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Urban Political Processes
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NYC Guide
Places of Protesting in Big Apple

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Urban unrest is on the edge between celebrated civic activity and feared revolution. In the whole spectrum of different protests we still can follow that some places in the city are used more for them and some are used less. What are the reasons for some places to be more used in urban demonstrations and for other places less? In some cases they are physical qualities of these places – configuration, size, existence of podiums and stages, acoustics. Parks, plazas, squares and large promenades have been used for demonstrations of many sort. For every demonstration it is always essential that voices of it have been heard. Thus proximity to the government buildings, corporations or other institution in focus of the protest is important aspect. Mass media is helpful to deliver the message, but sometimes, like during Occupy Wall Street movement mass media did not give the support it would do for other activities of its scale. Thus direct contact of the revolution happening in the heart of the Financial District was essential. Other times the regulations existing in the place are important to organize the event. They include rights to express the opinion, rights to use sound amplification devices, rights to gather in groups, openness of the place over night etc. Culture of using space for expression of different emotions might be cultural. It can be forbidden to use open fire, but during grief or religious ceremonies candle lights floods the streets. Traditionally protesting grounds often attract people to maintain the practice alive. In this piece I will address several urban spaces that host protests in diverse levels of participation and representation. I will look at formal protest ground in Union square and its history and spatial qualities that help maintain the tradition. I will look at the qualities of Zuccotti Park in Financial District and question its usage for Occupy Wall Street campaign. And finally last but not least I will look at informal street memorials in the Bronx as protests of oppressed groups.
**UNION SQUARE**

“One can listen upon such occasions to a variety of denunciations by wild-eyed and long-haired foreign citizens;”[..]“you may not be able to understand anything they say except the one word **capitalisten**, which is hurled with such obvious and bitter hatred that you come to the conclusion that it cannot mean anything else but capitalists” (Jenkins 1911, 226)

Located between Park Avenue South & Union Square West on its meridian sides and between East 17th and East 14th streets on its lateral sides this square marks the place where Broadway and 4th Ave comes together. Union Square is often used for wide variety of civic protests, demonstrations and rallies for almost two hundred years. We might think that the unity between protesters could have provided the name of this square. However, the confluence of two urban routes is main reason for square’s name. Nevertheless, physical space description of uniting 2 major streets of NYC has grown in rather metaphorical one. Union place became a public meeting place in 1815 – before it was used as a potter field and camp of shanties and squatters (Jenkins 1911, 220). However, park was first created in 1839 and later redesigned by notorious Frederick Law Olmsted (1872) and Calvert Vaux (Jenkins 1911, 224). According to Jenkins (1911, 225), park “had a platform facing the open space of 17th street from which speakers can address the crowds on public occasions as early as 1845” and thus it might be the reason that this had been “favorite outdoor gathering place upon May-day and Labor day for the socialistically inclined” (ibid).

In April 20, 1861 a great gathering of over 100 thousand (other data up to 250 000) took place in Union Square “to take steps to redress the insult of the flag, which had been fired upon at [Fort]
Sumter’s less than ten days before” (Jenkins 1911, 226). It was probably one of the largest public gatherings in North America up to that time.

In 1865 Fenian movement surfaced in their 17th street “Capitol” a rented house facing Union Square (Ramón-García 2010). They can be described as contributors to general revolutionary mood in this neighborhood. Thus we can say that revolutionary mood here was not only during rallies, but also on the other times.

The tradition to hold here Labor Day parade started in 1882, but the largest parade here took place in 1889 with participants of around 10 000 people. (Parks 2016a).

In the end of 1800s this has become an “ultra-fashionable part of the city” with several shops and department stores at the beginning of so called Ladies’ mile – one of the first public spaces in 18th century where it was acceptable to see women alone (without accompanying male) in public space (Project 2014). This rendered the space even more liberal and even revolutionary.

In March 28, 1908 a bomb was hurled to police during one leftist-anarchist gathering, but the only fatality was hurler himself (Jenkins 1911, 226). In 1930s workers rallies were held here (Parks 2016a). The first Earth Day here took place in 1970. (Parks 2016a)

Square is unique place also because there is an equestrian sculpture of George Washington, which is the first public sculpture (1865) in NYC after the independence declaration of the U.S. Thus it marks this as one of the first ideologically charged place in the NYC (Parks 2016b).

However, formal monument took its life just several weeks after the attacks of 9/11 when it was turned in a public place of grieving – an Union square turned into an informal shrine with candles and flowers where massive 24 hour vigil took place (ibid.). One of explanations of this could be

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1 Fort Sumter – a military fort in South Carolina that was built after 1812. It was the place where first military actions of Civil War took place in the April 12, 1861, when confederate artillery fired at Union’s garrison (Tucker 2014)

2 Fenian movement – Irish revolutionary secret society between Fenian Brotherhood and Irish Republican Brotherhood. It was an attempt to cooperate between Irish in Ireland and in America (Ramón-García 2010).
that there were strict limitations to move below 14th street in the days following terrorist attacks, thus it was one of the first closest available public place to the World Trade Centre site.

In conclusion – there is no specific reason for civic rallies to take place particularly here. However the place traditionally was one of the first sites of political and ideological charge due the first national sculpture of NYC. Perhaps because of its name “Union Square”, it was chosen for the historically one of the most important gatherings of 18th century in order to support Union army in the outbreak of Civil War. However the size, infrastructure and revolutionary environment has been a great ground for breeding the civil unrest.

**Zuccotti Park**

“We’ve not been able to go out on the side walks, the streets and the parks of this city and say what we believe. You know You know when you got your song about going out in the grassy place in Union Square and singing what you believe We’ve not been able to do that. Now we are here in the shadow of this 80-story tall investment banks – We have Brown & Harrison, right across the street, We’ve Chase, here, Citi. These people are in windows. They see us.” (George)

In September 17, 2011 “Occupy Wall street” movement started in Financial District of Manhattan.

The traditional demonstration place was not suitable to this event because public park has its closing hours in the night when accessibility is reduced. Thus its main location was in Zuccotti Park. *Occupy* was the largest and most massive public grass roots demonstration in NYC’s recent history. It showed the power of masses of people and power of large corporations or rather their invulnerability. Since then several strict rules have been applied that control gathering in this park just stone throw distance from 9/11 memorial (McCleave Maharawal 2011).

Formerly known as Liberty Plaza Park this is like many other NYC parks – Privately owned public space. Its owner is Brookfield Properties. In total In NYC there are more than 500 such places which are accessible by public, but privately owned (Foderaro 2011). This form of property rights was established in 1960s when real estate’s developers were given zoning concessions in exchange for public space. There are three advantages for this park to be used for *Occupy*
movement. First, in contrast to most public parks this is open 24 hours. In fact it is legally bound to be publically accessible for unlimited amount of time. Second, till 2011 there have not been specific rules applied to this park that gave rights to gather and keep event like Occupy. Third, being 33 000 sqf large – it is one of the largest private parks in the city and one of the largest public spaces in the Financial District (Foderaro 2011). Taken that we can see why this park was a perfect place to organize this long term protest. However, during the peak weeks of the protests Brookfield introduced regulations that forbid placement of large objects on the ground, usage of sleeping bags and food preparation. That gave legal rights for the company to start removing the protesters away from the site.

Street Memorials

“Mostly it’s when someone young dies and their friends and family bring a candle outside in front of their building usually or somewhere on their block, and friends put liquor bottles there depending on what the person liked or if they got together and drank it one night. It’s usually young people. I mostly see guys. They are killed shot” (Anna).

There are strict rules that define what is allowed and what is not on the streets of NYC, open fire bigger than cake candle is not in the allowed list (Mayors Office 2016, § Section 308-01). Using alcohol on the street is not permitted either (Mayors Office 2016, § Section 397.7) (Mayors Office, § Section 308-01). However, in order to give honor for recently deceased people who died on the streets of Bronx inhabitants (often from Hispanic neighborhoods) perform pouring liquor rituals and erect street memorials from candles and alcohol bottles. Usually that happens soon after person’s death in the place he was killed or near their home. These memorials are mostly short-lived shrines that lasts no more than couple of weeks. However, one such memorial in 187th street was erected in memory of Leonard Heines – 24 years old Bronxite. He was shot in June 4, 2003.

3 “pour one for my homies” – in Black and Latin American street sub culture, “the act of pouring liquid (usually an alcoholic beverage) on the ground as a sign of reverence for friends or relatives that have passed away. In most cases, a 40 ounce bottle (see: forty) of liquor is used.” (Newman 2003)
2014. Since then his friends keep the memorial alive for almost 2 years now. It has been removed several times both by the City of New York Department of Sanitation and the owner of the nearby building. Friends of Leonard re-erected the memorial across the street facing blank wall where it does not disturb a property borders, nor does it block entrances of the buildings. Jeff, a friend of Leonard Hines said:

“They always want to pull it down, but we will remake it each time they take it down”.

In fact memorials are all across the Bronx, they are weakly or not researched at all. These traditions come from Latin American tradition of *descendos* – a practice to erect road-side shrines for those who died in traffic accidents. Despite their road equivalents are widely studied in academia, these memorials have been left unnoticed in many cases. Nevertheless, homicide among poor American minorities is troubling issue – an effect of relative accessibility of fire weapons and poor allocation of resources in the neighborhoods with higher crime rates. Around 40% of street homicide victims are Black males in the age between 16-30. They constitute only around 6% of American population (Leovy 2015). Thus rising concern of their voices being heard. Street memorials like one in 187th street are rather such platforms of expression of the voice of silenced groups.

**Conclusion:**

Spaces of protests are diverse as the forms of protests themselves. Sometimes it is enough for the site to be a protest site just as it was used as such earlier. Union Square nowadays seems to be following the pattern of traditional demonstration ground. It is a large, public space with university nearby. That provides young and often active citizens that are engaging in public relations. However historically this place has developed due several reasons: its infrastructure (podium for public speeches) invited people to talk to their fellow citizens, progressive
environment – first places where both genders could feel free in public, radical, even anarchistic crowds used to gather here since the city developed from agricultural lands to urban space. Zuccotti Park contrary was legally best place to organize event in a large and night time accessible place, besides it is located just in the middle of the district where work and live all the people whom they protest against. However, the smaller the protest forms grow and more marginal or oppressed are people, the protest forms are more and more local and hidden. Thus Bronx street memorials remain in conflict with just few people while being largely ignored by society and academia.

Quotes:

Anna – 24 years old female Bronxite, interviewed by Matiss Steinerts for research “Informal Urban Space: Street Memorials in the Bronx” fall, 2015;

Jeff – 25 years old male Bronxite, interviewed by Matiss Steinerts for research “Informal Urban Space: Street Memorials in the Bronx” fall, 2015;


References:


http://www.nypap.org/content/ladies-mile-historic-district.