Dispatches on the Future City

Hamid Dabashi

In 2013 I had the opportunity to engage in a series of public conversations about the future of the city around the world, many of which stemmed from the publication of a book that I wrote about Arab revolutions called *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. In that book, I paid particularly close attention to the notion of public space, and the way in which Tahrir Square had emerged as an allegorically potent term through which we as citizens of a future that cannot be too distanced from our present might begin to reimagine our citizenship. I noted that soon after the Egyptian revolution began, other places around the world began to rename themselves after Tahrir Square. For example, when the Occupy Wall Street movement began in Zucotti Park in New York, people called it Tahrir Square. The name became synonymous with the occupation of public space.

I proposed that the period of ideological formation in the context of postcoloniality had exhausted itself. On previous occasions, I had formulated three moods – anticolonial nationalism, third-world socialism and militant Islamism – as the modus operandi of ideological formation and political mobilisation over the last 200 years in the Arab world. My proposal was that in the location of public space, Tahrir Square writ large, we were at the proverbial ground zero of the articulation of new ideas around human agency, the implications of which went far beyond that region. My subsequent travels have only confirmed my proposition that the reclamation of public space is an urgent global issue.

Earlier this year, I was in Gwangju, South Korea. The Gwangju Biennale had invited me to participate in a symposium for the Folly Project, which began in 2011 and was initially co-curated by the distinguished artist Ai Weiwei. A folly is an architectural design that is very frivolous: it has no function in itself, but is often a critical intervention into the functionality and rationality of a space. The idea of 'folly' was invoked in Gwangju through a number of commissioned spatial interventions into the city. I was invited because of an extraordinary work by the architect Eyal Weizman, who had come up with the idea of Roundabout Revolutions. He had taken the idea of Tahrir, Pearl Square in Bahrain and a number of other public squares in the Arab world in which revolutions had taken place, and superimposed them onto a roundabout in Gwangju, which was itself the site of a major revolutionary uprising in 1982. So suddenly, beyond space and beyond time, these disparate moments of uprising and dissident became enmeshed and related.

In a succession of cities, including in my own city of New York – in Zuccoti Park – across Greece during the movement against austerity measures, or in the youth uprising in the UK against tuition-fee hikes, in Madrid, or in Gezi Park in Istanbul, the question quickly shifted from *whether* to occupy public space, to *how* to re-occupy and redefine public space. Both in the case of Zuccoti Park and Gezi Park in Istanbul, it turned out that these were already privatised spaces: there was no public space accessible for the protests. And as a result this began to stimulate a whole debate around the notion of what exactly is public. I've been fascinated, for example, by the fact that the Bahraini government not only destroyed the central monument in Pearl Square after the uprising there, but has now appropriated the notion of occupying public space by turning the area into a government art project.

A few months after the publication of my book, I had a public conversation with Pankaj Mishra in London about this question of public space in the context of reimagining geographies, during which Deena Chalabi heard me talk and invited me to Liverpool. Paramount to my experience in Liverpool was of course seeing the dilapidated urbanity of the city and the heroic struggle that people in Liverpool were putting together, which I saw especially in the form of their attempts to revive a bakery. However valiant they were, the bakery's destiny appeared to be a fait accompli, since the neighbourhood has been slated for demolition. Nevertheless, the community has put up extraordinary resistance.

In Liverpool, I remembered another uncanny urban condition that I had witnessed a few months earlier, in Detroit, Michigan. I was invited to facilitate a conversation between the artist Shirin Neshat, and lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi at the Detroit Institute of Art. Between the fancy five-star hotel in which we were staying and the spectacular Institute, there was practically nothing but derelict space. The degree of destitution in Detroit, which has since declared bankruptcy, was on a visual level

similar to what I saw in Liverpool. But there was no organised communal resistance to what was happening, at least as far as I could see.

I was next invited to Mexico City, and my visit coincided with the Day of the Dead, which is a celebration similar to Halloween in North America, when Mexicans celebrate the reawakening of their dead relatives. They put out their favourite foods and the entire city is covered with brightly coloured, heavily scented marigolds, so that the dead can find their way. In the highways, on the subways and buses you see people dressed as skeletons, singing and dancing. It seemed to me particularly important that on the campus of UNAM, the national university, this moment of the dead returning to visit their relatives was used for political expression. It was as if the dead, now beyond reproach, were coming back with precisely the political slogans – against the surveillance state for example, or labour migration or privatisation – that were on the minds of the living, but for a variety of reasons were not being expressed. So in effect, the 'dead' were defining the public space with these concepts and were now speaking on behalf of the living.

But while the lack of public space is a global condition, and while public space needs to be reclaimed and crafted, we have to consider this in the context of other developments. During my talk in Liverpool, I offered the airport as a cautionary model, a phantasmagoric combination of the surveillance state and unbounded commodity fetishism. The transmutation and absorption of cities, societies and communities into digitised surveillance systems is the real issue of the future city. In an airport, we see the clearest evidence that we are no longer simply atomised individuals; we are digitised individuals. Today, it is not my passport that needs to correspond to my humanity but in fact my humanity that needs to correspond to my digitised identity. And these digitised identities continue to be extrapolated. The accumulated digitised version of me is the evidence to which my humanity has to correspond no matter where I am in the world. Following Edward Snowden's revelation, we have learned that not only is the surveillance far beyond national borders, but also that there is no human intelligence behind the intelligence gathering. The computer algorithm that collects the data is zero-one: you're either a terrorist or not a terrorist. There is no sense of humour. And of course, after 9/11 this is no joking matter.

In the United States there is the illusion that if you hire somebody from MIT or Harvard with a high IQ, that person will know how to read facts. But the intelligence that we need in order to read these facts is actually what Immanuel Kant called public reason. It isn't just reason in abstraction; it's reason that emerges from the thicket of the public. I propose the need for a consciously articulated dialectical relationship between public space (as we understand it from the public sphere of Habermas), public reason (as in Immanuel Kant's '*was ist aufklärung?*'), and what Hannah Arendt called public happiness.

In writing the Arab Spring book I returned to Arendt's *On Revolution*, in which she contrasted the American revolution with the French revolution. In reading the famous statement in the American Declaration of Independence, 'Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', she defines the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of *public* happiness. She also makes a distinction between liberty and freedom. Liberty is emancipation from tyranny, while freedom is to participate in public happiness, perhaps to be part of a public that is instrumental in establishing what happiness is. She systematically analyses Thomas Jefferson's later work in order to show that his idea of the ward, as a unit of public space and the public sphere, is definitive of this notion of public happiness. So the dialectic that emerges between public sphere, public reason and public happiness is, I believe, needed for us to be able to read facts of all kinds, and that is precisely what we lack in the United States and elsewhere today.

While in Doha for the second Future City symposium, we were asked how we imagine the future city. I think it's a hard task to imagine it when we are part of what is being imagined for us by the society of the spectacle (after Guy Debord, who coined the term back in 1967). We are conscious of our humanity by virtue of its fragility, and yet also of having been aggressively digitised. The future city is the simulated liminality imagined for us by the surveillance state, amidst the politics of fake and fabricated identity, in turn designed by and for the rich and the powerful.

In Doha I also heard, at Qatar Foundation, that future students of architecture are likely to study Education City as an example of what has been built. But given how my thinking has been formed, I'm personally less interested in structures than in ruins. I'm interested in the way we imagine developments for the future of a city like Doha with projects like the magnificent buildings of Education City or Musheireb, but also in the particular ways in which ruins are left behind, and who occupies them. When you turn away from Musheireb, you can still see the historical, dilapidated Doha behind it, now used by squatters, who are migrant labourers. Upon visiting, I remembered how earlier this year, when I was in Asheville, North Carolina, a friend took me to see what he called 'the Seven Sowetos of Asheville'. These were the hidden homes of the underclass, which thanks to architectural sleight of hand and landscape design, have been placed out of sight. You'd never notice them unless you knew where to look. The spectacle hides the labour that creates it.

I spent a day in the Sanaya neighbourhood of Doha, chasing after invisible labourers' quarters. I counted four signs of their presence: water tanks, satellite dishes, a makeshift mosque where the Muslim workers say the *Athan*, and their clothes hanging out to dry on balconies. The economics of migratory labour are made increasingly invisible, while the visual regime that the migratory labour enables draws us all into a society of the spectacle that is almost entirely on autopilot.

Three decades before Debord, in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin theorised in his writing on the *Passagenwerke* the aggressive transmutation of the fetishised commodity into the sign, and the sign into ruins. The genius of his thinking, in part a combination of his Jewish and Marxist identity, was the transformation of the ruinous into the allegorical. He began to read these ruins and fragments as allegories of emancipation.

In my humble opinion, the salvation for the future, as we move forward further into the society of the spectacle, is in fact its aggressive transmutation. You need conscious, deliberate, purposeful interventions into the defining moments of and in public space, because if you leave it to itself, it will gobble you up. The extraordinary work of progressively minded curators, artists, activists and architects around the world has allowed me to think about these things from various perspectives and has taught me a great deal, for which I am very grateful.

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