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# 53

TRUST  
THE BLOCK  
SOCIETY

# CIVIC SPACE

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# VOLUME 53

**'THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY, ONLY MEN AND WOMEN'.  
IF PUBLIC SPACE IS IN RETREAT, UNDER PRESSURE FROM  
DECADES OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, HOW IS SHARED SPACE  
EVOLVING? CIVIC SPACE BECOMES ACTIVATED ACCORDING  
TO TIME, IN A SYNAPTIC NEGOTIATION BETWEEN A VARIETY  
OF ACTORS: HUMANS, ADMINISTRATIVE, TECHNOLOGICAL.**

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IMAGE FRONT COVER: MARTIN ROEMERS , LANDHI ROAD, QUAIDABAD, KARACHI, PAKISTAN.

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# SWEEPING PUBLIC SPACE MARC SCHUILENBURG

interviewed by  
Francesco Degl'Innocenti  
and Arjen Oosterman

When researching the relation between safety and technology, and looking at public space, researcher Marc Schuilenburg detected a peculiar change in mood and attitude of both the government and the general public. So-called 'smart city technology' comes with a redefinition of certain groups within our society and their access to public space.

**Arjen Oosterman:** What is 'smart city' from your perspective?

**Marc Schuilenburg:** Smart is an urban buzzword that functions as an empty signifier, it absorbs rather than emits meaning, and therefore is susceptible to multiple and even contradictory interpretations. Originally, it dates back to the 1990s. There were similar terms circulating at that time like, intelligent, knowledge, creative, virtual, inter-connected, and digital. These terms were all used to indicate 'smart'. In literature today, you see a more common ground for the notion of the smart city: there must be at least three layers and then municipalities claim that their inhabitants live in a smart city. The first layer is 'smart technology', the use of the internet, but also rfid-tags, big data, sensors, connectivity, and so on. The second layer is 'smart people' – a human dimension in which people and knowledge are combined. The third layer is – now it becomes more interesting – 'smart governance' and that is the assembling of public and private parties into a hybrid identity, a new framework, in which the involvement and responsibility of the participating parties are reinvented and



MILO KRIM

reformulated. On a side note: this idea of assembling is very complicated. As I have shown in my book *The Securitization of Society* (2015), there is a substantial lack of insight in the reasons, motives, attributions, and experiences of the public and private parties in contact with others. How do the parties give substance to the agreements made? Do they nurture opinions other than those agreed upon? In Europe, smart governance is a kind of mixture of on the one hand public parties like municipalities and on the other hand private parties like Phillips, Google, Facebook, and Siemens.

Next to these three layers, you can discern different aims of smart cities: the first is that 'smart' provide solutions for all kinds of urban challenges. It fits in the discourse of Benjamin Barber who states that currently, cities are becoming the arena for politics, instead of the national state. This fits into a multitude of urban challenges nowadays, economic instability, food and energy insecurity, ground and water pollution, global warming, and so on. The second claim is that 'smart' enhances democratic processes. By the way, this is the same argument as with the introduction of any new mass medium (newspaper, radio, television, internet, social media). The third claim, and now we're entering more my concern, is an economic one: that 'smart' fosters growth, prosperity, knowledge, education, and

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more — this is the neo-liberal argument. Smartness adds value in cities and improves the living conditions of its citizens. And the fourth one, interesting because the third and the fourth argument are closely intermingled, claims that smart cities enhance protection against criminality and disorder. It argues that 'smartness' provides the possibility of perfect and permanent surveillance of a city's citizens by using smart technology that gathers large amounts of data.

**AO:** What is the relation between the third and the fourth argument?

**MS:** We have to discuss why they call it 'perfect and permanent surveillance' for citizens and in which way it differs from the traditional way we look at security and safety in public space. We're now at a point where things are going in a completely different direction in relation to the third and fourth argument I just mentioned, the argument being that the smart city creates a prosperous and risk-free environment without crime or disorder. When you look at the Dutch situation, there has always been, at least since the 1980s, the ambition for, what I call, the purification of public space. The purification of public space means that what is called 'a matter out of place' must be removed from public space. The definition of 'a matter out of place' is a classic one, stemming from anthropology, and the famous book by Mary Douglas from 1968, *Purity and Danger*. She reminds us, beautifully, that if we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the traditional definition of dirt as matter out of place.

Since the 1990s in the Netherlands, the focus on public space has drastically changed. From that time on, all kinds of instruments are envisioned and invented to remove what we define as dirt. I found out that in this country it dates back to the original motto of Dutch cities in the '90s: '*schoon en heel*' ('clean and complete' or 'clean and unharmed' in the sense of undamaged). As such, public space was connected to very social issues, like renovating social housing, maintenance of the neighbourhood, and social cohesion. Politics invested a lot in these issues to improve the 'clean and unharmed' quality of public space. End of the 90s, a third word was added to the motto: 'safe'. Now, the motto is 'clean, unharmed, and safe'. Then you see a remarkable shift, namely that the main focus is on the third component.

The rationale behind is that if a space is clean and unharmed, it automatically must also be safe. From that moment on a lot of theories became popular that do not rehearse the motto, but reason the same way. Examples are Newman's 'defensible space' and the 'broken windows' theory, which state that feelings of insecurity may rise in a poorly maintained neighbourhood where there is much vandalism. Public space becomes a matter of crime and disorder politics, as it still is today.

As a consequence, everything that was not 'clean' was removed or mended. This started with, for instance, the replacement of broken windows, removal of graffiti, and sweeping the pavement. But also, undesirable people who are defined as dirt – what might be called 'social dirt'. That starts with the removal of beggars, prostitutes, loitering youth, immigrants without documents, disturbed persons... They become 'a matter out of place' because they perturb the normalization of space and what 'we' think clean and unharmed means. Beyond practices of waste management, this purification of public space becomes a matter of 'us' against 'them'. Who belongs to public space and who does not? This is combined with an aesthetic experience and an ethical notion that what we define as 'out of place' is also a way how we normalize and delineate between who is us and who is them in public space.

**AO:** That is a very interesting development you describe, this shift from investing in 'improving' certain groups to removing them from sight.

**MS:** These days, the governance of public space clearly echoes a mere exclusive discourse, not inclusion, by raising all kinds of physical barriers. For instance, benches in public spaces are designed in such a way that beggars or homeless cannot lie on them. This is called 'sadistic street furniture', explicitly designed to prevent certain groups from using them as a couch for the night. Another example of the move towards security-obsessed urbanism is the increasingly popular area ban. In the Netherlands a special form of this is the Collective Shop Ban. We already know the individual shop ban in which a shopkeeper refuses a customer access to the shop. But this new variant was introduced in The Hague in 2005 – you can be banned from all affiliated shops within a certain area for a maximum of one year. In its heyday in The Hague, that could mean over 500 shops. This means that when someone steals a Mars bar from the newspaper kiosk, he or she will not be granted admission to the H&M store ten blocks further.

## PURIFICATION OF PUBLIC SPACE BECOMES A MATTER OF 'US' AGAINST 'THEM'

So, the emphasis in public space was on physical measurements, ranging from area bans to road blocks to sadistic street furniture. You can call this politics of properness by physical means. I traced this development back to the 90s, as said, but I think it links back even further to what Richard Sennett famously pointed at in his book *Flesh and Stone* from 1994, that it relates to the fear of touching in the 16th century. His example is that of the Jewish Ghetto in Renaissance Venice. Christians were afraid of touching Jews; the Jewish body was considered to be unclean. The Venetian Jews were decreed to live in an area that closed at night. At dusk, all the Jewish people were obliged to be back in the Ghetto. Surveillance of the Ghetto was external, it took place from boats, circling the Ghetto throughout the night. In many ways the analogy between the Venetian Jews and the groups I mentioned earlier is striking, like immigrants, homeless people, beggars, disturbed people and so on. But it takes on a totally new dimension.

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The Jewish Ghetto was still in the city, whereas today people are being expelled to the outskirts of the city and beyond.

**AO:** If you connect that to the development of the smart city now and in the future, what do you see?

**MS:** The point is, and it differs in that respect from the smart city, that the main barriers were physical: road blocks, high fences, guarded gateways, a ban from certain areas, sadistic street furniture and so on. The smart city is more radical, although it still makes use of these physical barriers. That's the twist. If we look at the smart city, one of the most interesting examples in the Netherlands is Eindhoven. In that city there is Stratumseind, the longest pub street in the Netherlands and one of the busiest nightlife streets in the Netherlands with more than 50 cafes, bars and nightclubs. It attracts some 40,000 visitors every weekend. Eindhoven also sees itself as a smart city. Philips is located there, one of the largest electronics corporations in the world, collaborating closely with the municipality, the TU Eindhoven, Intelligent Lighting Institute, Dutch Institute for Technology, Safety & Security, and the Institute of Mental Health Care Eindhoven. They collaborate to prevent crime and disorder in the Stratumseind area. How? They do it with all kinds of soft measures, and this differs from what we witnessed during the past decades. They are now experimenting with light, smell and sound manipulation. For example, they are using light (when there are lots of people partying in the street) to reduce tension and aggression in public space by changing its colour and intensity; the colour blue for instance can lower heart rates and will reduce people's aggression. This means that the securitisation of public space is pursued by interactive lighting design to manage the atmosphere of the area and to evoke affective responses from visitors.

Two interesting observations come from this. The first observation is that it is not exclusively about physical exclusion anymore – you can see the neoliberal logic mingle with the logic of perfect and permanent surveillance, because what they want at Stratumseind is to control and to facilitate the freedom of movement of people from place to place. In other words, it seeks control without stopping or hampering the flow of visitors in Stratumseind. They use psychopolitical instruments rather than physical ones to do so. Interestingly, these instruments to keep public space safe and secure go beyond classical instruments. Instead of forbidding and punishing, they work through pleasing and seducing.

**Francesco Degl'Innocenti:** It is probably only now that smart cities are changing face. Safety adds to security a layer of perception. Insecurity is a personal feeling.

**MS:** Working on one's own psyche, that will be the future of purification, although physical measures, like roadblocks, high walls and security guards, will still be needed. The second observation is that the use of smart technology in the design of public space changes the way we understand the architecture of power. Architecture will become scripted; the scripts are built into the environment, like lighting, smell and sound design to stimulate an efficient, safe and consumption-focused use of public space. These techniques, that manipulate the behaviour of visitors, are an integral part of the design of the urban environment. Consequently, the use of public space is pre-structured in such a way that the architecture of security anticipates how people will interact with their environment.

**FDI:** Linking with the production of value, the neoliberal belief par excellence, also the idea of gift politics and nudging for good behaviour, it has so far been exploited mainly in the digital realm. We now see it transformed and transported into the spatial environment.

**MS:** The reason is that nowadays the human body is seen as a data source.

**FDI:** Your data personality is probably equally important.

**MS:** No, even more important.

**FDI:** But other than accessibility and blocking, what type of trade-offs have you noticed in terms of physical space? In the digital realm you give up privacy to have access to services; is something similar happening in the physical space?

**MS:** I don't separate digital and physical space anymore. In your email you mentioned the analog world, but today it is completely impossible to (just) live in an analog world. Look at the type of data that they collect in Eindhoven in order to profile, nudge and actively target the visitors: the amount of social interaction, the social distance, the presence of police, waste in the street, the activity of bouncers, the sound level, the weather, the parking density, the beer consumption, social media posts, mobile phone data. For example, from mobile phone use they can tell how many people there are in the public space.

During the weekend it can be around 50,000 visitors. For me, Eindhoven presents the future of public space and the control is based on psychopolitical techniques developed by private parties like Philips who are increasingly using public space as their living laboratory.

**AO:** This all is a way to understand public space as we know it, right? A public space that everyone can enter. But it is also a legal term. How does that relate to civic space, the space of negotiation?

**MS:** I think civic space as space of negotiation ... there is no such thing. Same as with the separation between analog and digital. Civic space, that is the world of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. That doesn't make sense anymore. If we're talking the reality of the body as data source, public space is everywhere (and nowhere).

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**AO:** Sure, but there is this element of ‘who’s designing’ and the notion of ‘commons’, that has become so popular these days. Having that in mind it becomes interesting to discuss how that relates to the power of the big five, for instance.

**MS:** Then I’ll return to my thoughts on gift politics: it is based on exchange. The more data you allow ‘them’ to collect, the more advantages you’ll receive. So, there is still the possibility of a common, or being on your own terms. I only think it will not be financially attractive. Because public space, at least in smart cities, is the domain of big tech companies. Take insurance companies as an example. If you allow the insurance company to install a usb-stick in your car, to track your driving style (speeding, accelerating, and so on), you’ll pay less. This is something you can refuse, if you’re willing to pay. But it becomes disadvantageous not to take part.

**AO:** Does this in the end lead to a paradise with no crime?

**MS:** No, because if you’re totally drunk, you’ll smash something anyhow.

**AO:** Maybe one other old notion: the metropolis. Throughout the 20th century, Dutch urbanism has really tried hard to avoid the metropolis, in favour of smaller entities, afraid of all the negative aspects of the bigger conglomerate. Would the society that we see coming now allow for a metropolis without its negative aspects?

**MS:** The reality of the present and future city has little to do with the ideas of Jane Jacobs in which the city should be divided into small-scale communities with a shared communal space where you are likely to meet your neighbours all the time. It is a totally different reality. Now, contact is psychopolitical contact, triggering the mind. Not to say there is a divide between body and mind, in which the body follows the mind, but the triggers are on a psychopolitical level, not on a physical level as in the case of disciplinary power. The object of intervention is not primarily the individual body, which needs to be controlled and trained. Instead, it is the mind that needs to be triggered to make smart choices.

**FDI:** Last week we were interviewing the State Architect, Floris Alkemade [see elsewhere in this issue]. His definition of public space is: the space where you’ll meet people that you otherwise would not meet.

**MS:** That is the classical definition of Hannah Arendt.

**FDI:** What you’re implying is that such a place doesn’t exist anymore.

**MS:** It exists barely. The main reason is that public space cannot be defined anymore in terms of a socially open-ended space to which no social group can be denied access. Public space must be regarded as an urban condom. It is a spatial filter bubble.

**AO:** In your work you write about the Anthropocene, for instance in your article ‘Gift politics: exposure and surveillance in the Anthropocene’ (2017). In the Anthropocene, the human species is defining and influencing conditions on Earth’s functioning. That places the human in the centre. How about the smart city?

**MS:** In the smart city, technological data come first. The body follows. The Anthropocene is the opposite. At least how some philosophers deal with it.

**AO:** How do you deal with it?

**MS:** I like the notion of the Anthropocene. Although I think that human agency is still undifferentiated and taken *en bloc* in the Anthropocene. But in the end, I understand it makes sense to talk about the responsibility of human beings if you want to change the world. With the smart city though, you already see that it is difficult to allocate responsibility. Who are responsible? The municipality, Philips or Tesla? And Google or Facebook – how do we make them liable? So that is the major issue of our times: how to restore the agency (and responsibility) of the users of the smart city. In other words, how can we assert ‘a right to the smart city’? This is a political issue that questions the ‘non-ideology’ ideology of the smart city.

## **THAT IS THE MAJOR ISSUE OF OUR TIMES: HOW TO RESTORE THE AGENCY (AND RESPONSIBILITY) OF THE USERS OF THE SMART CITY**

**AO:** You’re a criminologist, aren’t you?

**MS:** I’m a lawyer and philosopher, but I teach at the department of Criminal Law and Criminology at the VU University.

**AO:** I ask, because I suppose you study patterns, not cases.

**MS:** I don’t study criminals, no. I study the way we think about crime and disorder in the western world. Shortly, I’ll lecture on predictive policing and how this changes our notion of risk and responsibility.

**AO:** And next to patterns, you are interested in techniques that influence our behaviour?

**MS:** Yes, take this technique of seducing and teasing, we talked about before. This is a completely new way of governing the behaviour of citizens. It is being used everywhere nowadays. In Australia, where youngsters loiter near supermarkets, they play Barry Manilow’s ‘Copacabana’. After playing that song three times, no one is left.

**FDI:** Does Manilow know?

**MS:** Yes, they asked him what he thought of this use of his music. He responded very mildly by saying that like with every song, if you play it ten times in a row, no one will stay listening.