One autumn morning in the late 2000s, three public benches in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, were lifted by crane, flipped around, and bolted back to the ground on the very same spot. It was only after the rotation that I noticed how peculiar their original placement, along the outer edge of the sidewalk, had been. Instead of facing inward, towards the shops and the main flow of pedestrians, they gave onto the road, their views of the university almost always obstructed by a stationary line of taxi cabs.

Now that they had been rotated, I found the benches more inviting. But others seemed to have liked them just fine before. Shielded from pedestrian traffic by their proximity to cars, their back turned to the “active frontage” of nearby buildings, they provided a semi-secluded space in an area otherwise teeming with movement. This made them popular with the homeless who, slouched awkwardly against the middle armrest designed to prevent them from being more comfortable, could nevertheless find there a modicum of tranquillity and rest. With the benches now fully exposed to public view, drawing students and tourists alike, that appeal had gone and with it, the original users.

The replacement of one public by another had required no change in zoning, no additional policing, no modification to rules of access, not even the introduction of new street furniture. All it took was a change in angle. Interestingly, it was us, the passers-by, who, through our fleeting gaze and the temptation to sit, had become unknowingly enlisted as the agents of this transformation.

The rotation of the benches was part of a broader effort by the City of Cambridge to revitalise open public space in Harvard Square. Also targeted was “the pit”, a sunken quasi-circular area by the main subway exit that had for decades served as a meeting point for the homeless as well as for skaters, goths, and punks of all stripes. The City did not raze or redesign the pit; it proceeded, rather, to eliminate its enclosed, arena-like feel, by filling it with tables and chairs placed to attract tourists and visitors. Once again, the intervention was punctual, cost-effective, and non-coercive. As William Whyte, an urbanologist famous for his detailed observations of street life, put it, ‘the best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else’ (2001, p. 63).

The plan to revitalise Harvard Square was not imposed unilaterally by City Hall, nor was it forced upon local authorities by business interests run amok. It germinated, as has become de rigueur these days, through inclusive community discussions, lengthy subcommittee
meetings, and workshops open to all concerned parties. One round was conducted by the city in 2005–2006, as the Healthy Harvard Square Initiative. Another took place in 2013 and 2014, in partnership with Harvard University and the Harvard Square Business Association.² It involved a series of workshops led by the Project for Public Spaces, a non-profit inspired by the work of Whyte and dedicated to disseminating his insights on how to make urban spaces come to life.

To someone from the 1960s, this partnership might have looked incongruous. The very voices that were then, along with Whyte and his contemporary Jane Jacobs, decrying the disappearance of public space at the hands of the automobile and modernist architecture and clamouring for a community-based approach to urban planning had, five decades later, become powerful forces in their own right, dotting cityscapes with movable furniture, sun shades, street pianos, food kiosks, and potted plants. One could be forgiven for finding the outcome ironic. At Harvard Square, it was in the name of broadening access to public space that the homeless had been displaced from the benches they used to occupy, and in the name of place-making that one of the most distinctive places in the city had been altered beyond recognition.

What should we make of these transformations to public space? And how should we understand the fact that both their proponents and detractors present themselves as defenders of public space? I propose to shed light on these questions by examining a range of competing visions of public space that co-exist, somewhat uneasily, in our democratic political culture. These imaginaries, as I will call them, emanate from four families of normative political views—liberal, egalitarian, civic republican, and democratic—that have played a significant part in shaping our political practices and self-understanding, and that are all, in that sense, ours. Each of these views provides us with a different account of what it is that makes public space valuable. Each brings into focus a distinctive type of threat to public space, and each charts, finally, a different course of action for public policy and urban design.

While these four families of views derive from different traditions of political thought, I do not attempt to trace their lineage, nor do I claim that they are mutually exclusive. Most contemporary theorists—be they liberal egalitarians, neo-republicans, or radical democrats—are in fact committed to a hybrid mixture of all four. Still, I believe that each of these strands exhibits a certain loose coherence, and that there is value in comparing and contrasting the imaginaries of public space they contain, if only to show where and why they diverge.

Rather than speak of imaginaries, political philosophers may prefer the language of values—referring to arguments from liberty, from equality, from civic community, and from democratic pluralism. Much of what I say in the following pages could indeed be captured under such rubrics. I have chosen the term “imaginary”, however, because several of the arguments we will encounter are couched in evocative descriptions of what public space ought to look and feel like. These descriptions conjure up aesthetic and sensory experiences that exceed the bounds of principled argumentation.

In what follows, I hope to show that these imaginaries can provide a useful way to navigate the somewhat disjointed scholarly literature on public space, a literature scattered across various fields—urban planning, geography, political theory, and sociology—that often talk past one another. If I am successful, we will emerge with a diverse range of theoretical resources to explain why we care about public space, and with a better sense of why it is that proponents of public space often disagree so vehemently.

I begin with a short conceptual discussion of what public space is, then proceed to examine, in turn, liberal, egalitarian, civic republican, and democratic imaginaries of public space.
What is public space?

Before we begin to examine what public space is for, we first need a better understanding of what it is. Political theorists often use the term figuratively, to refer to the shared world of artefacts and institutions that relate us to one another (Arendt’s “common world”, 1958), or to designate the discursive spaces – such as salons, newspapers, and online platforms – in which people come together to discuss matters of common concern (Habermas’s “public sphere”, 1991). I here use the term more narrowly, to refer to physical public space, and I focus primarily on urban environments. Expanding on the work of Margaret Kohn (2004), I propose to think of public space along four dimensions – ownership, accessibility, sociability, and commonality.

One may be tempted to define public space by reference to public ownership. In our current property regime, ownership is a good, albeit imperfect, proxy for the power to set rules of access to a space and rules of behaviour in that space. Public space, then, would designate a territory over which we, the people, have control, as opposed to private space, where that power belongs to a particular individual or corporation.

Public ownership, however, sometimes fails to track another, equally important aspect of public space: accessibility. In common parlance, we use the term “public space” to refer to spaces that are open to all. Paradigmatic public spaces, like parks, are both publicly owned and openly accessible. But publicly owned spaces can be closed to the public at large (e.g., military facilities), and privately owned spaces may, in turn, be open to all (e.g., malls). Since ownership and accessibility are not reducible to one another, it is helpful to think of them as two separate dimensions along which we can assess the “publicness” of a space.

Each of these dimensions – ownership (understood as a proxy for control) and accessibility – admits further gradation. Somewhere on the continuum between publicly and privately controlled spaces are privately owned public spaces, better known under the acronym POPS. These spaces arise from incentive zoning, with developers permitted to build more than they otherwise would in exchange for incorporating open, but privately managed and policed, spaces into their designs. Like ownership, accessibility is also a matter of degree. Some spaces are open to all (e.g., sidewalks); others can be accessed by anyone who pays a fee (e.g., coffee shops); others still are restricted to members (e.g., gated communities).

There is more to public space, however, than ownership and accessibility. It also matters who else is there. Public space is a setting for enlarged sociability – it is space we share with strangers, people who are not part of our proximate circle of family, friends, and acquaintances (Walzer, 1986, p. 470). Not all publicly owned and openly accessible spaces are like that. Jane Jacobs describes, for instance, a small park in Baltimore surrounded by houses, isolated from stores and sidewalk traffic, and used almost exclusively by residents of nearby blocks, as a setting for the ‘suburbanlike sharing of private lives’ (1961, p. 63). Despite being publicly owned and accessible, the park effectively serves as a quasi-private space for the immediate community.

Besides the presence of strangers, public space also involves a certain kind of commonality of experience. It is space we do not merely occupy with others but share with them. The experience of walking on a sidewalk, sitting on a bench in a busy plaza, or taking a stroll in a park in the company of strangers is different in kind from that of driving our car alongside theirs on the freeway.

Michael Walzer (1986) tries to capture the difference between these two types of experiences by distinguishing between spaces that stimulate different qualities of attention: single-minded spaces, which we enter in a hurry, with one thing in mind; and open-minded spaces, designed for a variety of uses, which we enter prepared to loiter. While useful in theory, I believe that this distinction often flounders in practice. It forces us to differentiate too sharply
between phenomena that are closely intermingled: many of the spaces that we consider public involve a mixture of single-minded purposiveness and open-minded loitering. The suburban mall, for instance, which Walzer characterises as the epitome of single-mindedness, strikes me rather as a hybrid. We venture into a mall not only to purchase specific goods but also to spend time socialising and window-shopping alongside others.

Margaret Kohn (2004, pp. 10–11) proposes to capture the kind of togetherness involved in public space by distinguishing between spaces that foster collective isolation, focusing everyone on a single object of attention (e.g., movie theatres, stadiums), and spaces that facilitate interaction among people, positioning them as co-creators of a common world. This distinction, which harks back to the situationists, is useful as a tool for social critique. But as a definition of public space, I think it sets the bar too high. Most of the public spaces we inhabit with others do not provide interaction in any meaningful sense. Being addressed by a stranger, or approached to sign a petition, is a rare occurrence. It is also worth noting that many public spaces, like the sloping plot in front of the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris or the meandering alleys of Central Park, are designed to direct the attention of people towards an external object – the striking façade of the building, or the natural beauty of the park. This, however, does not seem to detract from the sociability that such spaces foster.

I propose to capture the kind of commonality involved in public space in a more modest and expansive way than Walzer or Kohn. A space is public, or so I suggest, when people are in one another’s immediate presence, forming what Erving Goffman (1963, pp. 15–18) calls a “gathering”. By this, I mean that people can perceive others through their naked senses and in turn be perceived by them, including in their perception (of others) and in their sensing of being perceived (by others). When people are together in this way, Goffman (1963, p. 16) writes,

at least some of their world is made up out of the fact [. . .] that an adaptive line of action attempted by one will be either insightfully facilitated by the other or insightfully countered, or both, and that such a line of action must always be pursued in this intelligently helpful and hindering world.

This is one way of saying that a special mutuality or form of interdependence obtains. People are aware of one another’s presence and must take each other into account. It is in this sense that the presence of others is a constitutive and shared component of the experience of being in public space.

To recapitulate, then: paradigmatic public spaces are publicly owned and open to all; they involve contact with strangers and a commonality of experience. Instead of thinking of these four attributes (ownership, accessibility, enlarged sociability, and commonality) as necessary and sufficient conditions for a space to be called “public”, I believe we should think of them as four dimensions along which we can assess the “publicness” of a space. Some spaces may score well on one dimension and less well on others.

The liberal imaginary

One way to reflect upon the significance of public space is to consider what it means to those who are most dependent on it. This is the kind of exercise that Jeremy Waldron (1991) invites us to perform in relation to homelessness. Working from within the liberal tradition, Waldron observes that public space is the only place where the homeless are free to be without being dependent on the permission of private property owners. In a fully privatised society, the homeless would be comprehensively unfree: they would be legally liable to being removed
from wherever they happened to be (Waldron, 1991, p. 302). This is already a powerful liberal argument in favour of having public space, at least in a society that does not provide all of its members with private property.

But Waldron goes further and takes aim at restrictions placed on behaviour in public space, such as prohibitions on sleeping and urinating in public. He argues that while such prohibitions might appear sensible to those who have access to other places where they can satisfy their basic needs, that option is typically not available to the homeless. Denying them the right to pee or sleep in public space is tantamount to denying them the right to pee or sleep altogether. So far as the homeless are concerned, Waldron argues, ‘a rule against performing an act in a public place amounts in effect to a comprehensive ban on that action’ (1991, p. 318). With that argument, Waldron brings into focus a distinctive type of threat to public space – sanitisation. He shows that if we are not sufficiently vigilant, attempts to tailor public space to the sensibilities of the majority can have unacceptable consequences for other segments of society.

I have chosen to begin with Waldron’s essay because it presents us with a rather minimal vision of public space, as a kind of sanctuary in an otherwise unjust polity, where some of the most vulnerable members of society are permitted to exercise their basic freedoms. To be sure, this is not all that Waldron thinks a liberal society owes the homeless. His own version of liberalism is far more capacious. It involves a concern not just for securing liberties but also for creating the conditions under which it is possible to enjoy and exercise such liberties (Waldron, 1993, p. 7). This includes a commitment to welfare provision that would go a long way towards addressing the root causes of homelessness. But in the essay I have been discussing, Waldron does not appeal to this thicker conception of “liberal egalitarianism”. He builds his argument on weaker premises, drawing solely on a concern for protecting basic negative liberties.

The very minimalism of Waldron’s argument, however, seems to invite solutions that may strike us as problematic in their own right. One could grant that we have an obligation to provide the homeless with some place to exercise their basic freedoms. But consider Robert Ellickson’s (1996) suggestion to institute a system of zoning within cities that would effectively confine the homeless and the “nuisance” they pose to a specific district. Ellickson worries that in the absence of strict controls on acceptable behaviour, city dwellers will desert public space even further, and retreat to the security and orderliness of gated communities and suburban malls. He proposes a pattern of zoning – with small permissive areas where the homeless would be permitted to satisfy their needs, and other, larger ones, where behaviour in public would be more strictly regulated – as a way to reclaim public space and save it from a downward spiral of degeneration.

This proposal, which is in fact a rehabilitation of the Skid Row model, might strike some of us as troubling. It would be easy, of course, to articulate our reservations by relying on Waldron’s liberal egalitarianism, for surely Skid Row flies in the face of equality. Yet some scholars have expressed scepticism as to whether we can do so by relying on the more minimal liberalism that Waldron mobilises in his essay on homelessness (see Kohn, 2004, pp. 130–146). I believe that Waldron does, in fact, have a powerful rejoinder even on these terms. The problem with the zoning measures that Ellickson proposes is that while they are couched as general prohibitions they do in fact single out a specific subgroup of the population – the homeless. As such, they fly in the face of the liberal commitment to impartiality. These measures target actions that almost no one would perform in public if they had somewhere else to go (urinating); they prohibit behaviour that would not be a cause for concern if performed by people who were not homeless (sleeping in public); they stem from a conception of what is proper to do in public space that is formulated by people who are not themselves dependent on public
space; and finally, they involve regulations that would most likely be altered if they had unwel-
come effects on people who were not homeless (Waldron, 1991, p. 314).

While Waldron mobilises the traditional apparatus of liberal political thought, Nancy Rosenblum (1987) invites us to consider the question of public space from the standpoint of another kind of liberalism. For much of her career, Rosenblum has been concerned with how liberalism – a body of political thought often derided by its critics as formalistic, cold, and uninspired – can engage, attach, and bind people. The answer, she suggests, is in part aesthetic. The individual freedom accorded by liberalism is an invitation to self-affirmation. We can become enthralled by liberalism by witnessing what people make of themselves with such freedom, by looking at the dazzling array of personalities and identities that surround us.

While Rosenblum does not consign this ‘spectacle of diversity’ (1987, p. 118) to a single location, her references suggest that there may be no better place to observe it than on the streets and plazas of a vibrant city. She finds herself drawn, like early sociologists of the city, to Walt Whitman’s poetry and the language of the sublime to describe the chaotic plenitude of city life, the spontaneous encounters it fosters with a diverse set of others, each of them unique in his or her own way.

On Rosenblum’s vision, public space matters not just because it helps protect basic freedoms from encroachment by privatisation or regulation but also because it serves as a stage on which the fruits of individual freedom can be expressed and viewed by all. Teeming with activity and diversity, it offers an enticing spectacle that serves to reinforce our attachment to the value of individual freedom and to stimulate our own self-development by exposing us to a rich array of life possibilities. Like Waldron’s, this more romantic conception of public space provides us with reasons to be suspicious of regulations on behaviour, but the threat it brings into focus is not so much sanitisation as uniformity. The worry is that a tightening of social rules might stifle spontaneity and exuberance, and leave us with an undifferentiated display of social conformity.

**The egalitarian imaginary**

As Rosenblum (1987, p. 124) herself acknowledges, however, there is something lost in aesthetic approaches to public space. Delighting in one another’s presence is not the same as dealing fairly or respectfully with one another. One way to bring concerns of fairness to the fore is to think about public space as a material good that is essential for the welfare of all city dwellers and that must, as such, be distributed equitably.

Public space is used for recreation, exercise, and health; it allows people to commune with nature and to enjoy themselves in the company of others. One of the main purposes of Central Park according to one of its designers, Frederick Law Olmsted, was to make natural beauty available to those who could not afford to leave the city for vacation. ‘To supply’, in his words,

to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend
their summers in the country, a specimen of God’s handiwork that shall be to them,
inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is,
at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.

*(Rybczynski, 2000, p. 177)*

This vision of public space, as a good that must be distributed fairly, alerts us to the importance of public policy decisions regarding its location and accessibility within the city. It also directs our attention to the various design strategies used to screen certain groups of people from spaces that are, in principle, accessible to all. Consider the well-known, though perhaps
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apocryphal, example of the overpasses that Robert Moses had built on Long Island’s parkways. These were allegedly designed to be low enough to prevent the circulation of buses, thereby discouraging those relying on public transit – mostly poor and black – from accessing one of New York’s most desirable public beaches (Winner, 1980; but see Joerges, 1999). One could also point to the ever-more-inventive use of “defensive architecture” or “deterrent design”, such as surface studs, “pig ears”, uncomfortable benches, and sprinkler systems that go off at random times. Such design interventions typically target specific publics. They are troubling in part on account of their inconspicuousness to everyone else. They give the illusion of a space open to all while concealing patterns of exclusion.

It is important to note, however, that while critics of defensive architecture fault it for unevenly restricting access to public space, some of its proponents justify it precisely on the grounds that it contributes to a more even playing field. They worry, for example, that the presence of youths performing acrobatics on skateboards might make a park less welcoming to senior citizens afraid of potential collisions. As John Parkinson (2012) reminds us, conflicts such as these are sometimes integral to the democratic adjudication of competing interests, although concerned parties often depict each other as undermining the very idea of public space.

I have focused so far on policy measures and design interventions that might prevent people from enjoying public space on equal terms. But egalitarian concerns about public space are not merely distributive. They also encompass the expressive qualities of public space. This dimension is important because public space is highly symbolic: it is there that we honour and immortalise certain aspects of our collective memory. In a society committed to equality, it matters whose history is represented and celebrated in public parks, squares, and monuments, and whose history is passed in silence.

The design of public space also conveys something to potential users about how they are regarded by their own political authorities. Public architecture can both elevate and demean. In City of Quartz (1998), Mike Davis discusses Frank Gehry’s design for the Goldwyn Public Library in Hollywood. Davis describes the building, which replaced a library that had been destroyed by arson, as the ‘most menacing library ever built’, with ‘its fifteen-foot security walls of stucco-covered concrete block, its anti-graffiti barricades covered in ceramic tile, its sunken entrance protected by ten-foot steel stacks, and its stylized sentry boxes perched precariously on each side’ (Davis, 1998, p. 239). Unlike other buildings, which typically camouflage their defences by disguising them through landscape architecture, Davis notes, tongue in cheek, that Gehry’s library has the merit of declaring openly what it expects from its neighbourhood. The symbolism of buildings is of course contestable. But if Davis’s impressions were actually shared by city residents, this could be an example of architecture that stigmatises – especially if one were to compare the building to the more welcoming postures of libraries in other parts of the city.

While social critics with an egalitarian bent are typically keen on expanding access to public space, David Harvey (2006) reminds us not to be too quick to equate more public space with a more just city. In a series of influential studies on the transformation of Paris under Haussmann, Harvey showed that the opening of new boulevards lined up with wide sidewalks not only was a strategy of state control (facilitating the movement of troops and preventing the erection of barricades) but also inaugurated a symbiotic relationship between open public space and commercial interests (turning sidewalks into spaces where the seductive spectacle of commodity could be displayed). Haussmann’s reforms resulted in a city segregated along class lines, with a well-to-do west traversed by airy boulevards and a neglected east. Interestingly, public space in the poorer parts of the city took a different form than it did in the west. The foci of activity were not the boulevards with their cafes and boutiques but a myriad of smaller, dingier eating
and drinking establishments, cabarets, and dance halls, which served as a breeding ground for a vibrant counterpublic.

There are two important points to take away from Harvey’s work. The first is that public space takes different forms, and that these may be differentially suited to various political actors at different moments in time. In certain conditions, open public space may be an impediment to political mobilisation and relative obscurity, an asset. The other, methodological point is that we cannot understand the political valence of public space by looking at it in isolation. It is only when we consider the relationship between public space, housing, and commercial interests that we can begin to comprehend whose interests a program of re-development actually serves.

The civic republican imaginary

While thinking about public space as a good or service that must be distributed brings into focus concerns of fairness, it also raises a host of subsidiary questions. If public space is a service like any other, why should it be produced and allocated by public authorities rather than by the market? Wouldn’t it be preferable to let people choose how much “public space” they want by charging them for use (e.g., at the entrance of a park or a beach)? A pay-per-use model might also allow for more customised offerings, with some spaces specialising in quiet recreation, others devoted to skateboarding, basketball, roller-skating, and so on. This would allow everyone to enjoy the activity they like without having to be in the same physical space at once.

To someone steeped in the civic humanist interpretation of the classical republican tradition, such suggestions would appear particularly unsavoury. In the civic republican imaginary, public space is not merely a good among others but one that plays a central part in constituting the civic community and imparting its members with civic virtue. Far from being a commodity that can be traded for others, it is a vital political institution – one whose production and distribution could not possibly be left to the vagaries of the market. Public space matters because it allows us to experience what it is like to be related to others as members of a civic community. When successful, it involves a form of interpersonal relationship premised on civic equality and commonality of purpose that differs in kind from the instrumental exchanges of the market.

Both Olmsted and Rousseau offer vivid depictions of such a vision of public space. For Olmsted, urban parks are valuable in part for their restorative influence on human character. They play an important civic role by replenishing a psyche drained by the toils of labour, and enervated by the demands of everyday life in a crowded and adversarial metropolis. While he describes the streets of the city as a breeding ground for a ‘peculiarly hard sort of selfishness’, Olmsted argues that the carefully crafted spectacle of natural beauty can in itself have a ‘harmonizing and refining influence . . . favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance’ (Hall cited in Roulier, 2010, p. 326). He claims, moreover, that by placing people in an open and convivial mindset, parks can inaugurate a distinctive form of togetherness fit for democratic society (see Cohen, 2017). He writes,

Consider that the New York and Brooklyn Park are the only places in those associated cities where [. . .] you will find [. . .] with an evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each.

(Olmsted, 1997, p. 186)
When they live up to such a description, urban parks provide what Scott Roulier (2010, p. 330) calls a ‘visual articulation’ of civic equality. In such spaces, social hierarchies are temporarily suspended. A distinctive type of sociability is also fostered, one in which people are not in competition with one another, but in which they contribute by their very presence to enhancing the experience of others. In this way, parks do not only represent but also instantiate a form of being together in which others are not adversaries but partners in a cooperative enterprise. They help foster a sense of civic community and prefigure what relations between citizens ought to be like.

Rousseau (2003) strikes a similar, if somewhat more effusive, tone in his Letter to D’Alembert. Reacting to the latter’s proposal to reintroduce the theatre to Geneva, Rousseau insists that republics call for another type of spectacle. In contrast to the theatre – performed in a closed room for an exclusive public, with spectators kept passive and isolated, their desires inflamed through the imagination – Rousseau vaunts the merits of public festivals. These take place outside and are open to all, with people moved to interact with one another in a spirit of collective euphoria. Rousseau insists on the simplicity and immediacy of such festivals, and on how they turn spectators into actors who then become the centrepiece of the event (see 2003, p. 182).

For Rousseau, like Olmsted, public festivals are not merely occasions where civic equality is on display; they are occasions where a genuine form of fellow-feeling arises. He recounts the memory, still vivid, of one such spectacle he witnessed in his youth – that of a military regiment dancing to music around a fountain in a public square, drawing nearby residents in a spontaneous, joyful, and innocent celebration. Rousseau describes the scene as one of collective exhilaration, a kind of communal trance that gripped participants at a visceral level and awakened feelings of fraternity and patriotism (Rousseau, 2003, p. 193). Unlike the liberal spectacle of diversity, the experience that Rousseau describes is not a form of revelling at the individuality of particular others but rather a kind of transcendence of individual differences that points beyond ourselves, towards a more encompassing community.

In its Rousseauian and Olmstedian variants, the ideal public space stands removed from the corrupting influence of other social forces, allowing us to experience a distinctive kind of social bond, one premised on equality and commonality, regardless of whatever else sets us apart. Aesthetically, this translates into a vision of public space as simple, natural, and devoid of pomp (even though the appearance of simplicity may, as in the case of Olmsted’s parks, be achieved at the cost of great effort and artifice).

The civic republican imaginary of public space must contend with two corrosive forces: commercialisation and fragmentation. Commercialisation threatens to erase the distinctiveness of public space. It does so by introducing motives of private interest, by making way for social hierarchy between those who can pay and those who cannot, as well as by appealing, as commerce often does, to our “amour-propre” – a concern for how we compare to others that is at odds with the spirit of civic equality.

Civic republicans should also be concerned with the fragmentation of public space – its disaggregation into different services provided to different groups of people in separate locations. Such fragmentation may result from privatisation, with homogenous social groups retreating behind gated communities with their own communal space. But fragmentation could also be a consequence of urban sprawl and the reliance on the automobile, which disperses functions that would once have been performed in a single location (e.g., town square) to various spots remote from one another and catering to diverse publics. If public space were to be fragmented as such, it would lose its capacity to foster an inclusive sense of civic community.
The democratic imaginary

While the civic republican vision of public space, with its emphasis on civic community, has proved popular with some urban planners (Congress for the New Urbanism, 2013), it has met with considerable scepticism on the part of many democratic theorists (see Hayward, 2007). The democratic vision of public space, we will see shortly, is more sober and pluralistic than its republican counterpart. It deems public space valuable both because it contributes to broadening our awareness of the people with whom we share a polity and because it serves as a stage for forms of political activity that are essential to the proper functioning of democracy.

Democratic theorists have two reasons to be sceptical of the republican appeal to civic community. The first is empirical. If we reflect on our own experience in public space, it is not clear that contact with others does in fact incline us positively towards them, at least in any reliable way. While contact does sometimes foster a sense of community and mutual recognition, it can also engender tension and conflict (Hayward, 2007, pp. 195–197).

The second reason for scepticism cuts deeper. Democratic theorists worry that the republican fixation on a unitary conception of civic community can serve to conceal important differences between the plurality of groups that make up a polity. They are concerned that appeals to a transcendent community may in fact be no more than a cover-up for the interests of some, and a way to silence the perspectives of others (see Young, 1990).

Instead of stressing the importance of civic community, democratic theorists tend to celebrate the diversity of publics that make up a city. They understand public space as a space of encounter with strangers – people who are unlike us, and with whom we do not have, and do not care to have, an intimate rapport. Their vision of public space is one of sociability without community. Encountering strangers on sidewalks, parks, and plazas does not necessarily give rise to positive feelings but it expands citizens’ awareness of the different perspectives they must take into account when making political choices that will affect everyone (Bickford, 2000, p. 370).

It is important to note that such mutual awareness can be generated even if our encounters with others are transactional, transitory, and occasionally conflictual. Unlike its civic republican counterpart, democratic public space is unabashedly chaotic, discordant, and less concerned with preserving its putative purity (see Sennett, 1970). The threat it finds most alarming is not commercialisation or fragmentation but segregation: the possibility that others with whom we share a polity might become – because of design, access, rules of behaviour, or pricing – invisible to us.

Democratic theorists also value public space because it plays an important part in the political life of democratic societies. According to John Parkinson (2012), public space is necessary for the fulfilment of democratic roles. On his view, the housing of public institutions in monumental buildings, located centrally and giving onto open public squares, signals to citizens that they should take what happens there seriously. It also provides citizens with a highly visible and symbolically charged focal point for protest. Parkinson invites us to remain vigilant about the securitisation of public space around government buildings and its cooptation by the tourism industry, both of which contribute to deflating the political potential of such space.

Drawing on the work of Michael Chwe, Josiah Ober (2008) provides another account of how public space matters for democratic politics. Ober argues that public architecture and rituals can contribute to resolving a central problem of democratic governance: how to achieve coordination in the absence of a centralised hierarchy. The key is to generate a repertoire of common knowledge on which citizens can draw to independently coordinate their actions. Inward-facing public spaces are particularly useful in that regard because they allow for
interpresence and intervisibility. ‘Each participant can personally observe not only that others know some piece of information in common, but how others respond to that information’ (Ober, 2008, p. 192). Possessing such common knowledge is a prerequisite for being able to act effectively together.

While Ober makes this point in the context of participatory democracy, the insight holds in autocratic regimes too, where citizens are often afraid to share their views with one another. Being in public with others, sensing their dissatisfaction, seeing that they also find the regime’s rhetoric empty, can be a spur to collective action. It is in part for this reason that mosques played a vital role in galvanising protesters throughout the Arab Spring, translating co-presence in physical space into a powerful asset for political mobilisation.

Margaret Kohn has argued, finally, that public sidewalks and streets are a vital platform for ‘unscripted political activity’ (2004, p. 3), with people gathering signatures, voicing grievances, distributing pamphlets, and haranguing passers-by. These face-to-face encounters allow people to engage one another in a direct and emotionally charged way, and have low barriers to entry, thereby providing valuable fora for marginal views. Kohn worries that the privatisation of public space would reduce the incidence of such political activity since private spaces, like malls, can place restrictions on free speech and political expression on their premises.

**Conclusion**

Our first reactions to public space may appear impulsive, but they are often guided by deeper commitments. When we are troubled by the rotation of a bench or pleased by the sudden appearance of a café, when we wish for more spontaneity or prize the feeling of safety brought about by its regulation, we betray a certain imaginary of what public space ought to look and feel like. I have tried to reconstruct some of these imaginaries and to trace them to four families of normative political views – liberal, egalitarian, civic republican, and democratic. These views all inform our liberal democratic political culture. Yet each of them gives us different reasons to value public space, and each casts a different set of threats to public space: sanitisation, normalisation, exclusion, stigmatisation, commercialisation, fragmentation, segregation, securitisation, and privatisation.

Some of our disagreements about public space are internal to these imaginaries. We may agree that public space is a good to be distributed fairly, but disagree as to whom precisely has been excluded from it. But some of our disagreements pit these various imaginaries against each other. At that level, our allegiances are perhaps less responsive to reasoned argumentation than to the seductive power of prose. Whitman, Olmsted, Rousseau, Davis, Jacobs, Sennett: if these authors have anything in common, it is their capacity to capture our imagination by distilling vivid facets of our experience in public space, and getting us to see what it is that we do, or what it is that we should, cherish about such places.

When we disagree about public space within or across these various imaginaries, any appeal to “democracy” to settle our disputes and resolve questions of policy will likely be hollow. These are disagreements that we need to address within the framework and institutions provided by democracy, not ones that it can resolve for us. For all the inflamed rhetoric that surrounds discussions of public space, policy-makers rarely find themselves having to choose between the security state, vapid consumerism, and rampant vandalism on the one hand and democratic openness on the other. They find themselves forced, rather, to strike a sensible balance between various ingredients that are all necessary for the success of democratic public space.

Commerce, incentive zoning, restrictions on access and regulations on behaviour are not unmitigated evils. They can serve to expand the availability of public space, to enliven it, and to
make it more inclusive. Left unchecked, however, they can also erode its distinctiveness, stifle its spontaneity, and reinforce its exclusiveness. In striving for the right balance, I have tried to show that public policy-makers and city officials have access to a spectrum of instruments, some blunt, others more surgical. These range from decisions about zoning and about the location of new public space to decisions about rules of access and behaviour. And as for Harvard Square, these also include choices that affect the character of public space – choices that pertain, for instance, to the shape, colour, material, and positioning of urban furniture, all the way down to its orientation.

Notes
1 I am grateful to Julie Kleinman who first made me aware of this change, as well as to Valentina Pugliano and the participants in the Stanford Center for Ethics Postdoctoral Workshop for comments on an earlier version of this chapter in the spring of 2017.

References