whilst civilians are armed with inadequate, makeshift defences, in turn suffering exposure to tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray, batons and rubber bullet pistols (Elser et al., 2023). The aftermath of these retaliations can be devastating, especially in countries under (but not limited to) strict, non-democratic regimes, ending in serious repercussions, injuries and even deaths. The conduct of authority against actions of protest in recent decades has been intensely scrutinised, being labelled as blatant brutality against demonstrators. The principle of protest is to gain traction through being heard and seen; therefore, disruption of public space to a certain extent is inescapable. Park book's publication on protest architecture, echoed that "protests have to be disruptive to be effective" (Elser et al., 2023, p.1), if this is undeniably the case, there must be a middle ground established for political occupations and demonstrations to embark into that allows them to voice their objectives publicly without receiving unnecessary confrontation or biased legislative consequences.



Figure 2 - (Testa/Panos, 1997)



Figure 3 - (Jeremiah, 2024)

The catalysts of change

In accompaniment with the physical bodies of state authority that counteract events of protest, public spaces are also crammed with architectural interventions and designs that directly and indirectly prevent and discourage political demonstrations and the erection of protest architecture. A few of the many driving forces behind these changes are the entangled processes of privatisation, legislation, globalisation and digitalisation. They have contributed to the modification of public spaces into the strictly monitored and zoned, yet simultaneously interlinked and communicable environments we are surrounded by today. Although a pessimistic view is often expressed towards these changes and their effects on contemporary public spaces, there are multiple ways in which the act of protest has also benefitted from these shifts in the public realm (Carmona, 2014). One of the most potent developments has been the countless policies that have been enforced in public spaces in the name of security, which have led to their fortification. Globalisation eased the access of people and information between borders, resulting in populations becoming even more diversified, with cities and transport networks experiencing unprecedented growth. This interconnectedness was and continues to be a remarkable tool in expediting the exchange of different cultural, social, economic and political content.

However, the high volume of people occupying and passing through public spaces made the identification of threats harder to spot, and security harder to regulate. Subsequently, public spaces became more susceptible to violent attacks, from individuals or terrorist organisations who purposely target these busy environments, compromising public safety (Mitchell, 2003). The case of the 2005 London bombings is a fatal example of this exploitation of public space, where the city's underground tube and bus networks came under attack,

tragically injuring and killing civilians (British Transport Police, 2025). The underground did not merely serve as a form of transport but had become an embedded part of the urban and cultural fabric of London itself, and so the threat towards these systems sparked a chain reaction on all associated public life. Governmental responses to events of this kind worldwide were to bring extreme surveillance and legislation into motion, in attempts to eradicate any possible threats from public spaces. CCTV cameras were gradually installed across almost every perimeter of public space, making it practically impossible to avoid being recorded or photographed. Barriers and bollards were situated at road junctions and along pathways to restrict and control the movement of vehicles near populated areas. Many public bins were removed, and toilets were locked to prevent the planting of explosives (Norman, 2000).

There is no denying that these measures reduced the risk of threats to public space, but at what cost to public life? A level of tolerance of hazard and risk must be accounted for in public space, to allow civic life to continue competently (Mitchell, 2003). If public space operates off fear, it only fosters alienation and avoidance, rather than solidarity and community, which is what society relies on in times of crisis. The problem with extreme measures of security is that they also encourage exclusionary practices. They support the agenda of forcing 'inappropriate users' out of public space, masked by the slogan of being in the public's best interest and improved quality of life. But it becomes apparent that this does not signify the whole public. Lower class minorities, homeless people, mischievous youth, and political activists are purposefully excluded from the planning of public spaces rather than being factored into the design process (Mitchell, 2003). Public spaces deliberately offer uncomfortable and obstructed seating intended to prevent loitering and sleeping, anti-climb surface treatments are painted onto lamp posts, poles, boundary walls and fences, etc., and surplus space is filled with decorative

obstacles (e.g. flower beds and fountains) to divert crowds, control circulation and prevent people from assembling in open space (Norman, 2000). These are just a few spatial details that discreetly shape public life and push perceived anti-social behaviours out of public spaces.

Alongside surveillance, cyber technologies and the rise of digitalisation in the 21st century have majorly shifted the trajectory of public space and the dynamics of political expression. Advanced technology and artificial intelligence are increasingly incorporated into public spaces, and cameras are equipped with identification systems that make it easy to identify protesters, meaning there are higher risks of prosecution for those involved even after protests have ended (Norman, 2000). However, the integrated security systems of public spaces are faced with competition. The influx in the use and representation on social media has armed civilians with their own source of documentation as well as an additional outlet to project their case to almost any human being with access to a device or smartphone. Affiliates of protest act as “interconnected transmitters: hubs of digital streams of information they share, comment on and supplement” (Elser et al., 2023, p.137). The widespread media coverage of protestive events and accounts of social injustice from those directly affected allows people from opposite sides of the world to express support towards these causes, often igniting demonstrations of their own in solidarity.

Social media has highlighted the excessive force that authorities often use against civilians during protests that would typically be downplayed or justified due to insufficient evidence (Elser et al., 2023). The death of George Floyd at the hands of police brutality is a testament to the significance of the media in displaying injustice. Video evidence from bystanders ignited global outrage, sparking mass demonstrations across cities and towns worldwide in support of seeking justice for George

Floyd and for the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) as a whole. The immense pressure these protests placed on public authorities demanded important discussions and legislative changes to be made regarding deep rooted systemic racism and violent misconduct from public positions of power (Campbell, 2022). There is no denying that these injustices still largely exist, but every act of resistance exercised in public space is a progressive step towards action and change. This precedent of demonstration in public spaces, like many others, emphasises the necessity of these environments to political activism, and outlines how contemporary changes of public space restrict protest movements, but can also be assistive tools.

03 Education as protest

This dissection of contemporary public spaces on a broad scale, looking at the factors of change, and how they have nurtured the public environment, helps to gain a comprehensive understanding of the limitations and options available for political discourse to eventuate. What do these limitations mean for future events of occupation and demonstration? Does the spatial planning of public space require modification to truly serve the public? How would this impact protest architecture or demonstrations in public spaces? By recognising these components, issues can start to be addressed at the root, in this case, the root being education. Diverting the trail of focus from protest in public space as a collective, to the specific alliance of public educational institutions (colleges, universities, schools), and the exercise of protest and academic freedom within them. Educational spaces are breeding grounds for curiosity. The disciplines taught are constantly growing, challenged and redefined in accordance with current contexts and discoveries, cultivating endless opportunities for ideological research and open debate (Gengel, 2025). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that topics of social and political natures commonly emerge in educational settings, either directly from the curriculum or as a product of communication in response to internal and external factors.

The engrained spatial and philosophical frameworks of educational institutions have the power to shape perspectives from a young age, equipping students with sufficient and advanced knowledge of topics concerning various aspects of life. This intelligence and awareness spill outside of educational institutions, where citizens can apply learning to everyday life, and adopt their own standpoints on societal and public issues, enabling them to push for change where they see fit, in or out of the public grounds of the institution (Nayar, 2019). Protest itself serves as a form of education, informing those who encounter

it (through physical or virtual realities) of the events and discourse that unfolds, in which many people would otherwise be sheltered from. Similarly, education has and continues to be a subject of protest. Despite being established as a constitutional right in many parts of the world, the right to public education is still being tirelessly fought for across many countries that face battles of poverty, war, gender discrimination and lack of funding, making it ever so crucial that these hubs of knowledge are preserved publicly, and utilised to generate progressive institutional change, that trickles down from educational institutions into political, authoritative ones, where amendments to legislation can be solidified in the wider context of the public realm to benefit citizens.

Instances of protest and occupation in public places of education function differently than in other forms of public space and institutions. The right to free speech and assembly prevails, however, additional guidelines are put in place that oversee how these rights can be expressed and handled to protect the staff and students that they serve (Zack, 2024). The discussion of political opinion and dialogue in academic contexts is essential to the very existence of many fields of research that require critical thinking and the reflection of current circumstances (Nayar, 2019). Much of the research and artwork produced by students often contains political undertones and symbolism, but because they are contained to their associated contexts and spaces, they are considered appropriate. When they are taken out of their direct academic contexts and placed in public spaces within educational institutions (hallways, courtyards, canteens, etc.) or other modes of public space, they translate into displays of protest. The response to these acts of protest is dependent on the methods of protest used, and their alignment with educational policy, but more importantly, on the nature of the relationship between students, lecturers and faculty. 'Public' educational institutions are fundamentally dedicated to students, so when students are treated with equal importance,

and encouraged to participate in decision making regarding their education, a mutual sense of belonging, trust and respect is built, which enables protests to be approached with healthy discussion, understanding and compromise to decide the next steps to be taken. Absence of this relationship creates isolated student communities, who may resort to more disruptive methods of protest to be acknowledged by their institution, which interfere with regular educational activities such as lectures, meetings, exams, etc., often leading to violent confrontations and responses to participants from state authorities that further escalate the situation (Zack, 2024).

The events that unfolded across France in the year of 1968 are memorialised as one of the largest acts of student-initiated protest of twentieth century Europe, provoking the acts of occupation and demonstration on a mass scale (Reader and Khursheed Wadia, 1993). What started as a small demonstration in public space opposing the Vietnam War quickly intensified once students involved were arrested by police. In retaliation of the arrests and to initiate a resistive movement, 142 students occupied their universities faculty council room (Abidor, 2018).

Occupation of interior space as a form of political protest is conventionally less common than other tactics of protest. The private nature of the atmosphere and enclosed infrastructure of interior space reduces public exposure, which many people perceive as less effective. On the other hand, it could be argued that through targeting internal spaces within public institutions where authoritative activity is situated, and power monumentalised, administrations are confronted physically as well as symbolically and therefore may feel the extent of pressure on a more extreme level, urging those in positions of power to engage in negotiations. The students were able to take advantage of their occupation and use the assembly as a forum, discussing in depth the motivations behind their dis-

plays of resistance and the objectives they were pushing for. Further demonstrations played out at the disciplinary committee hearings of students in the Sorbonne University courtyard, where the first wave of violent police-student encounters ensued. Demonstrations stormed the streets of Paris, and news of students' affairs spread like wildfire, triggering a nationwide movement of support (Abidor, 2018).

The infectious patriotism of protest in public spaces has shown a formidable capability of uniting people. In this example, the student communities of France were assisted in their campaign by a large portion of the working-class population (Reader and Khursheed Wadia, 1993). Despite advocating for their own struggles concerning workers' rights, the determination and collective power exhibited by students in their uprising encouraged other civilians to question their own political opinions in a time when society seemed politically compliant, arming more people with the courage to participate in the defiance of governmental or educational systems.

The repercussions of these periods of systemic defiance resulted in public schools and universities being temporarily shut down, classes cancelled and exams postponed (Abidor, 2018), whilst factories were occupied and inactive, with over eight million workers on strike, sacrificing up to 15,000,000 working days, forcing France into a state of paralysis (Reader and Khursheed Wadia, 1993). The precedent of May 1968 shows just how influential protests and political activism in public educational spaces can be in provoking wider societal and political change. The effects of the demonstrations, although they may not have succeeded in all their goals, ignited a confidence in people that encouraged them to be more vocal and expressive about societal or political matters they felt strongly about (Abidor, 2018), alongside a recognition of the significance of the public's right to protest in public space and public institutions.

Contemporary Public Educational Institutions

The enforcement of privatisation and state authority in public space is exceptionally obvious in public educational institutions. The academic freedom guarded by these environments has been consistently endangered by state intervention, with state entities attempting, and often succeeding in, exerting control over the content of the syllabus taught, by censoring information, depoliticising subjects, and erasing parts of taught history that do not align with the state's agenda (Nayar). Exercise of physical threat has also increased, entailing state authorities entering educational premises to confront and intimidate protestors, often carrying out arrests, prosecutions and acts of violence in the process. Not only does this severely restrict and deter progressive trains of thought (Zack, 2024), but it also aims to mould students and educational bodies into mirrors of authoritative ideals and regimes, chipping away at democracy. This specific behaviour of a state is not new and is homogenous to the way that the public institutions of the Roman Forum were shaped by the imperial state's ideals, showcasing that the concept of state superiority in public space is a recurring theme throughout history (Hausler, 1999).

Technological developments have additionally dissolved the barriers between protest movements within educational institutions and the public sphere. Similar to educational spaces, the realm of social media is dominated by the younger population, whose mobile smartphones and devices seem to function as human antennas, always connecting people together. In terms of student activism, the overarching use of digital media ensures that protestive events on school grounds are recorded through photographs and videos posted online, immediately connecting movements to anyone with access to the digital realm, and escalating the scale of these protests into "global spectacles" (Zack, 2024, p.119) that concern the interest of the public, and consequently the interest of the state as well

(Zack, 2024). The over-involvement of the state has formed a relationship with public educational spaces that is difficult to maintain without neglecting the neutrality that the state is ethically obliged to uphold in their conduct towards educational institutions. Without this neutral position, educational systems are plagued with state bias, compromising the integrity and innovation of educational systems.

Ironically, the government's growing authoritative presence in public educational space contradicts its retraction of funding and investment, resulting in many public institutions of education requiring external funding and endowments from private, corporate investors, as well as financial aid from students themselves to continue operating. The problem with this form of privatisation is that it conflicts with every democratic value that lies at the core of public education. Universities become profit-oriented, curating a hierarchical imbalance, where students' priorities and interests often fall to the bottom, or are presented in artificial ways. A multitude of student protests in public educational spaces have been the direct result of objections against the organisations that these institutions receive investment or funding from. Demonstrations frequently call for divestment due to moral corruption within the funding companies and the people and organisations they associate with. In an institution devoted to triggering democratic and innovative frames of thought, if the designated spaces, systems and infrastructures do not embody and stimulate these traits, an obvious conflict of interest stands.

Concerning economic accessibility to public education, government grants and scholarships face near extinction, whilst tuition fees and interest loans continue to rise (Nayar, 2019). England has one of the highest public tuition fees for any bachelor's or equivalent course in a public university, demanding up to a staggering £9,535 fee, for the 2025/2026 academic year alone. This fee drastically grew from zero in the late

1990s to almost £10,000 in under 30 years (Lewis, Bolton and Wilson, 2024). Despite the counterbalance of tuition fees with government loans, those from disadvantaged backgrounds of society are still somewhat ostracised from higher educational spaces by the economic barriers imposed by seemingly 'public' institutions. The financial strain and burden held over individuals who must repay loans (Lewis, Bolton and Wilson, 2024) also hinders their quality of education. Many students will work several jobs alongside their studies just to be able to live, missing out on the extracurricular activities, social interaction and discussion that more fortunate students get to experience. Higher educational institutions become a privilege for those who can afford it, instead of a space for learning that is equally accessible and opportunistic to all.

04 Occupational case study

Now that the presence of political activism in public educational institutions and spaces has been assessed, I will be undertaking an analysis of a case study of protest in a public educational space to examine its role as a political domain. The analysis will cover what methods of protest architecture and demonstration were used, the effectiveness of the events' communication and push for change, and the response given from the universities and state authorities. The results will allow me to make a relative comparison against historic events such as those in France in 1968, and observe any patterns, changes or anomalies in the political climate of educational spaces currently. The event that is going to be studied is the associated discourse that occupied the University of Warwick, England, in 2014.

The institution has a long-standing reputation for student protest and activism, one that has moulded the political atmosphere of the university throughout its lifetime. A recurring theme amongst many of the protests held there has been in retaliation to the attack on the public university, and the subsequent elimination of citizens' access to free, liberated and safeguarded education. Marketised and privatised interests have hijacked public higher educational systems, substituting the needs of students with monetary benefits (Thompson, 2014). Activist groups such as the PPU (Protect the Public University Warwick) and Warwick for Free Education have campaigned for the restructuring of the public educational organisation and criticised the limited avenues available for communities of the university to practice democratic processes under academic freedom (Protect the Public University Warwick, 2013). In a statement from the PPU, they claimed that students' voices had been minimised to "customer feedback and merely tokenistic representation in the governance of this university" (Protect the Public University Warwick, 2013, statement), indicating

a need for change in the way power is leveraged across the university so that students are at the heart of educational operations.

In December 2014, an assembly of around 30-40 students demonstrated outside the grounds of the arts centre, in conjunction with the free education movement. The group recited speeches, chants and held banners as part of their protest. Following the assembly, some of the students vacated to the ground floor of the senate house building, where they chose to establish an occupation and reiterate their cause (Dawson, 2014). On entering the building, they were physically confronted by security, who attempted to block entry but inevitably failed, and the students cemented their position in the space. A peaceful seminar then transpired, comprising dialogue around the topic, its objectives and limitations.

Soon after, police officers arrived unannounced and broke up the occupation in response to a complaint from one of the security guards who claimed to have been subjected to an assault by a participant, which was profusely denied by witnesses. Almost immediately, excessive force and violence were inflicted upon the students, who were wrestled, pushed, exposed to CS spray and threatened with tasers (Dawson, 2014). This extreme reaction to a contained occupation stood as another example of state authorities abusing their power and straying from protocol, instead of attempting to de-escalate the situation at hand. Unfortunately, this behaviour presented by officers is part of a deep-rooted negligence of duties and discriminatory practices, disguised with the intent of 'implementing safety' but in reality, only enforces security. How can people feel protected in public or private spaces when brutality is directed by those employed to protect us?

Student and outside communities were appalled by the misconduct of the West Midlands police and the lack of regret or

accountability shown by Warwick University officials for inviting them onto campus. 1000 individuals showed up the following day in opposition to the misconduct, only to start a new occupation in the university's Rootes building for over a week. Although police intervention was minimal in this case (most likely due to fears of further backlash), the university itself sought to eliminate the student's occupation by filing for an injunction, prohibiting any sign of occupational protest anywhere on Warwick property for the foreseeable future (Warwick for Free Education, 2014b). This motion highlighted the university management's weaponisation of authority to outlaw academic freedom, and further attack marginalised students and faculty who face the consequences of an exclusive, privatised public structure more intensely. Gradually, a breakthrough was made when a university wide survey was constructed by the institution's CHRP organisation (Centre for Human Rights in Practice). The practice operates separately from university authorities, functioning as a platform for students, academics, activists and practitioners to promote human rights through advanced research and dissent (University of Warwick, 2026). The survey was open to all affiliates of the university for a two-week period in preparation for the 'Summit on Protest' that was held on the 12th of March.

The summit's aim was to instigate discussion across the educational and wider community in relation to the general subject of protest on campus, or with reference to the contested events of December 2014 (University of Warwick, 2016). The survey tackled essential questions, inquiring what people would like to see done differently. What questions did they hope to be addressed at the summit? And who would they like to be involved in the summit? Raking in 579 responses, ranging from the perspectives of undergraduate/postgraduate students, and administrative/academic staff (Centre for Human Rights in Practice, 2015a). The content of the survey was fabricated in a document to be reviewed at the summit, containing

a multitude of opinions on the topic. One undergraduate student (submission no. 180011551) claimed that “space on campus is aggressively depoliticised and made sterile” (Centre for Human Rights in Practice, 2015b), whilst another post-graduate student (submission no. 179971973) slammed the absence of effort in granting safe spaces for political dissent, which has led students to feel that their feedback is unwanted. Contrastingly, a member of administrative staff (submission no. 179826488) suggested modifications to how protests are executed to ensure peaceful demonstrations, condemning the acts of property damage and vandalism (Centre for Human Rights in Practice, 2015b).

Despite differing viewpoints on the themes and recall of events, the survey and consequent summit on protest initiated an overdue conversation between the fragmented groups within the university. Students finally saw valuable steps being taken towards achieving academic freedom in the public spaces of their university through re-evaluation of the regulations of protest, accountability taken, and apologies distributed from administration for mishandling and neglecting student safety, and serious investigations into any misconduct from police and security forces. The results were by no means immediate, and the injunction was not lifted until two years later, following another occupation (Ruben, 2017); however, it emphasises the indispensable value of the persistence of protest in inflicting societal change, and at the very least, its ability to spark discussion.

Conclusion

Having covered a plethora of examples of student-originated political activism, from the encampments of the University of Columbia to the mass demonstrations of France, and finally the persisting occupations of the University of Warwick, is there a trend that can be spotted in the way that the freedom of protest is evolving? Before outlining any patterns, it is important to acknowledge that despite the assessments made, the condition and climate of the ability to protest continues to vary across the world and is extremely relative to the laws of individual universities, and the laws of the nation they inhabit. This dissertation has adopted a particularly Western perspective of public higher education, and although many similar issues of commodification and extreme legislation encroach into other territories, this cannot be used as a measurement of the political freedom of all countries.

With this being said, the unequivocal importance of political streams of action and expression in public space is and always will be a crucial part of the advancement and formation of all intellectual and innovational societies. Societal changes can be perceived as opportunities to expand knowledge and resilience, instead of rejecting adaptation in the name of tradition and order. In many ways, public educational spaces have shown resemblances to their historic counterparts, from the philosophical Athenian schools in the Agora that fostered critical thought and dissent, establishing the principles of education (Martin-McAuliffe.S.L, 2017). To the monumentalisation of infrastructure to elicit power in the Roman Forum, which can be observed across autocratic educational buildings (Hayes, 2011), such as the senate house building at Warwick University that students targeted because of the buildings symbolic power (Dawson, 2014).

The most evident pattern has been the growing process of privatisation for monetary interests, which has led to the loss of public integrity in educational public spaces and public space as a whole. The research on the architectural interventions, designed to mitigate against unsocial behaviour in the form of barriers, uncomfortable seating, preventative surface treatments, etc. (Elser et al., 2023), has successfully distracted people from the elimination of 'free' space for interaction and dialogue to unfold. In relation to education, the attacks on academic freedom have appeared to have intensified upon involvement with the state, and monetisation has driven funding away from fields of study that do not generate enough money or attract investors, leaving educational inequalities and the static growth of certain subjects.

On the other hand, the consistency shown by protest groups within the University of Warwick offers hope for the acknowledgement of the importance of continuing the fight for academic freedom and the right to protest in and out of educational institutions. The Summit on Protest event led by the Centre for Human Rights Practice was one of the first of its kind, marking a considerable victory for student communities who now had the opportunity to debate directly with university administration in a space reserved for political discourse (University of Warwick, 2016). Efforts to erase public protest from any form of public space is not productive, nor successful, and as observed, only cause events of protest to escalate to violence and extreme disruption. In the future, Designers, Authorities, Faculty, Students and all fragments of society need to inject public interest back into public spaces, making conscious efforts to accommodate for political dissent by introducing public internal, external and virtual spaces that serve as political forums for the public, to promote healthy, constructive discourse. For this to be strived for, the links between public and private interests must be compromised, but ultimately still prioritise public demands to truly serve as a public space, and the utili-

sation of public educational institutions to push for this goal will be the key to reinstating public spaces as political domains.

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