

Reflections: *Lectio praecursoria*

Insights about the publicness of public space from the Kamppi area of Helsinki

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Undergoing dramatic changes in its form, structure and purpose, public space has recently drawn sharp criticisms from its investigators and its theorists. At the same time, for the public who use it, public space has continued to be meaningful and attractive. To understand what public space is and what constitutes its publicness in the city of today, I conducted a multiple-case study and prepared a doctoral dissertation *Publicness of Public Space in the Contemporary City: Insights from Helsinki* (Tamašauskaitė 2024). On March 1st, 2024, during the public defence of my dissertation, I gave a lectio praecursoria, which this short article is based on. In my lectio, I overviewed contestations over the concepts *public space* and *publicness*, suggesting that the publicness of contemporary public space shall be conceived through use and treated as a phenomenon that comprises three dimensions, namely activities, users and control. The focus of the lectio was on my main findings from the three publicly usable spaces within the Kamppi area of Helsinki: Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre. First, I highlighted that from my study, I learnt that the publicness of the three spaces is primarily activity-based, whereby their publicness is strikingly similar when the spaces are used in comparable ways. Next, I suggested that even if the diversity of user groups is highly important in ensuring a wide variety of activities, it is all those activities that intermix and combine with one another that produces an ecosystem out of activities and that reveal the dynamics of activity-based publicness to be situational. Finally, I argued that various means of control are but some of the matters that affect the actual and the possible use of public space, for the publicness of adjacent public spaces may also complement each other.

Keywords: public space, publicness, activities in public space, collective passivity, situational dynamics of publicness, complementary publicness

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For many decades, public space and its defining feature – publicness – have attracted great scholarly attention and have tempted theorists and researchers from various academic disciplines to delve into the concepts. Traditionally, public space has been seen as a space that is owned by the city or a public body, widely accessible to the public and unconditionally open for public use (see e.g. Madanipour 1996; Mitchell 2003; Low & Smith 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht 2009). This understanding, however, has not been universal – it has varied across disciplines and time.

Recent changes in urban space, including privatisation, securitisation and retailisation, have encouraged new ways of using public space and have created conditions for new types of public space to emerge. Unlike in the cities of the previous epochs, where public space was limited to the marketplace and the town square, in the city of today, there is a wide variety of spaces that are all open for public use but that are different in many other of their respects, including their form, design, ownership and accessibility. As a matter of fact, it is highly important to reconsider the concept of publicness and to scrutinise its manifestations in the contemporary urban space.

My approach to the publicness of public space primarily rests upon Lefebvre's (1991) ideas regarding the production of social space and Tyndall's (2010, 134) proposition that "publicness is a dynamic practice". As I see it, publicness is more than a characteristic of urban space; it is a phenomenon that is both present in public space and evolving (or becoming) when the space is used as public space. In my dissertation, I treat publicness as a three-dimensional phenomenon that comprises activities, users and control over use. The use of public space is thus the medium through which publicness can be accessed, studied and conceptualised.

Taking this approach, I set myself a task to explore the publicness of contemporary public spaces and chose Helsinki as the city where I could fulfil the task. I selected three publicly usable spaces from the Kamppi area: Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square, and Kamppi Shopping Centre. The spaces are highly different in their physical characteristics and legal ownership (there are indoor and outdoor spaces, publicly and privately owned spaces and barely and richly furnished spaces). Despite these differences, the spaces are located adjacent to one another, they are tied to each other historically, and they all were developed or (re-developed) at the same time (in early 2000s). Rendering a unique opportunity to approach different types of public space in exactly the same urban context, the Kamppi area appeared to be very attractive for exploring the publicness of different public spaces in the city of today. Therefore, Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre became my three cases and served me as instruments in the pursue of my research aim.

As I write in the introduction to my dissertation, my aim was to "build an understanding of what the publicness of public space implies and of how it is practiced and (re)produced in different public spaces of the contemporary city" (Tamašauskaitė 2024, 18). To put it in other words, I wanted to know what makes Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre public. Pursuing the aim, I intended to study all the three dimensions of publicness, namely activities, users, and control over use. This meant (1) investigating the activities that define and (re)produce each of the three spaces as a public space; (2) studying the groups of users who carry out those activities and evaluating the contribution of their actions to the publicness of each space; and (3) identifying any means that affect the use of each space and tracing the outcomes on each of their publicness.

I designed my primarily qualitative study as a multiple-case study with exploratory and instrumental purposes. In addition to the analyses of each space (or case), I performed an analysis across all three cases. My approach to data collection was a mixed-method approach, and I adopted three research methods. First, I applied the method of spatial observation, which meant observing the principal physical characteristics of Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre in order to familiarize myself with the possible use of the spaces. Next, I applied the method of non-participant observation and spend four weeks systematically watching the public life as it was going on in the spaces. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with people whose professional knowledge and/or job duties and responsibilities enabled them to act as experts, or my research informants. In this way, I could enrich my data with evidence gathered through communicative means.

I completed my field work with a considerable set of data: over 800 digital photos, 231 observation forms, more than 450 pages with hand-written and typed field notes and a few hours of interview recordings. Taking a public space as a unit of analysis, I systematically analysed the contents of

different sets of data about the use of Narinkka Square, the use of Tennispalatsi Square and the use of Kamppi Shopping Centre. Then I compared the findings across the three cases. All the insights that I gained are presented in my doctoral dissertation, a monograph, *Publicness of Public Space in the Contemporary City: Insights from Helsinki* (Tamašauskaitė 2024). In what follows below, I present some of my major insights.

To begin with, my study of the three spaces within the Kamppi area of Helsinki offers an insight that the publicness of a public space is grounded in the activities that different groups of users carry out in the space. This can be explained by the fact that different activities do not only disclose how public space users can use a particular space, but also how the space they use responds to their actions and assists them in satisfying their diverse needs and their aspirations. The cases of Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre show that it is *collective passivity* – not collective activity – that different user groups spending their time in public space either come looking for or decide to stay in because they are tempted by such an opportunity. Two other important purposes include sheltering and satisfying some pressing human needs. Even so, the spectrum of the activities which public space users are interested in carrying out is much wider than that, and every single activity undertaken in a public space has a contribution to make to the publicness of that space.

Despite the fact that every single activity is beneficial to the publicness of public space, some activities manage to leave a more profound impact as compared to others. This, however, does not depend on the activity itself, but is conditioned by how the activity interacts and intermixes with other activities. My findings from the spaces within the Kamppi area afford an insight that those activities which are able to attract, encourage, sustain or facilitate other activities combine into a complex system, which I call an *ecosystem of activities*. It is in this process that the publicness of public space is produced in the most successful way: publicness does not only change its quality (or kind), but also its quantity (or degree). As publicness varies with activities, I consider it to be an ever-changing phenomenon, not an inbuilt characteristic of public space. In the contemporary city, the publicness of public space is marked by *situational dynamics*, which means that it depends upon the activities that are carried out in public space and is never exactly the same.

Another important insight that I gained studying Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre is that public spaces of different types may be strikingly similar in their publicness if (or when) the activities undertaken in the spaces manage to intermix in comparable ways and produce ecosystems of activities that are of similar complexity. If the activities are comparable in number, they are of similar intensity and they interact among themselves more or less equally well, what or which activities make up the systems becomes almost insignificant. This means that public spaces may be different in their kind of publicness, while the degree of their publicness may be comparable.

When it comes to public space users as a dimension of the publicness of public space, I obtained an insight that the range of activities carried out in public space is directly proportional to the diversity of user groups present. To specify, I found the users of Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre to be remarkably tolerant to each other's choices over the use of the spaces, even willing to give priority to other users so that they could successfully satisfy their needs and aspirations. From the point of view of publicness, this mutual respect creates favourable conditions for various activities to be carried out and to intermix and for an ecosystem of activities to develop. Unlike the variety of activities, the diversity of user groups is not productive in itself, but it is indicative and conditional to the publicness of public space.

It shall also be noted that the role of public space users is instrumental in the production of *complementary publicness* which I witnessed in the spaces within the Kamppi area. Moving between adjacent located public spaces, users distribute their activities across the spaces, in this way making the spaces work in cooperation. When adjacent located public spaces join forces in helping their users satisfy their needs and aspirations, they manage to transcend their limitation, and their publicness becomes complementary. Based on this insight from Helsinki, I am inclined to believe that the publicness of a public space is not only grounded in its actual and possible use, but is also dependent on the use of public spaces that are in its near vicinity.

Findings from Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre provided me with yet another insight, which is as follows: there is but a weak link between the source of ownership and the control that is exercised over the use of public space. Any more effective means of control over use are either contextually determined, or they are adopted through design. Behind the use of various means of control, there tends to be an intention of facilitating some particular patterns of use rather than a wish to restrict some activities or limit opportunities to freely choose how to use the space. This, nevertheless, is highly likely to result in creating a public space that discourages some activities, deters some user groups interested in those other activities and hampers the practicing and producing of the publicness of that space.

Finally, my study affords an insight that control over the use of public space, if it is to allow for publicness to successfully be practiced and (re)produced, shall appear in the form of social control and mutual respect. What I found in the spaces within the Kamppi area was the mechanism of social control supported by the police and private security guards who take the role of mediators and act only when necessary to maintain order and ensure safety. Such approach allows for public space users to practice and (re)produce publicness as they choose as long as they respect other users' choices. In this way different groups of users have equal opportunities to contribute to the publicness of public space, which is a social space at the end of the day.

To conclude, the multiple-case study that I conducted in the Kamppi area of Helsinki showcases that various public spaces that are present in the city of today may be highly comparable in their publicness when they are in practice used in comparable ways as public spaces. Based on my insights from Narinkka Square, Tennispalatsi Square and Kamppi Shopping Centre, in my dissertation I argue that despite their differences, a public square, a shopping mall and any other space open for public use may all serve as public spaces and have their own contribution to make to the public space of the contemporary city. Each contribution is unique, and each one is valuable.

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