

Harold M. Tollefson Square:

A Case Study Using Citizenship to Analyze Public Space as an Issue of Urban Inequality

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The concept of “citizenship” plays a significant role in public space production, use, and destruction. Using a synthesis of in-class readings and independent research, this paper examines Harold M. Tollefson Square in order to demonstrate knowledge of the concept of “citizenship” and to apply this concept to a real world case of urban inequality.

In order to understand citizenship’s role in urban inequality, readers must first understand that public space is not in fact public space. In a work entitled *A Space for Place in Sociology*, Thomas F. Gieryn argues that “Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out.” (Gieryn, 465) What he argues here is interesting because it introduces an important but easy-to-overlook distinction between what is simply *space* and what is much more meaningful *place*. Gieryn later clarifies the distinction further by arguing that “...place is not merely a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life.” (Gieryn, 466) This argument is powerful because it gives us a new tool with which to analyze the subset of places which our society refers to as public: public places can now be analyzed not only by their mere existence but also by the way they interact with various matters of concern including cultural meaning, history, people, things, and even citizenship (which is the focus of this paper).

One way that public places interact with citizenship is through design, or production. To better understand this concept, the following questions beg to be considered: Once a public place is built, who ‘owns’ it? Is it those who had the power to make the design decisions, or the people as a whole? On a local scale (rather than national), can it be said that some people have “citizenship” to the public place, while others do not? To build a foundation on which these questions may be analyzed, consider Tacoma’s Wright Park.

Readers of *Images of America: Tacoma’s Wright Park* discover that the land for Wright Park was “...donated to the young city [Tacoma] by the Tacoma Land Company in 1886” (McGinnis, Melissa;

Beard-Simpkins, Doreen; Tacoma, Metropolitan Park District of, 7) and furthermore, that the Tacoma Land Company “...was the real estate subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railway.” (7) On the following page, readers are informed that the donation was strictly contingent on the land being forever “...exclusively used as and appropriated for the use of a public park” (8) and that in fact failing to do so would ensure the nullification of the donation.

Via the history of Wright Park, we see that the land is basically leased to the city of Tacoma with duration of forever, cost of zero, and contingency of the land being used exclusively for a public park. The term “leased” is used here to make obvious the locus of ownership and decision-making power, which is in fact not the City of Tacoma but the Northern Pacific Railroad. My argument here is that the city of Tacoma has no citizenship or ownership/rights-to the land that Wright Park sits on: Should the city choose to deviate from the exclusive land use as a public park, the original donation becomes nullified and the city loses the estate.

Interestingly enough, the current Master Plan for Wright Park, published in 2005, includes in its list of primary features a bullet point which reads “Planning for a new park facility which adds leasable retail, restrooms, office, and storage.” (Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma, 6) While it may be in Tacoma’s best interest not to proceed with such a plan considering the land donation’s strict contingencies, such an argument (although quite interesting and related, indeed) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, readers can still see that the new Master Plan includes portioning off certain pieces of the public park and leasing them to non-public entities. While this is probably an attempt to “clean up” the park (remove crime, get wanted populations back into the park, etc.), this method unfortunately changes the land use within certain parts of the park from public to exclusively private. This illuminates a paradox: How can it be that the notion of equality can support and legitimize such an obvious and overt inequality? In other words, how can the general public’s citizenship of a public place

be taken away in the name of keeping things equal and preventing a minority group from hogging equally public land? T.H. Marshall brought forward the underlying idea in *Citizenship and Social Class*.

In *Citizenship and Social Class*, Marshall uses a case study of social class to explore and better understand the concept of citizenship and its effects on society over time. The argument is made that “Differential status, associated with class, function, and family, was replaced by the single uniform status of citizenship, which provided the foundation of equality on which the structure of inequality could be built.” (Marshall, 104) Although his work focuses on social class, readers can pull out the profound idea which he presents and use it to analyze other types of inequalities as well. Through Marshall’s work, useful insight can be gained into the inequality that surrounds Tacoma’s Tollefson Square, previously known as Pacific Plaza.

The design of Tollefson Square was produced in a profoundly inequal manner yet the process was legitimized via a superficial notion of equality. A notice published in the *Tacoma News Tribune* entitled “Ideas to improve Pacific Plaza will be revealed at luncheon” offers an excellent case-in-point:

The Project for Public Spaces will present its final report today on what to do to make new downtown park Pacific Plaza more inviting. The luncheon discussion, called "Creating a Great Civic Square - Pacific Plaza," will take place at noon at The Tacoma Club, 16th floor, Wells Fargo Plaza, South 12th Street and Pacific Avenue. The cost is \$15 per person. (The News Tribune, D1)

The notice in The News Tribune points out a number of glaring inequalities: the redesign of the public place was to be completed at an exclusive club, during the day when many citizens of Tacoma are busy at work, and at a cost – all of which limited the power of design to a comparatively small number of people – and surely by excluding the working and lower classes, the remaining group of people did not represent the median demographic for Tacoma. Making things worse, the whole inequal design process was legitimized because by technicality, the meeting was open to the public, which supposedly allowed

all Tacoma citizens to participate in the design of the space. As a natural consequence of this exclusive design, the space welcomes some citizens (those who designed it) while pushing others away. The design of the space therefore changes the way people perceive who “owns” the space or who holds citizenship for it.

One way to affirm this link between citizenship and public space is to analyze how the space is used. Is the space actually public? How public is it? Work by Anna Secor, Aihwa Ong, and Pun Ngai provides the insight necessary to answer these questions and how they relate to Tollefson Square.

In her work *“There is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me”*: *Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City*, Anna Secor studies how Kurdish women use either anonymity or identity to pass wherever they happen to be, claiming citizenship in some places and hiding within the crowd in others so as to “pass” or get along in everyday life.

Aihwa Ong’s work *Please Stay: Pied-a-terre Subjects in the Megacity* illuminates issues surrounding citizenship and temporary professional workers. One of the main points that readers take home from her work is that because these professional workers are only temporary, they don’t really have a vested interest in the city in which they stay. Therefore, even though some cities grant these professional workers a special pseudo-citizenship status, they do not really hold actual citizenship. As soon as their work contract expires, these professional workers often pick up and move on.

Pun Ngai, in her work *Made In China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workforce*, also writes about temporary workers, but as the title suggests, Ngai focuses on women factory workers in China. What makes Ngai’s work different and interesting by comparison to Ong’s work is that in China, the women workers are officially disallowed from obtaining official citizenship in the places they stay. Thus, even if they wanted to move to the city and have citizenship over some space, they couldn’t. These women are allowed to temporarily be in the city, but cannot stay indefinitely.

Secor, Ong, and Ngai provide much-needed insight to better understand the use of public space. Pulling from Secor's work and applying it to Tollefson Square, in much the same way as Kurdish women claim to be Turkish to make themselves "anonymous," commuters traveling to work on the Link Light Rail may be traversing the public space every day, but because they are traveling through in an enclosed coach which does not stop in the square, these commuters are "anonymous." Additionally, through Ong and Ngai's work, one can think of commuters as temporary citizens of the city (during weekdays). Using Ong's vocabulary, these citizens have had their citizenship "suspended" by being only anonymous and temporary citizens. In other words, because they are only anonymous and temporary workers, commuters experience only limited real rights to the public space they pass through, including Tollefson Square. This is interesting and profound because unlike China where official citizenship is *taken away*, here in America it can apparently be *given away* via an ignorance or lack of use. One might say that in practice, citizenship is always fluidly changing, can be given or taken, and never very easy to define.

Besides the creation and use of public space, it is important that this paper also analyze the destruction of public space and its relationship with citizenship. Although the destruction of public space can come in a number of different forms, this paper analyzes specifically the destruction of public space via commercialization or privatization.

One particularly fascinating piece by Michael Sorkin entitled *See You in Disneyland* analyzes one of the best examples of commercialization of urban space: Disneyland. Sorkin touches on how Disneyland creates and uses "urban" space – but he also says Disneyland is not urban at all. He refers to Disney parks as "...a city with billions of citizens (all who would consume) and no residents." (Sorkin, 13) Disneyland is "...the utopia of transience, a place where everyone is just passing through." (Sorkin, 13) Sorkin's work here meshes well with the work of Ong and Ngai, as they all discuss in varying degrees the same urban issue of transiency. Readers are reminded that Tollefson Square has this issue of transiency,

where the served population is whisked through the place (via the link) but never really given a reason to stay, have ownership, or be a citizen. [If that is the case, what is the point of the square?!]

Another example of the erosion of public space to private or commercial interests is Don Mitchell's piece on People's Park, entitled *The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy*. In his work, Mitchell analyzes the issues surrounding People's Park, including an ongoing battle between the University and the public in which "...the University has maintained ownership of the land, frequently announcing plans for its imminent 'improvement'" (Mitchell, 109) in an effort to cleanse the park of unwanted citizens and behavior. The University eventually privatized the center of the park by installing a recreation area with volleyball courts. This effort placed pressure on park transients to leave, and succeeded to some degree. In the process, the public space became private: "ownership" was therefore changed from public to private. As a result, it can be said that citizenship was taken away from some groups (most obviously the homeless) simply through the destruction of public space.

In a manner vaguely similar to that which Mitchell presents, Tollefson Square is being commercialized in an effort to get people to use the space (and by implication, to help keep "undesirables" out). The easiest and most obvious demonstration of this concept comes from the billboard-sized advertisement across the street from the square: As a marketing plan for the Tacoma Art Museum clearly mentions, "Another advantage of the location is the ability to advertise on the building." (Kennedy, et al., 8) The wall of the art museum points almost directly at the seating surfaces of Tollefson Square as if it were a venue specifically tailored to meet the art museum's advertising needs. However, commercialization of Tollefson Square may not be such a bad thing: one might ask "Who else is going to use the space if not the Art Museum?" [After all, remember that through design, most of everyone else has already been kicked out.]

The following can be said with certainty about Tollefson Square: Through design, use (or disuse), and destruction (or commercialization), the vast majority of the public has lost “ownership,” citizenship, or right to use the space. One question remains, however. Is the situation really *that* bad? Hopefully not – Just last year, an online blog called in-tacoma.net completed a social experiment where the author left some sidewalk chalk in the public space for a day to see what would happen if the instructions “Imagine” and “Free. Have fun” were written on the ground. What the author discovered was uplifting: not only was the public space actually being used, it was also self-policing. In fact, “People that wrote inappropriate things were moderated by others.” (Michael 2008) Surely readers can assume that this is a good sign: Citizenship, ever fluid and changing, is being redefined in the square.

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