

## Chapter One

### The Problem with Public Space

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#### Finding an Audience

In 1994 William 'Upski' Wimsatt, a hip hop columnist, graffiti-writer, and self-described college dropout from Chicago, self-published a book called *Bomb the Suburbs*. Upski conceived of *Bomb the Suburbs* as 'a book for people who don't usually read'. He especially wanted his book to be read by young people in the inner cities of the United States – a group he argued were severely disenfranchised by the growth of suburbs and the 'suburban mentality' which he set about attacking. To make sure his book would be accessible to his target audience, Upski gave his manuscript to around 50 different readers, including one 13-year-old girl at risk of dropping out of school, who was instructed to 'cross out the boring bits'.

Upski wrote *Bomb the Suburbs* after encountering difficulties trying to publish a newsletter called *Subway and Elevated*. This newsletter, produced by Upski and some friends, sought to raise awareness of the problems with cities in the United States and to discuss strategies for their renewal. They taped the newsletter to walls and train lines. This method of distribution had a message:

The ultimate goal of *Subway and Elevated* was to revive public places in America – and call attention to their necessity – by placing works of beauty and value there that were impossible to obtain in stores. It was our little way of turning the tables on the reward structure in American life. If you drove a car, lived in the suburbs, and sent your kids to private school, then for once in your life you couldn't have one (Wimsatt 2000 (1999): 16).

This distribution method ran into some serious problems, not the least of which was its legality. In fact, Upski and the others involved were

arrested for vandalism. At this point, they thought a book might provide a solution: 'No one could arrest us for a book, we thought' (Wimsatt 2000 (1999): 16).

But once the book was written, Upski confronted a new set of problems – if you want to write a book for people who don't usually read books, exactly how do you find this audience? He read parts of his book to commuters on subway platforms. He put up posters and graffiti with the title of the book, first around his home town of Chicago, and then further afield as he freight-hopped and hitch-hiked his way around America. He did what he could to get the book on the shelves of stores in Chicago and other cities – not just bookstores, but also music and clothing retailers and other places where his target audience were likely to shop. People sold Upski's book in their schools and junior colleges. He attempted to gain publicity for his book by staging a 'Bet with America'. This bet was a kind of radical alternative to Newt Gingrich's 'Contract with America', in which Upski bet that he could hitch-hike around America and walk the streets of its most feared neighbourhoods without actually getting hurt – thus demonstrating (hopefully) that the fear of strangers which seemed to characterize mainstream culture in the United States was misplaced, and that the negative hype about ghettos served only to erase the humanity of the people who live there. He used the proceeds from sales of the book to help set up a writers' workshop with a twist:

In my version, the group would be based not on what we wrote, but on *where* we wrote – not in cafés, bookstores or addresses on the World Wide Web, but in public places of the city (Wimsatt 2000 (1999): 18, original emphasis).

For Upski, then, 'the medium was the message'. He sought to reinvigorate the very public spaces which were under attack through the writing, reading, promotion and sales of *Bomb the Suburbs*.

Upski continued to encounter difficulties in circulating his ideas through a book. His guerrilla advertising methods and readings continued to attract the attention of urban authorities. Once again, Upski was arrested, this time during a street-corner reading, on a 'string of goofy charges' (Wimsatt 2000 (1999): 19). The publication of a book also brought Upski into conflict with a group of 'publishing industry motherfuckers' whose practices made it difficult to find places where the book could be sold – powerful publishers seemed to dictate what books were on sale and display in most shops, and the aggressive business strategies of chain retailers made life difficult for independent booksellers and other 'mom-and-pop' shops which might stock the book in neighbourhoods across the United States (Wimsatt 2000 (1999): 31–2).

Nonetheless, Upski's perseverance paid off. In 1998, a second edition of *Bomb the Suburbs* was printed by Soft Skull Press, an independent publishing house based in New York City. The new edition found its way onto shelves in independent bookstores across the United States, and was even sold by some major retail chains like Tower Records. By the time Upski's next book came out in 1999, *Bomb the Suburbs* had sold about 23,000 copies. It has continued to sell well since, with sales recently passing 40,000. Through Upski's various efforts, his book found an audience.

As Upski's experience with *Bomb the Suburbs* illustrates, 'finding an audience' is hard work. Indeed, this phrase hardly captures the difficulties of public address. Upski's audience was not simply there waiting for him to 'find' it. Rather, to 'find' an audience is to *make a public*. It is to construct a scene through which ideas, claims, expressions and the objects through which they are articulated can circulate to others. And as Michael Warner (2002: 12) notes:

when people address publics, they engage in struggles – at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise – over the conditions that bring them together as a public.

My aim in *Publics and the City* is to develop and apply a framework for understanding the urban dimensions of these struggles. How are cities put to work by those engaged in efforts to circulate ideas and claims to others, and how do their efforts in turn (re-)shape cities?

### Public Address and 'Public Space'

So, how might we begin to investigate the urban dimensions of struggles over the making of publics? Existing frameworks for such investigations frequently associate the city's contribution to public-making with the existence of *public spaces* where people can (re)present themselves before an audience of strangers. But across these analyses, there are some important differences in how public space is conceptualized. One of the key differences in understandings of public space relates to the geographical dimensions of the concept. Here, we can distinguish between two dominant approaches to the concept of public space. The term 'public space' is often used to denote a particular kind of place in the city, such that one could colour public spaces on a map – this is a *topographical* approach. By contrast, however, the term 'public space' is sometimes used to refer to any space which is put to use at a given time for collective action and debate – this is a *procedural* approach. I now want to explore these important differences in some depth, in order to assess the usefulness of the

concept of 'public space' for investigating the urban dimensions of public-making.

**Public address and 'public space':  
*topographical approaches***

'Public space' is most commonly defined in a topographical sense, to refer to particular places in the city that are (or should be) open to members of 'the public'. Here, we are talking about places such as streets, footpaths, parks, squares and the like. For many urban activists and scholars, access to such places is said to be vital for opportunities both to address a/the public and to be addressed as part of a/the public. Among those who make this connection between public-making and public spaces, there is a widespread concern that public spaces in contemporary cities are becoming more exclusionary, and hence less accessible to those seeking to put them to work in circulating ideas and claims to others.

Upski's street-corner readings to passers-by could be considered as one example of how an urban public space (understood topographically) can be put to work for public address. Based in part on his own experiences, Upski worried that the possibilities for street-corner readings seemed to be receding in contemporary cities. He is certainly not alone in articulating a fear that urban public spaces are becoming less accessible in cities all over the world. There now exists a large (and still expanding) literature which focuses on a range of developments which are said to be making public spaces less public. Some worry about the widespread proliferation of enclosed shopping malls in the second half of the twentieth century, initially in North American cities but now well beyond. In the mall, the gathering of strangers is organized to facilitate shopping rather than speech-making. If Upski tried to read excerpts of *Bomb the Suburbs* to passers-by in a mall, he would most likely find himself escorted off the premises by the mall's private security guards (unless he'd been invited to conduct a book reading by a retailer such as Tower Records, of course). If he read on suburban street corners, Upski might be lucky to encounter any passers-by at all – if suburbia's critics are to be believed, suburbanites are more likely to be speeding in their cars between their homes and some other enclosed space in the urban archipelago, leaving public spaces deserted. Yet other analysts worry that some street corners are simply off-limits to non-residents like Upski, accessible only to residents and their invited guests ensconced behind walls, with gated entries restricting access. Even on the more densely populated and accessible street corners that still exist, an Upski reading session might be watched closely by security agencies via closed-circuit television surveillance cameras. He could find himself

accused of performing without a permit and asked to move on by police charged with enforcing local ordinances designed to enhance 'quality of life' (indeed, this did happen!). Should a crowd gather to listen to Upsi, they too might be asked to move on if they threaten to block the free movement of pedestrian traffic. If they dared step off the footpath and onto the road itself, thus blocking motorized traffic, this would likely provoke an even more forceful response.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the very fact that Upsi continued to engage in street-corner readings seems to confirm the notion that the intentions of regulators are never fully realized. Upsi, and many others, have fought for the right to access 'public spaces' (Mitchell 2003).

This picture is complicated by the fact that many of the very policies and technologies just described as exclusionary are often supported on the grounds that they enhance, rather than reduce, access to public space. Politicians enact measures to restore 'order' and 'quality of life' in public space on behalf of a public that they claim is intimidated by begging, threatened by graffiti, menaced by boisterous groups of teenagers, disgusted by the smell of urine or faeces they associate with rough sleepers, and inconvenienced by unauthorized political gatherings which block traffic. Here, it is argued that exclusion from public spaces is the *product* of so-called 'anti-social' and criminal behaviour. Planners and law enforcement agencies charged with the responsibility of improving public space argue that the exclusion of a troublesome minority will make public space more accessible to the well-behaved majority. And the more people use public space, the more attractive it becomes – not only to other residents, but to people from elsewhere who might be tempted to visit or relocate (see for example Carr, Francis et al. 1992). Such policy agendas are by no means the sole preserve of the political right. Similar objectives have been pursued by a range of urban administrations, from the conservative Mayor Giuliani in New York to the socialist Mayor Maragall in Barcelona.<sup>2</sup> For their part, retail and residential developers argue that the spaces they produce are profitable and popular precisely because they offer users the kind of shelter from the weather and/or the strangers who threaten them that is not provided in more traditional forms of public space.

These debates reflect a range of normative perspectives on what makes for good public space. In my own earlier effort to conceptualize public space, I was particularly concerned to tease out the differences in how contributors to the public space debates understood the 'public' in 'public space' (Iveson 1998). While these differences are of course important, it now also seems to me that the different positions staked out in these debates have more in common than it might first appear. Indeed, most writing that conceptualizes public space topographically shares two problematic features.

First, many arguments on behalf of better 'public space' are articulated through narratives of loss and reclamation. Where public space has been found to have become more exclusionary, it is argued that the priority for action is to reclaim it from those who are trying to capture it for their own particular purposes. The villains and the heroes change depending on who is telling the story. Some claim that public space is under threat from the actions of corporations and developers more concerned with profit than public use, while others identify the culprits as overzealous law enforcement agencies and urban authorities who value order over democratic expression, or modernist planners who value rationality over community. Yet others argue that drug dealers, teenage gangs and other 'anti-social' groups have appropriated public space through violence and intimidation. Activist groups have sprung up to 'reclaim the night' from masculine violence against women, and to 'reclaim the streets' from the automobile. Each of these narratives is concerned with the apparent erosion of public space by the actions of those who are said to be anti-public. Perhaps the twentieth century has been witness to 'the fall of public man' (Sennett 1978), and perhaps the twenty-first century threatens to bring with it 'the end of public space' (Sorkin 1992)? As Bruce Robbins (1993: viii) noted over a decade ago:

The list of writings that announce the decline, degradation, crisis, or extinction of the public is long and steadily expanding. Publicness, we are told again and again and again, is a quality that we once had but have now lost, and that we must somehow retrieve.<sup>3</sup>

When concerns about exclusion are articulated through narratives of loss, they imply that public spaces used to be more inclusionary – more 'public' – before their contemporary degradation. Robbins (1993: viii) is right to complain that:

the appearance of the public in these historical narratives is something of a conjuring trick. For whom was the city once more public than now?

The publicness that we are supposed to have lost is in fact a 'phantom', never actually realized in history but haunting our frameworks for understanding the present. Far too often, it is ambiguous and under-theorized, featuring as an afterthought to tales of exclusion and loss. Boddy's (1992: 152) rousing call for a return to 'real' public space at the conclusion of his analysis of the 'analogous city' of overhead and underground pedestrian thoroughfares is illustrative:

A zone of coexistence, of dialogue, of friction, even, is necessary to a vital urban order; either we must return to the streets, or the analogous city must

become more like the real city and the real streets from whence it came . . . Where the analogous city has been built, we need to find ways of opening it up to a complete and representative citizenry – even to those who threaten, avow causes, or cannot or choose not to consume.

Of course, not all who are concerned with the accessibility of ‘public spaces’ such as streets and parks build their critiques of exclusion through such narratives of loss. Some contributors to the public space debates have urged against nostalgia for times and places that were by no means perfect. Instead of idealizing past public spaces and cities, writers like Don Mitchell have sought instead to show how access to public space is always a product of political struggle. Mitchell realizes that public spaces have never been ‘open to all’ – nonetheless, the very *ideal* of a public space which is ‘open to all’ circulates to powerful effect. For him, the ongoing circulation of this ideal becomes a ‘rallying point for successive waves of political activity’ as excluded groups seek inclusion in the public spaces of the city (Mitchell 1995: 117). These struggles for inclusion have:

reinforced the normative ideals incorporated in notions of public spheres and public spaces. By calling on the rhetoric of inclusion and interaction that the public sphere and public space are meant to represent, excluded groups have been able to argue for their *rights* as part of the active public. And each (partially) successful struggle for inclusion in ‘the public’ conveys to other marginalized groups the importance of the ideal as a point of political struggle (Mitchell 1995: 117, original emphasis).

From this perspective, the struggle for democratic urban public space is ‘an activity involving creation and construction, not repair and retrieval’ (Phillips 1992: 50).

But even where narratives of loss and reclamation are rejected, most topographical approaches to ‘public space’ share a second problematic proposition about the relationship between public address and the city. In essence, this shared proposition can be summarized as follows: public address requires inclusionary and accessible urban public spaces where people can take their place as part of the public. Indeed, Don Mitchell’s (2003) book *The Right to the City* provides one of the clearest statements of this proposition. As Mitchell puts it, while ‘the work of citizenship requires a multitude of spaces’, the ‘public spaces’ of the city are ‘decisive, for it is here that desires and needs of individuals and groups can be *seen*’ (Mitchell 2003: 33, original emphasis). For him, to be *part of* the public is to be seen *in* public. Thus, to be part of the public is to have established the right to occupy what he calls ‘material’ public spaces – by which he means streets, squares, parks, and the like – and to put them to work in acts of public representation or address. As he puts it (2003: 131), ‘public

space is the space of the public'. From this quite topographical perspective, the *problem with public space* is one of 'increasing alienation of people from the possibilities of unmediated social interaction and increasing control by powerful economic and social actors over the production and use of space' (2003: 140).

The proposition about the relationship between public address and the city which is commonly held by topographical approaches to public space has some fundamental problems. Most significantly, much of the writing on the accessibility of urban public space is premised on a flawed conceptualization of the relationship between three distinct dimensions of publicness:

- publicness as a *context for action* ('urban public space');
- publicness as a *kind of action* ('public address'); and
- publicness as a *collective actor* ('a/the public').

When analysts propose that the urban dimension of struggles over the conditions of public address revolve around struggles over access to topographically defined public spaces, they (implicitly or explicitly) tend to assume an equivalence between these three dimensions of publicness. However, if we begin to unpack the connections between these dimensions of publicness, we see that this equivalence simply does not hold. Most importantly, access to a place generally considered to be 'public space' in a topographical sense can be shown to have no fixed or privileged relationship to acts of 'public address' or to one's status as a member of 'the public'.

When the urban dimension of public address is equated with the provision of accessible 'public spaces', this focuses our attention on a narrow range of places which somehow qualify as 'public' rather than 'private'. Topographical approaches miss the messy and dynamic urban geographies of publicness. For instance, one could certainly address a public (or indeed be addressed as part of a public) by appearing in a space conventionally understood as 'public', such as a street, a square or a park. But one could also address/be addressed as part of a public through action in a place conventionally understood as 'private', such as a bedroom in a domestic house which contains a radio and a telephone. From here, one could conceivably be *heard* (if not *seen*) as a participant in a talkback radio debate.<sup>4</sup> Equally, forms of address conventionally understood to be 'private' (such as conversations between intimate acquaintances) can take place in spaces conventionally referred to as 'public'. Clearly, then, the conventional understanding of the public/private distinction as it is applied to *contexts for action* (i.e. the distinction between public and private places) is not wholly defined with reference to the *kind of action* that takes place in these



spaces (see also Staeheli 1996). Nor can topographical distinctions between 'public space' and 'private space' be easily defined with reference to 'the public' as a *collective*. One might certainly be *seen* by strangers in a street, a shopping mall or a workplace, but such places have quite different relationships to 'the public' by virtue of the different proprietary and regulatory arrangements through which they are established and managed.<sup>5</sup>

Precisely because these equivalences do not hold, topographically defined concepts of 'public space' are inherently unstable. If we enquire as to the 'publicness' of any given place with reference to any of the three dimensions of publicness I have identified above, we will likely end up revealing incongruities rather than equivalence. As Michael Warner (2002: 27, 30) has argued:

Public and private are not always simple enough that one could code them on a map with different colors – pink for private and blue for public . . . [M]ost things are private in one sense and public in another.

This applies to streets and homes as much as it applies to other things. And of course, it also applies to places that are more obviously hybrids of public and private, such as shopping malls and public toilets. Any 'where' can potentially be the context for combinations of both 'public' and 'private' action. Just as feminist theorists have argued that 'public and private do not easily correspond to institutional spheres, such as work versus family, or state versus economy' (Young 1990: 121), so too it can be argued that public and private do not easily correspond to urban places such as street versus home, or park versus shopping mall. To echo Warner, such places can indeed be 'private in one sense and public in another'. It should not be surprising, then, that even the best of the interventions in the 'public space' debates surveyed above struggle to make this slippery concept workable.

### **Public address and 'public space': *procedural* approaches**

The incongruities raised by the different dimensions in which a space might be 'public' cannot simply be resolved if only we could find a clear definition of what constitutes a 'public' or 'private' place – such clarity would inevitably come at the cost of ignoring the very complexity which ought to be at the heart of investigations into the spatiality of publicness (and privacy). Publics and privates, Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2003: 108) suggest, 'are each constantly shifting and being performed in rapid flashes within less anchored spaces'. As such, they believe that the complex 'where' (and 'when') of publicity and privacy cannot be captured by static 'regional'

or topographical conceptions of public and private as distinct 'spheres' or 'spaces'. Indeed, they go so far as to argue that such conceptions of public and private ought to be consigned to the dustbin of history:

Despite the heroic efforts of 20th century normative theorists to rescue the divide, the various distinctions between public and private domains cannot survive . . . [T]he hybridization of public and private is even more extensive than previously thought, and is occurring in more complex and fluid ways than any regional model of separate spheres can capture. Any hope for public citizenship and democracy, then, will depend on the capacity to navigate these new material, mobile worlds that are neither public nor private (Sheller and Urry 2003: 113).

Of course, not all conceptions of 'public space' are of the static and topographical variety to which Sheller and Urry object. There is also a tradition of defining 'public space' from a *procedural* rather than topographical perspective. Defined procedurally, 'public space' is understood to be any space which, through political action and public address at a particular time, becomes 'the site of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion' (Benhabib 1992: 78). Drawing on Hannah Arendt (1958), Seyla Benhabib (1992: 78) argues that public spaces (defined in this procedural sense) can exist across 'diverse topographical locations'. Arendt was particularly influenced by the Greek conception of publicness, and while she recognized that in this conception publicness was strongly associated with the *polis*, she was quite careful to spell out the distinction between the *polis* and the physical spaces of the city:

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its time-space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. 'Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*': these famous words became not merely the watchwords of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly (Arendt 1958: 198-9).

To the Greeks, in other words, 'not Athens, but Athenians, were the *polis*' (Arendt 1958: 195). Here, Arendt's concept of 'appearance' is not reducible to the 'visibility' associated with physical co-presence in a place which is so important in topographical approaches to 'public space'.

What are the implications of these procedural conceptions of public space for our consideration of the *urban* dimensions of public-making and public address? If publics can indeed find their 'proper location almost any time and anywhere', as Arendt would have it, then the 'public spaces' of the city (topographically defined) would appear to have no privileged relationship to public-making and public address. Rather than focusing only on these sites or places, procedural conceptions of 'public space' draw explicit attention to the complex geographies of publicness that topographical approaches struggle to capture. So, in its procedural conception, 'public space' is not reduced to a fixed set of topographically defined sites in the city which act as a kind of 'stage' for representation before a gathered 'audience'. Different forms of public address may take place in a park, and over a kitchen table, and as such both could be considered as 'public space' from a procedural perspective. And of course, 'public space' does not only take the form of such 'physical' sites. From the procedural perspective, we may consider various kinds of *media* as 'public space', given their central role in facilitating the formation of modern and contemporary publics. This approach is advanced by Clive Barnett (2004: 190), who is critical of 'geographers' determination to translate the public sphere into bounded public urban spaces of co-present social interaction'. For him, a process-based approach to the public sphere requires us to 'stretch out' our conception of the public to take into account the importance of a range of spatial practices to the making of publics, directing attention to the role of media and communications practices in particular. The historical emergence of print media in the form of regularly published journals and newspapers is often regarded as fundamental to the formation of publics in the modern period (see in particular Anderson 1983; Habermas 1989; Warner 1990). And of course, the twentieth century has witnessed the widespread diffusion of electronic media in the form of radio, television and more recently the internet. Sheller and Urry argue that new communications technologies have given rise to an important new space of publicness – Arendt's 'space of appearances' may be a *screen* on which 'private' lives are made 'public' and 'public' issues are transmitted into 'private' contexts:

Where once 'staging' was the operative metaphor for public events, now 'screening' is more appropriate to describe those contexts where privacy has been eroded and where supposedly private lives are ubiquitously screened (Sheller and Urry 2003: 118).

Of course, if we accept that the gathering places of the city have no privileged relationship to public-making, it does not necessarily follow that these places have been rendered *irrelevant* as a form of 'public space', as

some champions of new media and communications technologies are prone to argue. The literature on cyberspace, for instance, is littered with techno-utopian claims that it has replaced/is replacing the gathering-spaces of the city as the pre-eminent public space (for a critical discussion of these claims, see Robins 1996). Ironically, perhaps, such claims frequently deploy urban metaphors to make sense of the spatiality of cyberspace and the media (Crang 2000) – Paul Virilio's claim that 'The screen has become the new village square' is one case in point (quoted in Featherstone 1998).

Unfortunately, however, some of those who have leapt to the defence of the city in the face of techno-utopian claims about its irrelevance have done so by simple reassertion of the primacy of urban gathering-spaces over other forms of public space. In these counter-claims, the urban (or the 'real', the 'material') is often defined in *opposition to* the media (or the 'mediated', the 'virtual'), so that these two forms of public space appear locked in a battle for ascendancy whose outcomes will determine the very possibilities for democratic citizenship. But we should not defend the city's importance for public-making by reasserting the value of its gathering-spaces *over and against* other forms of public space. Mitchell's (2003) claim that the internet cannot match the street as a space of democratic representation is illustrative of the problems of such an approach. Quite rightly, Mitchell is wary of those who herald the internet as *the* new public space. In noting his concerns about the limitations of the internet as a public space, he argues that 'the material structure of the medium closes off political possibilities and opportunities' (Mitchell 2003: 145). This concern with the consequences of the 'material structure' of the internet is important, but it should be applied to *any* kind of public space, not least the streets which he champions as the privileged terrain of publicness. Surely *all* kinds of public space have a 'material structure' which influences the political possibilities and opportunities they afford? This is precisely the point to which our attention is drawn by procedural conceptions of public space – if publics have *no* proper location, then we should be wary of claims that *any* kind of space has a privileged relationship to publicness, whether they be 'squares' or 'screens'.

The challenge posed by procedural conceptions of public space, then, is to find a new way of conceptualizing the urban dimensions of public-making which avoids the tendency to either privilege or denigrate the city's gathering-spaces as 'public space'. To help us address this challenge, we can draw two important insights from the analysis presented so far in this section. First, if we accept that all forms of public space have a distinct 'material structure', then we ought to explore the particular materiality of different forms of space, asking about how this materiality is made and remade, and considering the consequences of this materiality for different forms of public address and for different publics.<sup>6</sup> In other words, while we

might accept the notion that no space should be privileged as a form of 'public space' because publics have no proper location, this does *not* mean that all kinds of space are equivalent or equally available for those engaged in struggles to make publics. Rather, different kinds of public space offer different possibilities and opportunities for public action, and these differences require empirical analysis. Yes, an activist might turn a street, a kitchen or a website into a 'space of appearances' – but they are unlikely to do so without some appreciation of the different opportunities that these different spaces afford for public action. Nor are they likely to restrict their action to any one of these spaces. This leads me to my second point – we should not frame different kinds of public spaces as stark alternatives to one another. Rather, we ought to explore the ways in which publics *combine* a variety of 'public spaces' in their action. Indeed, we can use the example of protests which disrupted the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle to illustrate this point. For Mitchell, these protests illustrate the ongoing primacy of the city's gathering-spaces for politics – the protests, he asserts, would have been nothing without 'people in the streets' (2003: 147). But what purpose is served by asserting the primacy of the street over the media (or vice versa) in such a case? Certainly, this is a distinction which many of the activists involved in the Seattle demonstrations did not make – these events were as significant for the development of new forms of activist media and tactical interventions in the mainstream mass media as they were for the occupation of the streets. The streets and the screens here are distinct spaces for public action, but actions undertaken through these distinct spaces took shape in close relation to one another. While many kinds of 'public space' exist, none exists in isolation – rather, these spaces develop and mutate in complex relation to each other. 'New' forms do not replace the 'old', but draw them into new combinations.<sup>7</sup>

### **Public address and 'public space': an initial summation**

These observations about the distinct and yet relational materiality of different kinds of 'public space' (procedurally defined) raise some intriguing dilemmas for our inquiry into the urban dimensions of struggles over the making of publics. Drawing on the insights of procedural approaches to public space, our inquiry should not privilege those spaces defined as 'public' by topographical conceptions of the public/private distinction. However, we cannot simply reject or ignore these conceptions, as suggested by Sheller and Urry. Rather, we are now in a position to re-contextualize topographical conceptions of public and private within a wider inquiry into the materiality of different kinds of 'public space'. Certainly, we have

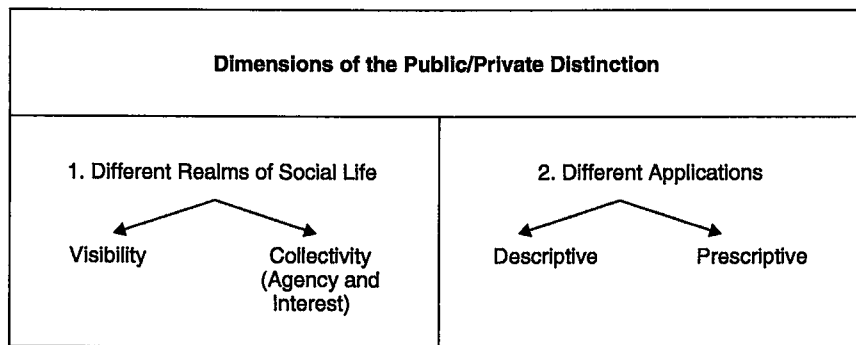
established that being public is not simply a matter of being *in* public, where being in public is equated with establishing an embodied presence in a particular site in the city defined as 'public' in a topographical sense. And yet, the materiality of some procedurally defined 'public spaces' is nonetheless fundamentally shaped by norms which continue to invoke spatialized distinctions between 'public' and 'private'. In some senses at least, the public/private distinction *is* materialized in a topographical register, such that moving from 'public' to 'private' can be 'experienced as crossing a barrier or making a transition' because of the different kinds of visibility afforded by different kinds of place (Warner 2002: 26). To be flippant, while Sheller and Urry may argue against regional conceptions of public and private in the pages of an academic journal, they may not be inclined to extend their critique of regional conceptions of 'public' and 'private' so far as to advocate (or practise) masturbation in a 'public' street. Greek philosopher Diogenes is said to have done this repeatedly in ancient Athens, in a kind of 'performance criticism' of normative ideas about public and private (Warner 2002: 21). Perhaps Sheller and Urry would also be so bold, but surely neither they nor their audience would consider such an event unremarkable, precisely because it would transgress currently acceptable norms about 'public' and 'private' which have a strong topographical dimension.

So, it would appear that we have come full circle. The urban dimensions of struggles over the conditions of public address are not adequately conceptualized as struggles over access to public space, where 'public space' is understood exclusively in a topographical *or* a procedural sense. Both topographical and procedural approaches to public address and its relationship to 'public space' point us towards the geographical complexity of publicness in its different forms – as a context for action, a kind of action, and a kind of actor. However, topographical approaches mistakenly see a direct equivalence between these three dimensions of publicness. While procedural approaches capture some of the dynamic geographies of public address, they fail to appreciate fully the persistent power of normative topographical mappings of public and private. Each approach, in other words, captures a particular aspect of the relationship between publicness and the city at the cost of neglecting other important aspects – the relationship is more complex than either seems to allow. I agree with Weintraub (1997: 3) that this 'complexity needs to be acknowledged, and the roots of this complexity need to be elucidated'. As the discussion above illustrates, when different fields of discourse about publicness are allowed to operate in mutual isolation, or when their categories are casually or unreflectively blended, confusion or even absurdity can be the result (Weintraub 1997: 2–3). To find a way through these murky waters, we need to have a much clearer appreciation of the multidimensional nature of the public/private distinction and its various applications across different realms of social life.

## Public Address and the City

Analyses of the public/private distinction provided by Benn and Gaus (1983) and Weintraub (1997) are particularly useful in dissecting the complexities revealed in the discussion of different conceptions of 'public space'. As Weintraub (1997: 1-2) has observed, use of the conceptual vocabulary of 'public' and 'private' in reference to urban space (and to other domains of social life):

often generates as much confusion as illumination, not least because different sets of people who employ these concepts mean very different things by them – and sometimes, without quite realizing it, mean several different things at once.



**Figure 1.1** Dimensions of the public/private distinction

There are two sets of meanings attached to the public/private distinction that are particularly important for our discussion of the urban dimensions of public-making (see Figure 1.1). First, the public/private distinction is used in reference to *distinct realms of social life*. When we describe actions taking place 'in public' or 'in private', public and private are understood as different contexts for action with different forms of *visibility*. In this sense, the conceptual vocabulary of public and private is used to distinguish between what is open, revealed or accessible (i.e. public), as opposed to what is hidden or withdrawn (i.e. private) (Weintraub 1997: 5). When we describe actions which are taken by 'a/the public' and/or actions taken in the 'public interest', publicness is understood with reference to the *collectivity* of different forms of *agency* and *interest*. In this sense, the conceptual vocabulary of public and private is used to distinguish between what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals, versus what

is individual, or pertains only to an individual (Weintraub 1997: 5; Benn and Gaus 1983).<sup>8</sup>

Second, uses of the public/private distinction are further complicated because there are at least two ways in which the public/private distinction is *applied*. It is variously used as a *descriptive* device and as a *prescriptive* device. Both of these applications of the public/private distinction are fundamentally normative (Benn and Gaus 1983: 11–12). It might seem relatively obvious that prescriptions involving publicness and privacy have a normative content. For example, ordinances against nudity in public space clearly invoke norms about what constitutes appropriate behaviour in places where one's body is visible to others. But descriptive applications of publicness or privacy are no less normative:

to describe an object as private [or public] implies that it satisfies some, at least, of a bounded set of conditions specified in the norms, without which the normative implications would not hold (Benn and Gaus 1983: 12).

The very classification of some place or interest as 'public' rather than 'private', in other words, inevitably invokes norms about what is properly 'public' or 'private'. So, to describe a street as a public space also implies that streets are places where norms proscribing nudity in public apply – the classification or description here has a normative content. The normativity of the public/private distinction applies to interests and agents as much as places (i.e. to collectivity and visibility). Indeed, sometimes normative applications of publicness and privacy combine criteria relating to collectivity and visibility. For example, some parents may claim that how they discipline their children in the 'privacy of their own home' is no one's business but their own. Here, the ideological classification of the home as a private space is used to protect it from institutional sanctions against physical disciplining of children, which are seen to erode that inherent privacy and its associated rights. The 'privacy' of the home has been publicly challenged by advocates of children's welfare and rights, who argue that the nature of interactions between parent and child within the home is a matter of 'public interest'. Because distinctions between public and private are essentially normative in nature, they have been a matter of political and theoretical contention. In particular, the distinctions articulated in the liberal political tradition which render some matters/bodies/spaces/actions/etc. as private and others as public, and which have been widely institutionalized in politics and law, have been the target of concerted political action (Warner 2002: 39).

We are now in a position to offer a more refined diagnosis of the problems with the topographical and procedural approaches to 'public space' which have dominated thinking about the relationship between publics and



the city. Put simply, topographical models of public space use 'public' to denote spaces of sociability in the city where one's actions are visible to others, while procedural models of public space use 'public' to denote spaces where one may take part in collective discussions about common interests and issues. Each approach draws attention to an important dimension of publicness. But each also fails to trace fully the complex interactions between the distinct dimensions of publicness, either simplifying or neglecting the nature of these interactions.

Topographical conceptions of public space usefully draw our attention to the power of regional distinctions between public and private which persist in the form of socio-spatial norms about conduct and action in (certain parts of) the city. That is, regimes of place often invoke norms about what behaviour is appropriate 'in public' and 'in private' in order to foster particular forms of conduct. Of course, these norms are contested and change over time and space. As such, struggles over the forms of conduct which are normalized in particular urban time-spaces often take the form of struggles over the terms of accessibility of 'public space'. Topographical conceptions of 'public space' equate being *in* public with being public in its collective sense. Publics (as collectives) and public action are not contained within spaces typically mapped as 'public' in a topographical sense. Procedural conceptions of 'public space' draw attention to the dynamic geographies of publicness as collective interests and agency, which do not conform to the conventional mappings of public and private. Nonetheless, we cannot simply choose to do away with topographical or regional conceptions of 'public' and 'private'. It may be true that one can address a public from one's bedroom as well as from a street corner, and indeed that one's 'private life' may be publicly 'screened'. But this does not mean that conventional designations of the bedroom as 'private' and the street as 'public' no longer have any power at all. The distinction between public and private cannot therefore be reduced wholly to a procedural distinction. As Michael Warner (2002: 28–9) has argued:

attempts to frame public and private as sharp distinction or antimony have invariably come to grief, while attempts to collapse or do without them have proven equally unsatisfying.

The challenge, then, is to build a framework for investigating the urban dimensions of public-making which is sensitive to the multidimensionality of publicness and privacy.

Building a framework that is sensitive to the multiple dimensions of publicness and privacy will also help us to bring together the different dimensions of 'the city' that are privileged by topographical and procedural

approaches to public space. In topographical approaches to public address and public space, 'the city' features as a network of physical sites which serve as a stage for public representation and visibility. In procedural approaches to public address and public space, 'the city' features more as a kind of 'being together' that is as much a matter of public deliberation and collective concern as physical propinquity. Both of these approaches bring out distinct but related urban dimensions of public-making. We can see both of these dimensions of 'the city' at work in Upski's efforts to 'find an audience'. While Upski might have found some people on a street corner, or by posting a newsletter to a pillar on a train station platform, he found others through book sales in record shops and online retailers. I became part of Upski's public when I found his book in an independent bookstore while on a trip to the United States some years ago. 'The city' still played a vital role in making this connection possible – but not in the form of a physical 'public space' where I could witness one of Upski's talks. Upski and I connected through a *shared interest* in the state of contemporary cities, rather than through *sharing a space* in one of those cities (how could a book called *Bomb the Suburbs* not leap off the shelves for an urban researcher with an interest in graffiti?).

### **The Structure of this Book**

In the next chapter, I take up the challenge of developing a framework for research into the urban dimensions of public-making which is sensitive to the multidimensionality and complexity of publicness and the city. This framework is developed by establishing a conversation between urban studies and critical social theories of the political 'public sphere'. The distinct trajectories of these two literatures has meant that studies of publicness in the 'polis' and in 'print' have mostly failed to connect (Iveson 2003; Smith and Low 2006). But the connections are there to be made. If the public space debates in urban studies have tended to lack conceptual clarity with regard to what constitutes 'publicness', then it is also true that the spatial vocabulary of critical social theory remains underdeveloped in some important respects.

The framework developed in Chapter 2 is then applied to investigate a series of struggles over the urban dimensions of publicness over the next five chapters. The conceptual organization of these case studies is discussed further in Chapter 2, but let me now offer some preliminary orientation concerning these chapters. They each explore the ways in which the urban is used and produced in struggles to establish particular forms of publicness in different Australian cities. The chapters range from considerations of political protesters seeking to use the grounds around Parliament House

in Canberra to young people hanging out on the streets of inner-city Perth and writing graffiti in Sydney, from a coalition of women and their supporters mobilizing to keep men out of a public swimming pool in Sydney to men cruising the parks and public toilets of Melbourne for sex with other men. These studies are all based on fieldwork conducted at various points over the past eight years.

In seeking to convince readers in Australia and beyond that these studies might be of interest, I make no claim that they are *representative* of struggles over the making of publics which take place in other cities in Australia or indeed in other parts of the world. The struggles I consider are neither 'typical' cases nor are they fought over 'paradigmatic places' whose present might become someone else's future. Nonetheless, as the title of this book suggests, I do hope that these investigations into particular publics in particular cities might also be *illustrative* of the relationship between publics and the city more generally. Michael Warner (2002: 11) has argued that 'the idea of a public has a metacultural dimension; it gives form to a tension between general and particular that makes it difficult to analyze from either perspective alone'. The same, I think, could be said about the idea of a city. I share Jennifer Robinson's (2002: 549) view that urban theory might also benefit from giving a little more consideration to 'the difference the diversity of cities makes to theory'.

In the final chapter, I return to consider the conceptual and political implications of the approach to publics and the city that I develop over the course of the book. My main claim here is that a revised concept of publicness can still be a powerful tool for critical analysis of contemporary urbanization.