

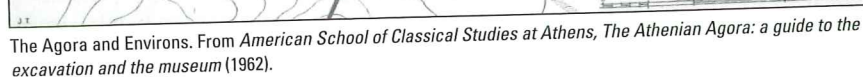
# Democratic Spaces

Lecture at the Berlage Institute: 03 March 2004

What would a democratic space be like? What would be the fundamental condition of making spaces, places and buildings that would serve democracy rather than some other kind of political regime? In a way, this may seem an absurd thing for architects to worry about, but I don't think it is absurd. Indeed, I think it is going to be a necessity for your generation of architects to legitimate the work you do, particularly the work that involves a public as clients rather than private developers or very rich individuals. To be able to find a language of talking about the politics in building, not of architecture, but in building, which is persuasive to people about what they should pay for and what purposes that building serves in the society. The major question that the phrase "democratic space" evokes is can such a space be designed? Is there anything visually that can be done to make a place more or less democratic? My answer to that question is yes.

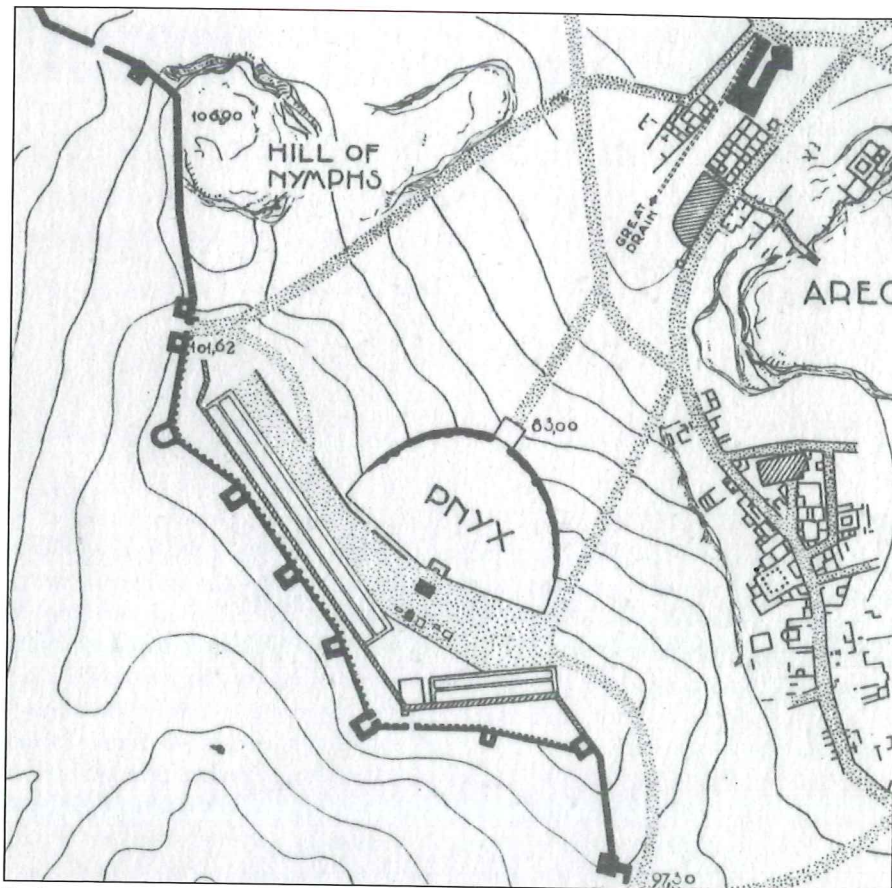
First let me start by presenting two very different models of what we mean by democracy. These two simple models of democracy are *deliberative* and *associative*. A deliberative model is the most familiar to you. It is the political notion we have of the democratic procedure whose goal is taking a decision and is a model that focuses on the ways with which people arrive at not only taking a decision but also, if their own views are not those which prevail, of obeying a decision taken against their wishes. The notion of creating a system of deliberation such that people who do not get their way still obey the way of others is the principle problem of deliberative democracy. It is not just a majority rule. It is the question of legitimating a rule by virtue of the process that led you to be faltering. This deliberative model is something that stretches from Aristotle's writing on politics to Habermas' writing on communicative interaction. The notion is really focused on the idea that the problem of democracy is not one of assent, but of submission.

The associative model in democracy is a more sociological idea and its goal is community building rather than decision taking. It focuses on how to build community amongst the people who differ, whether they differ by virtue of their ethnicity or by being of different classes or races. The model here is centered not on the problem of submission but on transcending toleration. The simple-minded notion of a complex community is the one in which people are tolerant and don't mind the people who differ from themselves. The English phrase "don't mind" is the key to that. You have toleration, which is bred on indifference, that is, you can have difference and indifference co-habiting within the same community. That is what we know about most capitalist cities. New York is the perfect model of that. There is no polity in that sense. If you are black, what happens to the lives of the whites elsewhere in the city doesn't touch you. If you are white and you are rich, what happens to the blacks that are poor doesn't seem to be associated to the conduct of your own life. So the notion that democracy equals toleration is a terrible recipe. The problem is how do you get a kind of community building in which the fact that somebody differs from you matters to you? How do you transcend this fatal recipe of difference and indifference?



There are two classic spaces for each of these models and both can be found in ancient Athens, right at the origins of Western city life. The deliberative model





The Pnyx.

is associated with a place called Pnyx and the associative model is associated with a space called Agora. The Pnyx is the name for any theatre used for political purposes. How is such a space, a semi-circular theatre, serving the purposes of deliberative democracy? First, it is an architectural space that focuses everybody's attention on the word. These are the semi-circular spaces at the base called the orchestra where the people dance. But behind that was always something called a *Bema*, which was merely a piece of stone and for theatrical purposes when somebody has a speech, in a classical play, they would simply mount the Bema and speak. What happens when these theatres are used for politics? The orchestra is cleared and there are only people speaking on the Bema. Behind them there is no backcloth. There is nothing but nature. What you have is an acoustic system. People sometimes used a blow horn. Behind them there was nothing but the natural world, in other words, the non-human. The word hovers acoustically and visually in this liminal space between the mass and nature. And that is the context in which people begin to deliberate. That is, the speakers are not in a crowd. They are not declaiming as one of us. They are removed to a liminal space where behind them, was the non-human, usually the sky. And because the acoustics of this horseshoe-shaped theatre, the voices – sometimes aided with mega-phones – are enormously magnified as though this one person were larger than life. This is one way of creating a space in which you create total visual focus on the word. And the words that you are listening to are linear. That is, one speaker comes after another. The ground rule of these spaces is that nobody can speak at once. And if somebody wanted to challenge the speaker, they didn't call out from the crowd, they had to go up to the space and they themselves spoke. It may seem like a detail but it means that you have a continual stream of words. You have no multiplicity. You have simply a line – a diachronic line of words organized in a space.

The second aspect of this deliberative democracy is that it is a totally public space. There is no distinction between public and private. The six thousand people seated in the bowl-shaped auditorium are seated by "treaties." Treaties



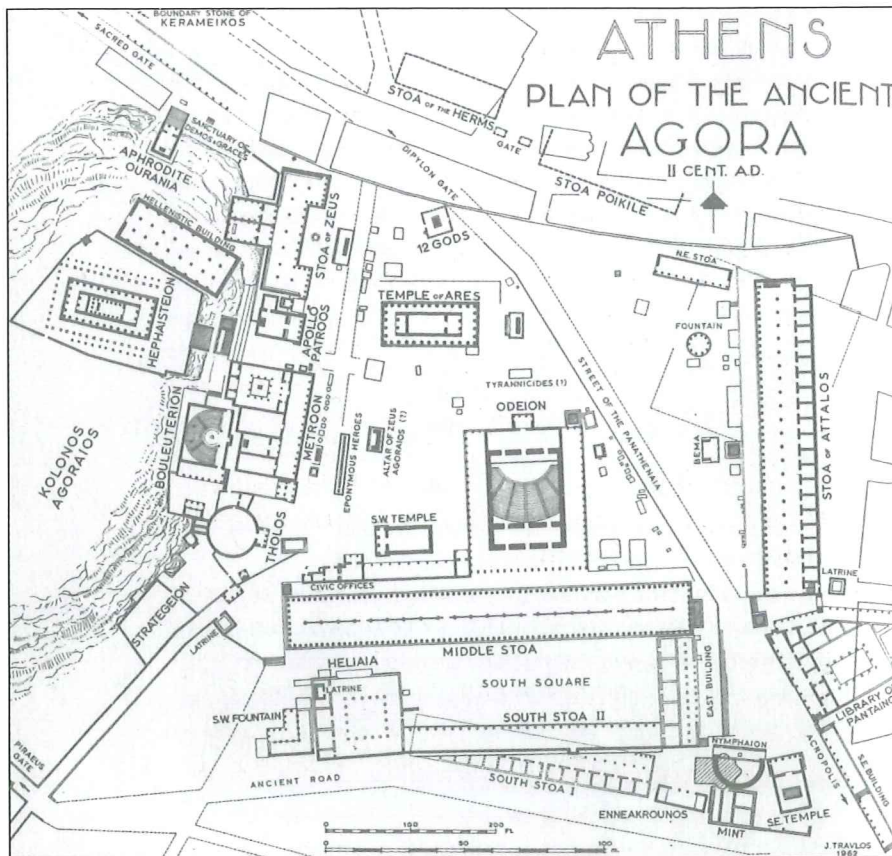
are like neighborhoods: you have to sit in this democratic space according to where you live in the city. When people vote they have a stone and the members of each treaty tend to vote as groups. They put their stone into a big urn and the treaties mark the stones. More importantly, it was completely open visually. There is no notion of having a vote that is secret. It is completely unknown to the Greeks. The reason for this is an idea, which is called *Isagoria*, that is, you need to be responsible for those actions you take in response to words – taking responsibility for your acts and, in the case of this highly theatrical space where everybody can see, how you vote. The notion is that you are held responsible because visually there is surveillance to see which treaties have done what. This is a notion in which the visual space, in Michel Foucault's terms, is totally a regime of surveillance. For the Greeks, the notion of absolute surveillance, visual surveillance, is necessary for the people to take responsibility for their words. Any notion of private rights being hidden from others is seen to allow people a margin to cheat and they therefore have become irresponsible.

The third aspect of the Pnyx, which serves deliberative democracy, follows from the second. It is a highly coercive space in which peer pressure organized visually and verbally in this way means that the active voting is an act of, as the Greeks put it, surrender of will. It is a very strange idea for all of us because we think about the democratic processes as the people exerting rights, as a way of people exerting agency. In this case, the actual moment of voting is the moment of submission – you lose agency when you take a decision collectively. It is a very fundamental social and political ideal. You have an agency as long as you debate something. You lose the agency in taking a decision. And that, for them, is how you legitimate the democratic process. If you think about it in modern terms it is quite disturbing. The notion is that you can only get people to submit to a decision with which they don't agree by making them feel, the very moment they decide, that they then give up their own sense of agency. They are literally lost in this process. That is how that kind of space can create deliberative democracy.

What about the associative model? The Agora is a central space in the city; it is a combination of market. In Athens, the Agora are ten-and-a-half acre spaces (or roughly six hectares) lined on three sides with rectangular box buildings called *Stoas*, which have one open side. In the center, people buy fruit. There were tables where bankers set up for money changing. There was a low little space called the *Heliaia*, which was the law court. They also had various places to pray. What they did not have was the space to decide anything. The Agora is a space completely unlike the mono-functional political theatre. There are lots of things happening at once in this space. Here, and primarily essential to note, physical propinquity is as important to people as verbal expression. In other words, what is critical about multifunctional spaces like the Agora is that the association of which we speak is the association of bodies as much as it is an understanding of somebody else's words. This is a space in which meanings are not verbal but bodily meanings. You do not have to understand very much about what is happening in order to participate. If you are seated in the theatre and focused on one person talking, the mental acts you will engage in are far more rational than buying figs, hearing somebody giving testimony you think is wrong and turning around and saying 'nonsense' and going back to buying the fig. This is a much less rational experience of being in the public. The reasons for being there have to do with this association of difference. In other words, it is the space in which the physical arousal is important, in fact, more important than the verbal clarity. And that is democratic for the Greeks in this model. Clarity is not something that you seek for in the multifunctional space.

The second factor this space permits, both in the ancient world and in its entire derivative in the history of urbanism, is a distinction between public and private. In the bowl-shaped theatre, everything is open to the Foucauldian regime. In the Agora it is possible to define what is not public. If you got inside one of the box-shaped structures on the side of the Stoa, at the back of them were places where people dined and also where they paid for sex. They were private places where



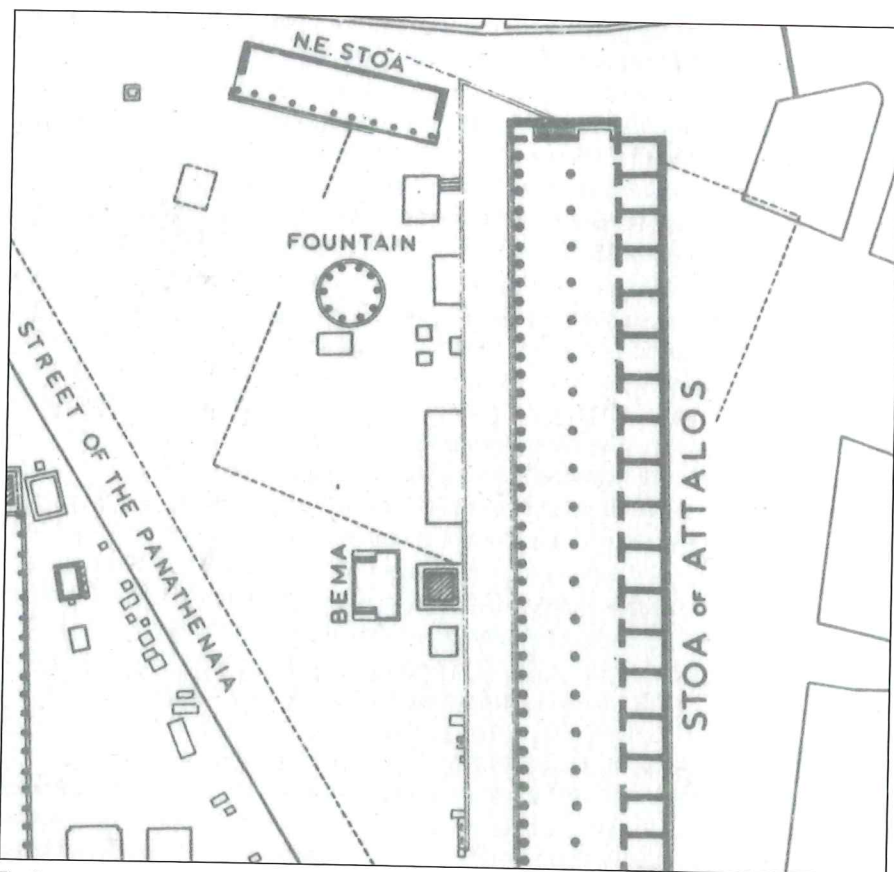


The Agora. From *American School of Classical Studies at Athens, The Athenian Agora: a guide to the excavation and the museum* (1962).

people conspired inside the form. One cannot go into the spaces without being asked to join. The interesting point is the edge of the Stoa. If you stand exactly on the edge of the Stoa between the open space out in the front and the closed space at the back, you enjoy a different kind of a liminal experience than people knew in the Pnyx, and it's quite simply that you can speak to people out in the open space but they can't speak back to you. It was here that the Greeks defined the transition from public to private. As you become private you still can speak out to those out in the open but they have no right to respond to you in that liminal space. That is how in this particular space a distinction between public and private rights was generated architecturally.

The third aspect of these spaces, like I have said before, was the multifunctional way in which they deal with the Tocqueville problem: how do you care about things or people who are different from you? It was the only space in which Greek slaves, both male and female, were allowed to speak to the citizen strangers and in which the citizen stranger had to answer. It is a convention of Greek life, that when you are in the space of the body of these strangers, when there is a distinction between the private and the public, there is one place in which the slave-owning society obliges you to pay attention to slaves. That is the public realm. And what is interesting to us analysts, looking back at it, is the notion that the space, the public space, has no building in it. It is an empty zone that defines the convention. Thus, an undefined, amorphous space may elicit the overcoming of passivity and mere tolerance more than the space inflected with form.

I have now described two classical spaces. One, the theatre of politics, and the other, something that seems much more to us like democratic spaces for differences mixed together and embodying deliberative and associative democracy. You can see the modern examples of the first in the movable theatres of Tadao Ando that he built at the beginning of his career in Japan, which he directly modeled on the Greek Pnyx. The modern Agora is something that is almost a cliché for us when we define multifunctional spatial uses. We have



The Stoa.

commercialized the Agora without producing any of the politics of democratic space in it.

How do we get more associative democracy? And how can we build that architecturally? How can we focus in a way that breaks free of this Greek model of the multifunctional center? At the London School of Economics we are looking at edge conditions between communities. We are trying to understand the ways to achieve associative democracy by looking at what the edges between different kinds of places in the city mean. What is an edge? We can think about an edge as having been of two sorts. In one, it is a border. In the other, it is a boundary. A border is a zone of interaction where things meet and intersect. A boundary is much more like a national frontier, a place where something ends. You can understand what this difference is like by thinking about natural ecologies. How do borders function? The sociologist Steven Gold makes a distinction between boundary and border as follows. If you look in the natural worlds – at the territory that a lion or a leopard will layout by spraying – it is a very serious no-go zone where other animals smell the urine and know they don't belong there. The boundary lays out an absolute zone of prohibition – this is my territory – whereas a border is an ecological intersection like that between where land and water meet. What Gold found was that in those kinds of border conditions you have a concentration of biological activity. It is where organisms feed off of each other, they don't feed randomly, but they feed in these layers. Also, this was the place where variation and natural selection most likely would occur because there is the most ecological interaction in the complexity. So, that natural paradigm is the one in which the boundary is a place where the energy of a natural territory gives out, whereas the border is that kind of edge in which energy is concentrated and intensified by a difference, by the meeting of different species.

What is the urban analogue to this kind of natural ecology? It won't surprise you that in cities like London or New York, one is much more likely to find boundaries than borders. That is, you would find legally defined territories in which as you



moved the edge there would be a loss of energy and interaction. Most of the planning that I was taught actually privileged the notion of a boundary as both a legal and social definition. That is why we use the highways, for instance, to divide one community from the other, to make a clear point of separation. We do this in zoning. Almost all the zoning work we do is an attempt to define where one thing stops and the other thing begins. The worst example for this is what has happened to Berlin in the 1990s, in places like Potsdamer Platz, which is literally an island unto itself. You see the same thing now in the modern Chinese planning of Beijing and Shanghai, in which there are distinct territories and what matters are the separations. I want to argue that this is undemocratic. It takes the energy out of the cities by sealing off differences from each other. How can we replace these boundaries by borders?’

The second aspect of this natural paradigm involves centers versus edges. In our idea of what a community is we tend to privilege the center as socially more important than its edge. By privileging the center rather than the edge, we, in my view, work in an undemocratic direction. That is, the centering of community is an undemocratic procedure. Probably the greatest mistake I made as a planner was driven by the mistaken ideology of what community is like, that community requires finding a central place where people know where their community is. In the 1980s, I was one of the planning commissioners in New York and I worked on a project called *La Marqueta*, which was to build a market for Spanish Harlem. It was the beginning of an enormous amount of Hispanic influx in New York City and there was no economic zone for this Hispanic commerce. We had a choice. We could put the market in the middle of Spanish Harlem. That is on the east side, between 114<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Streets, which is right in the center of where poor Hispanics lived in New York. Or we had somewhere along 96<sup>th</sup> street. The east side of 96<sup>th</sup> Street is an amazing divide in New York. Above it is great poverty and below it is probably the richest part of the community in the world, the Upper East Side. It is an edge, it functioned as a boundary, and we should have made it into a border. We should have put the market there. We should have learnt something from the old Greek notion about associative democracy. Instead, because we were pursuing a pretext of identity in which we thought that what people needed to do in order to have strength of feeling was to be centered, we put the market in the middle of Spanish Harlem and reinforced it as a ghetto. It was a terrible mistake and a disaster socially. It led to increasing isolation. We imagine that when the community is most concentrated, the points of concentration at the center are the most important, which is a way of saying that we really do not believe that the people can hold onto their identities if we move them and their activities towards the edge.

The problem is how to go about transforming spaces into living edges. How do you go about filling in or taking down boundary conditions and substituting them with borders? The third aspect of this is to ask what that edge is actually like. And here I think we can again take an analogy from the natural world and apply it to the urban world. If you look at a cell wall it has two conditions to it, it has resistance and it is porous. It is a fundamental condition of this wall to literally contain life. I should say that historically, when you look at the history of walls in the city like Renaissance Florence or medieval London, you see that same combination of porosity and resistance at the same time. The resistance is obviously to shut people out, whether they are people who have not paid taxes and so on, but it is also at these walls, particularly in the history of these two cities, where outcasts in the city would come and where there is the equivalent in modern terms of “it fell off the back of a lorry” enabling all sorts of what we might call *informal commerce*. These are the zones that escape regulation from the center and these are walls that are extremely lively spaces. In the case of medieval London, the wall is one of the most vibrant parts of the city because it is the space least controlled by the local communities. It is where all the stuffs that escape regulation happen. It is a permeable membrane. And my notion about this is that the combination of resistance and porosity matters because it is a qualitative condition for concentrating energy. Simply erasing division

and connecting everything up so that everything flows into each other is not a very good social recipe. It annihilates difference. It doesn't provide a forum for difference in which you acknowledge difficulty but permit interaction. The problem for visual designers is how to create something like the natural cell membrane that joins urban communities together where they are not simply smashed together in one kind of large cocktail with all the lines connected up but in which they are porous. We are working on this in the Lee Valley in the eastern part of London. We are trying to understand how to create distinct communities that have cell walls between them.

I conclude this talk by saying that what I have tried to describe to you today is the distinction between visual democracy and verbal democracy. The ancient deliberative model that I described to you is one that privileges the word, whereas the associative model – and particularly the notion of the living edge that is both resistant and porous – privileges the physical, visual and non-verbal aspects of democratic life. One of them, if you like, is the space of the body and the other is the space of procedure. This distinction is something I think architecture, visual design and particularly urban design need to contribute to a much larger debate or rather a different debate that goes on among political philosophers and politicians, that is where to find democracy? Where do we actually find it? Do we find it in those spaces or places where people's words become clarified? Or do we find it in those spaces and places where the word recedes in importance? A different democratic model would be a place where it does not matter whether people understand each other verbally, but they understand each other by their bodies. They can only do that through the form of association in which they are both together, aroused by each other's presence, but still kept distinct. That is the democracy with the living edge. And that's what I believe in, and I think it's something that architects and planners can make.

Transcription: Chintan Raveshia