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## **QUESTIONING “THE END OF PUBLIC SPACE”: A REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN CITIES**

### **Introduction**

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the term public space has become a subject of intense theoretical debates in critical theory across disciplines such as sociology; philosophy; geography; history, visual arts; architecture; cultural studies, law and media studies. The English translation of Lefebvre’s ‘Production of Space’ (1991) revolutionized the field of Urban Studies outside the Europe and America. His seminal work turned space from being a neutral vacuum in between buildings into a metaphor for the everyday urban life which is produced not just by the forces of capitalism but through the everyday life of urban dwellers as they struggle to make claims over space. In literary theory, too, public space is read as a metaphor for contemporary cultural and critical theorizing. In fact literary theory has permeated social theory in the analysis of space.

The literature on the privatization of public space has its roots in the Lefebvrian ‘production of space’ and the ‘rights to city’ which was further developed by Harvey (1992). Harvey looked at the monopolization strategies of real state sector and speculation in the property in the Baltimore area that created high rent and high cost areas to effectively keep out different social groups from accessing housing in these areas. Mitchell (2008) in his study of public parks used the right to study approach to explain the struggles over public space in the Australian context. The same is lamented by American Anthropologist Setha Low (1995) in her studies of public parks in America. The Australian case of the dwindling rights of public on park space has also been researched by Voyce (2007) using the framework of Don Mitchells’ right to the city. The variants of public space that have been the subject of research by scholars are not just the city centre, the parks, and the urban public housing but the street, and the plaza as well. The struggles over the street include the rights of pedestrians to walk, the rights of vendors and the homeless and the role of informal economy in general (Bluestone,1991; Gaber, 1994). Sorokin in his much cited work, ‘*Variations on a Theme Park*’ (1992), dooms the end of

public space with the rise of spaces of entertainment such as shopping Malls, theme parks due to privatization in the wake of neo-liberal policies of investment and governance. Shopping Malls have, in fact, become the visible symbols of the privatization of space in America as the growing literature suggests (e.g. Low, 2000).

By now these approaches have been replicated in several studies in cities across the globe. Wynn (1997) argues that in Saudi Arabia 'public space has long been an arena for asserting and challenging hegemonic gender, generation and moral hierarchies. In modern Jeddah, the increasing commoditization of urban space is transforming power structures and social practices' (p.30). Abu Lughod, however, was the first one to initiate such studies in the context of Middle East and she cautioned 'against celebrating consumption as an act of resistance' (*cf.* Wynn, p. 31).

Another concept that has been frequently applied to understand the changing nature of public space in urban studies in the last three decades is 'gentrification'. The gentrification argument is especially very useful to fathom the transformations of the post-industrial city though its scope and application has been much wider. For example, it has been used in an overlapping sense of fortification of Sao Paulo in the famous study by Caldeira, (2001). Zukin (1995), too, examines the role of artists, and cultural practices in transforming the urban spaces in her study of the gentrification of New York Parks (Bryant Park) and neighbourhoods. C. Ma and Wu (2004) in bringing together the work of leading scholars specializing on urban China, in their book examine what has happened to the Chinese city undergoing multiple transformations during the reform era, with an emphasis on new processes of urban formation and the consequent reconstituted urban spaces.

### **Problematizing the dualistic conceptualisations**

The theoretical binary conceptualisations of public space into the categories of public/private; open/close; and formal/informal are ideal types that do not conform to any real urban spaces in the cities anywhere in the world. There is a need to go beyond these dualisms by revisiting the concept of public space in a comparative context. For instance, Mehrotra's (2008) conceptualisation of the static and kinetic city in his analysis of Mumbai, albeit seemingly dualistic, is one such an attempt that maps the overlap and coalescence of the two co-existing cities in space and time. While the static city is more informal, permanent and monumental, it is the kinetic city that pulsates with life and vigour, and is ever changing. According to Mehrotra, the planners need to look beyond the physical and spatial to imagine different temporalities as design solutions for a cultural landscape that is perpetually in a state of transformation. The role of urban design and planning in creating inclusive cities cannot be undermined. Urban space is as much a spatial as a social category. Planning theory and practice largely derive from the universal

goals of creating a just, equitable, and inclusive city. It is a worthwhile question to ask as to: How close are public spaces in the US cities in achieving this goal?

### **Researching American public space: A reflexive ethnography**

On my earlier visit to the US in the summer of 2012, I travelled to many cities on the East and the West coast with a partially touristy gaze. It appeared to me that the public spaces were quite vibrant with people and activities. I could also find beggars, alcoholics, magicians, and singers trying to make some money through their ‘performances’ on the streets. These observations did not match the scholarly epitaphs that decried the “end of public space” in America. I was confused but didn’t have the time or resources to explore further the alleged dichotomies of open/closed; public/private; formal/informal; accessible/inaccessible; and inclusive /exclusive which characterized the stereotypical images of public space.

It was during my last visit to the US as a Visiting Fellow at the Harvard University that I constructed an ethnographic study of selected public spaces in four cities of USA as part of my post-doctoral research in 2014-15. Since, my stay was longer and with a purpose, I wanted to find out if my earlier observations matched the historically documented forms of American urban public space? During my one year stay at Harvard, I used a combination of methods to make an in-depth study of different types of public spaces e.g. a riverfront, a city square, two public parks, and a major neighbourhood redevelopment project as sites of my research. Applying my training as an urban social anthropologist, and my experience in researching issues of urban planning and development, I conducted fieldwork as a participant and non-participant observer, conducted interviews of key informants, and also collected secondary data from organisations and libraries across these cities. On a broader theoretical plain, my research was designed to make socio-spatial explorations that would further the critical understanding of public space in a comparative framework.

I selected four American cities *viz.* Cambridge, Boston, Chicago and New York for conducting case studies of different forms of public spaces. My location in Cambridge helped me capture the everyday life of the city at certain key public spaces. I selected the stretch of Memorial Drive from the Kennedy School of Government to MIT on the banks of river Charles as this stretch was the site of major public activities and events throughout the year. The other sites in Cambridge were Harvard Square and Central Square. In Boston, my initial interest was in Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway. My focus in both these cities was on public performances, events, and protests.

In New York, the recent Highline Project, also known for being the most recent site of urban redevelopment was taken up for research and in

Chicago, I chose to study its iconic Millennium Park. As a fieldworker, my ontological positions shifted between a non-participant and participant observer - someone who was part local and part stranger. While in Boston and Cambridge, the adoption of this hybrid identity enlarged the sphere of my insights about the dynamic relationship between the public space, city council, private business and the public. In New York and later in Chicago, I did not have sufficient time to do an intense study as in Cambridge and Boston. Nevertheless, secondary literature helped in filling the gaps. I was keenly aware of my partially touristy gaze and this reflexivity helped me contextualize my observations accordingly.

### **Conviviality and Everyday life in Cambridge: a mingling of 'intimate strangers'**

During this visit, I had relatively more time to put the theoretical questions about public space as a concept to test. My appointment at Harvard not only facilitated my field research, but also provided me with secondary literature. I chose to reside in Harvard housing at Peabody Terrace which overlooks the Charles River on the Memorial Drive. The one mile stretch between Harvard and MIT tube stations alongside the Charles River on the Memorial Drive is strategically a very significant location to study the public space in Cambridge. I had the occasion to study the everyday life and spatial practices that make this whole area very open and accessible to all sections of the society. In addition, I focused on Harvard Square and Central Square. While my strategic locational greatly facilitated my everyday participant and non-participant observation, my contacts with the local community helped me in interviews. The limitation of studying this area was that Cambridge is unique in many ways due to world class educational institutions where students from all across the globe come to study, do research and teach. This makes this whole city and especially the stretch between Harvard and MIT, extremely diverse, in terms of nationality, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, race and sexual orientation. The whole area is clustered with highly educated people. The high degree of diversity found in Cambridge is not common to an average small city of the US, although it is a characteristic feature of metropolitan America. The presence of high ranked global institutions makes the real estate very expensive; rents and property taxes, too, are also very high. The City Council has a comfortable budget resulting in a very high standard of delivery of public amenities such as public parks, public libraries, services and maintenance. There is provision of public housing for the poorer sections and immigrants e.g. Muslim immigrants stay in self-owned subsidised mass housing on Putnam Avenue at Western Avenue, close to Central Square. Within this housing locality, there is a community centre which organises very many activities for the residents and their kids such as farmer's market, sports and cultural events. There are some homes for old people as well. The city council organises many public events and street festivals in collaboration

with private organisations such as the boat club Cambridge. In addition, the Harvard, MIT, Cambridge public schools, and various sporting associations also organise many events. These events give this whole city an atmosphere of conviviality, openness and cheer. Following Amin, I see

Conviviality as a “momentary contact” with multiplicity of bodies, matter and technology that is experienced “as a promise of plenitude”. It is this kind of fleeting experience of space that can make one aware of belonging to a “larger fabric of urban life”, and at the same time giving a sense of participation, access and sustainability in, to and of space (Amin 2008 : 22).

I chose conviviality as a frame to study everyday life in Cambridge for the flexibility it offered to explain the sustained participation of strangers in the performative and mundane aspects of “everydayness” ( Shields: 1999) in a manner that created a community of “intimate strangers” which according to Nyamnjoh (2010) share close and overlapping spaces but paradoxically remain strangers. For instance, despite the formal organisation the events created an occasion for a multiplicity of strangers to come together to feel a sense of belonging to the local community due to the informality and openness of access that the event bore. The ‘Head of Charles Regatta’<sup>1</sup>, an international boat race, held annually every October, in which world’s premium teams participated from all over the world, was one such event. It brought together rowers from schools, colleges and clubs and created a community of rowing lovers from across US and Canada. Another festival was the Dragon Boat Festival<sup>2</sup> held every June in Boston at different locations along the Charles River. This is the first and the oldest such boat race festival in America and was started in 1979. During my stay, I observed the 36<sup>th</sup> Boston Dragon Festival held on June 14<sup>th</sup> along the Harvard stretch of Charles River in Cambridge on the Memorial Drive. My residential building overlooked this stretch and I could observe activity right at the break of dawn. During the latter festival, many school teams participate in this boating race on the River Charles. The organisers and sponsors arrange vendors who bring food in the street food trucks; this particular stretch of Memorial Drive along the Harvard is closed to vehicular traffic during the day-long event. Families come out in large numbers to cheer their kids who participate in various art and craft, musical and dance events that continue the whole day. In addition, there are live dance and music performances by many Asian artists in the big tent put up the open space on the banks of the Charles River. The sponsors sell tee-shirts and caps with their organisation’s logo on them to raise money. The event is open and no ticket is required. People are sitting everywhere on the footpaths, on the green stretch along the river, kids are cycling, skateboarding or playing and dancing along on the Memorial Drive. Young couples and groups of young men and women are eating all kinds of international cuisines including samosas sold in the take away trucks parked along the Drive. It is interesting to note that in the music and dance show, some Bollywood numbers were also played and *Bhangra* dance troupe also gave a rocking performance. The event

was largely organised by the South – East Asian community but people from all across the globe participated.

Harvard Square reminds one of a conventional town square where everything ‘urban’ can be experienced. It is always buzzing with life, activity, people and gaiety. On the lawns outside Pete’s café, a couple of guitar players played often played to an appreciating public in a quiet discreet way. People bought food or brought their home made sandwiches and often sat outside on the grass or rocks to enjoy their lunch. I would often sit on the benches outside and observe caravan of people go by. Some people would just sit and read newspaper or some book, while others would be meeting someone over a cup of coffee, yet others would simply be taking some much needed rest or break after shopping or running other chores. The place had a laid back charm about it and seemed very welcoming and inviting.

Outside the Harvard Square tube station, an artist would set up his aisle on the floor and make paintings and sketches right there and then. Generally newcomers and students stopped by to see if anything interested them. He was used to people hanging around him and admiring him as he went nonchalantly about his task. The nearby Information booth drew constant crowds especially in August and September as the new students joined the university and needed assistance in finding their way around the campus and the city. The many small souvenir shops strategically located alongside the square generally extended their counters on to the sidewalks with display of Harvard and MIT tees, key chains, magnets, pens, pencils and other knick-knacks for tourists or visitors. During Christmas, Harvard students and members of community associated with nearby chapels sang X-mas carols, dressed in traditional costumes. Harvard gazette would announce these events online and there would invariably be a crowd cheering and clapping to the performances.

The Central Square was another vibrant and open town square where I observed a host of activities. It is flanked by a busy market on both sides of Cambridge Street while residential lanes are located in lanes behind market. There are several institutional buildings such as the city post-office, city council hall, old chapel, YWCA and YMCA buildings. It is very well connected by public transport. At various places, there are benches under the trees where people sit around and chat or read newspapers. These are ordinary people, sometimes old people, blacks, immigrants, and also whites. The Cambridge street that runs from Harvard Square to Central Square and beyond towards Kendall Square is a hub of events, activities, performances etc. I observed the annual Cambridge Carnival<sup>3</sup> International parade which is a big crowd puller. The participants are attired in colourful traditional Afro-Caribbean costumes with body tattoos, painted faces, feather caps and decorations in the hair. There are musicians, drummers, singers and cheer leaders while the other performers are dancing, singing in bonhomie to the beat of Caribbean music.

The kids are a vital part of the parade and enjoy special art and craft competitions arranged for them. The carnival also features a variety of African foods on offer by many vendors lining the sidewalks. The carnival parade seems to be a seamless extension of everyday in its brazenness during the business hours of a busy day; the vehicular traffic cutting through the cross-cutting transactions at Cambridge Street while the pedestrians stopped by to watch the performance; and simultaneously it also acted as a rupture from the mundane in the visual relief that it provided by its sheer exotic presence. I talked to some performers in the parade and they informed that it was an annual event and a celebration of their native African and Caribbean traditions. It made them reconnect to their cultural histories and a mythical past while being embedded in a cosmopolitan community of strangers. This simultaneity of rupture and seamlessness with the everyday re-appeared as some performers sat engrossed with their mobiles on the crowded tube, on their routine return journeys home; their costumes and painted bodies, being the only symbolic remnants of the transient visual landscape that would return next year.

### **Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway, Boston: Reclaiming public space**

Soon after my arrival in Cambridge, in June 2014, I started reconnoitring the public spaces in the city of Cambridge and Boston. I began my exploration from Boston Common, Old State House, Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, North Market, South Market and other parts of the downtown Boston. While moving ahead from the historic Quincy Market towards the North End one day, I reached a beautifully manicured park with fountains, plazas and promenades right in the middle of the city where children played as parents relaxed or played with them; many people in formal clothes sat idly or munched on a sandwich or eating lunch; some were talking on the phone and yet others, most likely tourists were busy taking selfies or pictures in a leisurely fashion. This park seemed like an oasis amidst the concrete jungle of glass and steel towers that surrounded it. I was amazed to see the size of the park and its greenery and maintenance. Boston being one of the oldest cities in America, I wondered about the foresight of the city planners who initially designed the city. I also had a glimpse of a signpost that bore the famous ‘Kennedy’ name. Having heard of some big park in Boston, I wondered if were the same park. This visit made me curious about the vision of city planners and authorities who took care of the public spaces in this historic American city.

In my conversations with fellow residents at Peabody Terrace, I learnt that this park was quite a recent addition to the city, as it was inaugurated in 2008, and has been named after Kennedy Matriarch, mother of former US President John F Kennedy, who was born in North End, Boston. This further aroused my curiosity and I wanted to know how could such a large open space be created in the centre of the city and what existed at its site prior to this park. I decided to take up this site as one of the public spaces for my field

work. On scanning the secondary sources in Harvard libraries, I learnt that park was built over 15 acre land spread over 2.4 kms.in length throughout the busy downtown in the form of a green strip with gaps in between.

I started visiting the park for conducting my field research. The park attracts many visitors. It is a beautiful, safe and happening space. People from residential neighbourhoods, adjoining business complexes, students from all over Greater Boston and tourists are seen enjoying themselves in the park. In an interview, an elderly person who was a Bostonian from a neighbourhood adjoining the park, I was informed that the otherwise serene park has been in the middle of political controversies since the very beginning. There have been many political contestations about the ownership, naming, leasing, and financing of the park. He also mentioned that had it not been named after Rose Kennedy, it would not have been in the present shape. He admitted that he enjoyed the park but the coming of the park had added to the woes of local neighbours. Many of the local residents had to leave the area as property rates and rents had gone up due to rise in the value of real estate in this area.

Another person I spoke to worked in an office in the neighbourhood. He told me that he loved this park and often came there with office colleagues to have lunch or bask in sunshine. A young woman with two small kids reported that the park had good infrastructure, kids could play there, and it was safe, open and accessible to all. Further inquiries from the horticultural staff at work in the park revealed that a number of events were organized in the park throughout the year. From these accounts, the park seemed to be an ideal public space. I wondered as to how the maintenance of such a big park was funded? Was it the city council or state of Massachusetts or some federal grant that looked after its upkeep? Was there any revenue generated through activities to sustain its own operations? How was this space governed? Were local residential neighbourhoods involved in the governance structure? What was the role of local business community? This led me to finding out more about the role of different stakeholders.

### **'Big Dig' and Gentrification**

This park was a bye product of demolition of a 6 Lane highway elevated Central Artery known as John F. Kennedy Expressway (Interstate 93) that was constructed in 1950s to improve the traffic situation in Boston. The Artery was constructed by demolishing 1000 buildings, and displacing 20000 people.<sup>4</sup> Now, a tunnel has replaced this highway as part of a mega project known as "Big Dig" completed in 2007. The land above the tunnel has been developed into a park known as Boston Greenway named after Rose Kennedy<sup>5</sup>. The "Big Dig", is the unofficial name of the Boston's Central Artery/ Tunnel (CA/T) Project. This is considered to be the biggest and most complex transportation project in US. The project was planned to depress Boston's elevated Central Artery (Interstate 93) and construction of a tunnel connecting the city with



the Boston’s Logan International Airport and the waterfront. The project planning began in 1982, and construction work started in 1991 and completed in 2007.<sup>6</sup> (massDOT 2015).

The multi-billion project was fiercely contested, debated, opposed, discussed and ultimately implemented. The key organizations involved were the US Federal Highway Administration; The Boston Transportation Planning Review; The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority; Boston Redevelopment Authority; Mass Department of Environment Protection; Joint Venture of Bechtel and Parson Brinckerhoff; some civil society organizations, for instance, The Boston Chamber of Commerce; The Boston Society of Landscape Architects; Citizens for Liveable Charlestown; The Committee for Regional Transportation etc. to name a few. The State of Massachusetts, Governor Massachusetts, and Boston City Mayor were some other key actors in the planning and shaping of the project (CMPD)<sup>7</sup>. It was clear that submergence of the Central Artery would lead to the release of a large amount of land for future use.

In order to visualize future use of the land, the Turnpike Authority commissioned a study. The state also had some plan that visualized development of mid-rise commercial development on the released land. This was intensely debated and finally the plans to develop the park were started (*ibid*). Economic Development Research Group, Boston (EDRG) prepared a report for the Turnpike Authority on ‘Metropolitan Highways System & Urban Transformation’. The study highlighted that ‘the removal of the elevated Central Artery has opened up the long suppressed development potential of Boston waterfront. In addition, development of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway above the depressed highway is creating demand for office and residential development with waterfront views.’ The report estimated private investment of US\$ 7.4 billion; 7700 new housing units; 6.7 million square feet of hotel space; 9.2 million square feet of office space and 1.37 million square feet of retail and other space and more than 43000 jobs (EDRG Report:14)<sup>8</sup>. This development was to take place in Downtown, South Boston, Chinatown, North End, Charlestown, Haymarket, South End and Kenmore<sup>9</sup>.

Development at this scale and creation of such a huge park (Greenway) in the city of Boston was bound to result in the process of gentrification. In the same report it is mentioned, ‘residents of the North End, Chinatown, and South Boston have expressed fears that the new developments in their neighbourhoods will raise property values, leading to an increase in property taxes that residents cannot afford’.<sup>10</sup> During the implementation of the project, the Greenway came under discussions and public gaze but the real battle to take control of the land began when project was nearing completion. The Mass Turnpike implemented the project and it wanted to take control of the 15-acre parkland. The other major stakeholders, inter-alia, included State of Massachusetts, Mayor of City of Boston, downtown businesses, residential

neighbourhoods and citizens from Boston and Massachusetts. Government authorities were entangled in a bitter turf war on the issue of ownership of the land. Since the park was named after mother of former U.S. President John F Kennedy, the Kennedy family was also a significant stakeholder. The dispute threatened the future of the park.

### **Contesting ownership, control and rights: the politics of public space**

The artery land has been under focus from mid 1980s. Luberoff (2004: 9) mentions, 'a 1985 state plan called for mid-rise commercial and residential buildings on most of the new land, as did a 1988 plan prepared by the Boston Society of Architects.' The downtown business represented by Artery Business Committee (ABC) has played a very significant role in developing an understanding between state and public. The public of Boston, too, was not in favour of spending money for the upkeep of this park as most of the Bostonians were not living on the edge of the park. The state of Massachusetts was also not interested in funding it. The general opinion was that since the immediate beneficiaries of the park were downtown businesses, the funding for the upkeep ought to come from them. The businesses were of the opinion that they were already paying high property taxes. Hence, it was unfair to make them pay extra money. A few of them were willing to pay but in return wanted control over its governance. However, choosing this route would have meant a compromise with its inclusivity and openness and losing its public character.

In 2004, the Democratic National Convention was to be held in Boston. The Kennedys wanted to sort out this issue and they ultimately succeeded in brokering a deal between Turnpike Authority, Governor and Mayor after much prodding and negotiations. It is clear that without Kennedy's involvement, the Conservancy wouldn't have come into being<sup>11</sup> (McMorrow, 2012). Commenting on the controversies about Greenway, McMorrow (2012) points out, 'the greenway is an elaborately manicured park, but the space has always been defined by highly charged, politically contentious clashes'.<sup>12</sup> As per the deal, the Greenway was to be run by a Conservancy. While interacting with an employee of the Conservancy, I asked about the history of the Greenway. He told me that everyone wanted to take control of the land but none was willing to fund the development and maintenance. McMorrow has echoed the same view as 'planning and park design were largely the result of citizen-led volunteer efforts'<sup>13</sup>. The governance structure of the Conservancy, a not for profit, is modelled on public-private partnership. Further, the park doesn't exist because private sector asked for it. If it becomes solely and exclusively the domain of the private sector; the park would lose its inclusiveness'.<sup>14</sup> The public opinion was in favour of keeping the park public and strongly against the surrender of this land to private interests. Hence, keeping in view the public sentiment, the management of the Greenway Conservancy was conceived as a joint effort between public and private actors. The Conservancy

has been given some state support while the rest of the finances have to be raised by the Conservancy through revenue generation and donations.

Today, Boston Greenway is a vibrant public space with thousands of events such as festivals, carnivals, exhibitions etc., taking place in a year and millions of people visiting it. This case shows the way public discourse shaped the opinion of policy makers in recent history of any city. The historic downtown of Boston was choking under pollution, congestion and crime. This CA/T project not only solved the traffic problem in the city but also gave a large public space to the city. Wolff of CWDG, a Boston based design company, has been associated with the design of greenway and conducted hundreds of public hearings on the project. He says that this park is an open public space; a most democratic space and it invites diverse set of people with diverse set of interests.<sup>15</sup> In this case, citizens of Boston have reclaimed their public space in the city.

The American cities are witnessing a growing consciousness among its citizens to reclaim neighbourhood public parks and open spaces. A study compiled by Restore Our Community Coalition (ROCC: 2015)<sup>16</sup> enlists many such projects that have been rejuvenated by the cities, communities and neighbourhoods to create new public spaces e.g. Jim Ellis Freeway Park (5 acre) in downtown Seattle, Washington; Margaret T. Hance Park (30 acre) in downtown Phoenix, Arizona; Klyde Warren Park (5 acre) in downtown Dallas, TX; McKinley Avenue boulevard in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Embarcadero waterfront in San Francisco, California; and Tom McCall Waterfront in Portland, Oregon.

### **Re-vitalizing Chicago: The Millennium Park**

Millennium Park of Chicago is one of the much talked about public spaces in the recent times in America and hence I decided to visit Chicago and include it as one of the case studies. On my visit to the park, I was awestruck by its magnificence and monumentality. Its location, unique design, aesthetic architecture, sculpture, garden and activities make it far more than a park. It is an apparent and successful attempt to create a place for global tourist attraction, besides adding to the brand ‘Chicago’.

The official website of city of Chicago claims, “ in Millennium park, you’ll find a new kind of town square – a lively, spectacular gathering spot located in the heart of the city and a destination for Chicagoan and visitors alike”.<sup>17</sup> Richard M. Daley, the city mayor, conceived the park in 1997 by transforming an industrial wasteland into “world-renowned Public Park”. The project became very ambitious with the involvement of private sector and world famed architect Frank Gehry.<sup>18</sup> The 24.5 acre park is situated between Michigan Ave. and Columbus Ave, the high streets of Chicago. Developed on the rooftop of a garage and a commuter rail station, it houses Anish Kapoor’s

stainless steel sculpture called “Cloud Gate” , also known as the “Bean”; the Jay Pritzker Music Pavillion for outdoor performances designed by world renowned architect Frank Gehry’s; Jaume Plensa’s “Crown Fountain”; beautifully designed Lurie Garden; and BP Pedestrian Bridge to cross over the Columbus Plaza.

The construction began in 1998 and it was opened on July 21, 2004. The total cost of the project was US\$ 475 Million of which almost half the funding came from private sector. The park hosts a large number of events that are free but some events are ticketed. The city government has acknowledged the involvement of private business in transforming the very nature, scope and scale of the project. I observed the Bean was the most popular section and also the most photographed. It shows distorted self-images superimposed over a distorted image of Chicago skyline as the background. Another attraction point in the park was the “Crown Fountain” which is best described as a video fountain featuring live images of ordinary Chicagoans. Another white portrait sculpture named “Look into My Dreams, Awilda” by the same artist also finds place on the exit facing Michigan Side of the park. Interestingly, on my visit, I was able to view the three new massive sculptural additions, on display in the park till December 2015 which have been loaned by the artist. The three identical portrait sculptures were placed in the outdoor south Boeing Gallery on the grass for public viewing and offered a complete rupture from the surrounding sense of place.

During my conversations with the visitors, it emerged that they were in Chicago to see the famous park and its monumental art. The Millennium Park also has a café on one of its gateway along the famous Michigan Avenue, called the Park Grill. It however, comes at a hefty price and is out of reach of ordinary people. A café worker informed that visitors were rising exponentially since it’s opening in 2004. An international student at Chicago revealed that he and his friends were regular visitors at the park though they neither ate at the café nor attended any of the ticketed events. But they enjoyed the open spaces and beautiful lawns as well as loved to look at the iconic Chicago skyline from the BP Pedestrian Bridge. It was an exciting experience similar to Baudelaire’s flaneur and Simmel’s Metropolitan man that was constitutive of the “urban”.

It is well known that cities compete with each other for attracting businesses, investments, and jobs by getting new identities through large-scale public funded infrastructural development projects and organization of mega sports events such as Olympics or World fairs. What is not so widely known is that this has been historically so. For instance, Chicago organised the world famous Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. This phenomenon has only intensified in the post-welfare economy. The Millennium Park has not only given a new identity to Chicago but also a fresh lease of life to city’s economy. Since its very inception, the park has been in the midst of various controversies.

One of the expected controversies was with respect to the cost overrun and delays. Many other controversies concerning the design and height; the naming of “Cloud Gate” as “Bean”; and the prohibition of photography of art followed. Particularly, the photography of art generated a huge debate on copyrights. It was finally settled when public was allowed to take photographs as long as these were for non-commercial use such as keeping for memory or sharing it with friends / relatives. The professional photography was allowed at appropriate fees. At a local souvenir shop, near the park, I noticed that Chicago Skyline dominated as the theme on most of the knick knacks. In a conversation, the salesman told me that Chicago’s skyline was the story of the growth of America. Chicago was a very young city and it recreated its brand most imaginatively compared to other American cities like New York who were already gifted with the Statute of Liberty. Pointing towards the ‘Millennium Park’, he noted with pride that only Chicago could have undertaken such an imaginative project.

Although Millennium Park is a public park ostensibly planned to celebrate the dawn of new millennium, it has a latent business blueprint and agenda. The city has been witness to the flight of jobs and white people during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>19</sup> The suburbanization that followed during the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century led to growing inequality, racial segregation, slums and partisan politics in the region. It was an indication of urban decay. Interestingly, the business elites of the region have also created a platform for discussing the issues of regional importance, their internal business disputes and competition notwithstanding (Kelsey, 2006). The development of the iconic park, by the alliance of city mayor, business and philanthropists, involving huge investments, in a city facing problems of inequality, crime and poor education, could not be merely be read as the gift by the city’s elites to the general public. The park’s public-ness was incidental while the hidden agenda was to boost tourism as a vehicle for promoting private interests of local and global capital. The grandiosity of the park was an attempt to add a jewel to the crown of Chicago as was done a century ago by organizing Chicago World’s Fair. Gilfoyle (2006) in his commissioned work unravels “the use of culture as an engine of economic expansion” (ibid: xiv).

### **Public space in the neo-liberal context: New York’s High Line**

High Line is the latest addition to the already impressive list of monumental public spaces in New York. A friend of mine in New York offered to be my guide during my visit to the park. The online literature on the High Line revealed that it was a 1.45 miles long linear park created out of a disused elevated freight rail track in the West Side Manhattan. The construction work began in 2006 and it was opened for public in three phases. The first phase was opened in 2009, second in 2011 and last one in 2014.<sup>20</sup> The park is a celebration of urban architecture and design having creatively transformed

an urban blight into a natural, aesthetic and green monument of world attraction.<sup>21</sup> One of the High Line staff estimated that approximately 5 million people visited the park annually. The original freight rail track on which it rests was opened in 1934 to connect the industrial district of Manhattan to the larger rail-road network for transportation of goods such as meat, milk and other goods. It was elevated, and passed through the building blocks to avoid traffic congestion; and served the Chelsea and nearby areas in Manhattan. Due to development of inter-state trucking in mid twentieth century, the relevance of this elevated track started dwindling with hardly any business left for it during 1970s. The last rail that was moved on this track was in 1980 and since then, it had been lying abandoned with wild vegetation, graffiti and decay (David and Hammond 2011).<sup>22</sup>

During 1990s, the landowners below the elevated track started lobbying for the demolition of High Line keeping in view the real estate development opportunities. The demand for demolition was picking up but the neighbourhood did not want demolition fearing gentrification. A Chelsea resident, Peter Obletz, went ahead and challenged the demolition efforts in the Court (Freeman 2007).<sup>23</sup> Later, two more residents from High Line neighbourhood, Joshua David and Robert Hammond in 1999 formed a not-for-profit organization called "Friends of the High Line (FOTHL)" to preserve the High Line as an open public space. Under mounting pressure from many other citizen groups demanding the preservation of the un-used industrial infrastructure, the city administration agreed to re-purpose the High Line as a public park. The "Friends of the High Line" played a critical role in conceiving, designing and fund raising for the park. Its design transformed this urban blight spot into a monument in the form of urban public space. Today, the "Friends of the High Line" maintains the park and is responsible for organizing various programmes such as talks, performances, movies, displays of various exhibitions and arts, sculptures etc. Most of the activities are free or at low cost for public. However, the park is also used for exclusive purposes with advance booking.

The beautifully designed rooftop green park with old rail tracks in the background, gives aesthetic pleasure to the visitors (Bourne 2012).<sup>24</sup> I observed that the visitors were in awe of the concept and design. Expectedly, I observed a huge construction activity in various evacuated plots in the vicinity of the park. One of the staff in the revitalized neighbouring Chelsea Market told me that the whole area has been totally changed since the construction on the High Line began. My friend informed that the property rates had shot up and many luxury apartments and office spaces were replacing the older dilapidated buildings of the neighbourhood. While walking on High Line, and during my guided tour around the area, I observed that massive construction was going on, old buildings were getting demolished and the new ones were under construction. The secondary literature showed that the rezoning of the area

had spurred the real estate development whereby 33 new housing, commercial, retail, non-profit and gallery projects were either already completed or under construction (NYCEDC 2015).<sup>25</sup>

Gentrification was the most visible consequence of the park. The traditional businesses moved out concurrently with the local residents as the area became too expensive for them to afford. Mirbabae (2013) points out that as per a survey of US Census Bureau, there were 15000-25000 poor people living in the neighbourhoods of the High Line in 2005 and it was possible that this number had dropped since the construction of the High Line and consequent increase in property rates.<sup>26</sup> The total project cost of High Line was US\$ 185.3 m of which US\$ 123.2 m was contributed by city government, US\$ 20.3 m by Federal Government, US\$0.4 m by the state and the remaining US\$ 44 m was raised by “Friends of the High Line” (NYCEDC 2015).<sup>27</sup> Allegedly mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed US\$ 170 m in funding out of childcare services for the city. Thus a park meant to be used largely by the middle class and tourists was publically funded as the child care assistance budget for the city poor was cut (Mirbabae 2013).<sup>28</sup>

In my interaction with the local residents, I learnt that initially the park was proposed for the local neighbourhood, but it got appropriated by Bloomberg, the Mayor to suit the interests of real estate developers and builders. The new zoning laws of city as well as the entry of new businesses transformed the whole west side Manhattan (Moss 2012).<sup>29</sup>

While describing the appeal of the High Line to suburban American youth Bourne (2012) writes,

‘thirty feet in the air, winding through the remains of one of the last blue-collar work sites Manhattan, the High Line is a monument to gentrification, a showcase of what can happen when hip young college graduates invade an impoverished area and repopulate it with art galleries and fancy restaurants. But here’s the truly amazing part: it all works. The underlying aesthetic of the park’s design may be a tad fatuous, girded as it is by unexamined assumptions about working – class authenticity, but the park itself is a gorgeously executed gem.’<sup>30</sup>

Moss (2012) openly criticized the High Line for its gentrification, corporatization and appropriation of a neighbourhood space by the city government for the tourists. He called it, “Disney World on the Hudson” created for the elites and tourists.<sup>31</sup> His criticism of the park generated a huge debate in the city about the desirability of such projects that lead to out migration of the local poor residents. However, not all people agreed with Moss and instead viewed gentrification as a larger process for revitalizing the local economy. Notwithstanding the above debate, this park, though public in nature, has definite exclusionary effects as the whole area has been occupied by luxury brands, luxury apartments, expensive galleries, and high end restaurants

making it practically difficult for the poor people to consume this public facility (Mirbabaee, 2013).

### **Concluding Remarks: Production, reproduction and appropriation of public space**

The four case studies of different types of public spaces in different cities of the U.S. show remarkable diversity in terms of the strategies employed and the actors involved in the management and revitalization of these public spaces. In Cambridge, it is the diverse ethno-national communities which lay claim to the open streets, roads, markets and riverfronts by organising cultural festivals, carnivals, and performances. The Cambridge Caribbean Carnival is a significant illustration of the way in which cultural performances play a significant role in laying claims to the urban public space. Similarly, Dragon Boat festival, despite being organised by the South East Asian community, is inclusive in terms of the cuisines and performances of music and dance that lends it a cosmopolitan and inclusive character. The Harvard Square, too, is an epitome of freedom and diversity. The Rose Kennedy Park, Boston symbolizes a democratic public space in the very heart of the commercial city. The production of this open space demonstrates how public opinion can shape the policy and planning process. The other case studies of Millennium Park of Chicago and the New York's High Line are new models of public-private partnerships that are increasingly becoming a norm in the production, management and control of American public spaces. These case studies further unravel a variety of urban regeneration strategies adopted by local business elites, corporations, local and regional political actors, the city municipal authorities and city mayors for appropriating the public spaces for revenue and profit.

On the whole, I found that American cities have an abundance of public spaces. My findings are however, informed by my observation of the relative dearth of such spaces in other cities in other parts of the globe. This availability of open public parks and plazas in American cities is attributed to the heightened awareness and consciousness of citizens towards preserving their open public spaces, given the large spate of citizen led movements for their right to the city. There is an attempt at appropriation or rather re-appropriation of neighbourhood parks by the residents on the one hand and the big business elites' pushing for creation of grand public spaces such as Rose F Kennedy Greenway in Boston, High Line in New York, Millennium Park in Chicago, on the other. Although the phenomenon of production of space through architectural aesthetics and art imagery is not new to American cities, yet in the past three decades, the public spaces are being produced, appropriated and re-produced with massive investments at a scale and speed unprecedented in history. Consequently, a disproportionate spending of public money on certain high profile public spaces at the cost of poorly maintained



neighbourhood parks, leads to many controversies. Citizens are interested in neighbourhood parks and other such places that can give them a rich urban experience. The American public space is a juxtaposition of public and private, at once inclusive and exclusive; open and closed.

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#### NOTES

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