

Communion, Community, and the Commons: Reflections on the Public Domain

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Introduction

Community, communion, and the commons, share a Latin root, *Com* – with, together + *unus*, one, union. Yet, they carry different connotations. The common means general, free, open, public. Communion, from Latin, *Communio*, in Christian ecclesiastical language, refers to “*participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist*”, it is a specific religious practice. Community, from Latin, *Communitas*, refers to people residing in the same locale, it implies a spatial practice. *The Commons*, alludes to Latin, *munia*, meaning duties, public duties, functions, it implies an official practice. Here I will explore their implications for the public domain and urban design.

If men and women were angels, communion among men would be natural and easy, it would be guaranteed, community would be prosperous, the commons would be equitably shared. At its best, it is Christ, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King’s vision. This is an aspirational vision.

If men and women were heroes, communion would bring strength among comrades in arms, the community would be protected from the enemy, the Commons is a struggle. This is the agonistic view of the world in turmoil, of *us vs. them*. This is the world of Hobbes, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Schmidt. Recently, Chantal Mouffe rehabilitated the political philosophy of Schmidt, Hitler’s lawyer, and reframed his antagonistic dichotomy of *friend vs. enemy*, proposed an “agonistic pluralism” of *enemy vs. adversary*. This is a dismal vision.

Since men and women are human, how do we reconcile our aspirations with our struggles in this world? As James Madison wisely understood:

*“If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”*¹

Following Madison and Hamilton, we build public institutions to protect freedom and provide justice. In this context, communion is not a given or guaranteed, it is a political process to build trust, community is built over time and the Commons is subject to negotiation.

In our democratic, pluralistic society, men and women are free and equal under the law. The public domain already constitutes an “*agonistic*” space. Adversaries compete for a limited time during free and fair elections; in parliamentary systems, adversaries are represented as the “loyal opposition”. Our free institutions make room for dissent, in the free press, in the Supreme Court with minority opinions, at the different levels of federal, state, and local government, and in broad-based civic actions. Free liberal democracies strive with guardrails and calls for “*eternal vigilance*”².

¹ Madison, James. Federalist No. 51 (1788-02-06) - Federalist Papers (1787–1788).

² “*The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance, which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime, and the punishment of his guilt*”. Philpot Curran, John. Speech on the right of election of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, 10 July 1790, in Thomas Davis (ed.) Speeches (1845). Often attributed to Thomas Jefferson.

Beyond elections, to govern, to get things accomplished calls for transforming friction into challenges, and *adversaries into partners*. Partners can have legitimate disagreements yet, acting in good faith, seek a common ground to build a common project. This is how we build in the world.

How is this relevant to architecture? Communion, community, and the commons are features of the public domain. This is a human construct *par excellence*: literally, public space is a physical construct, built by design, and metaphorically, public institutions are a social construct, built by laws and sustained by norms of civility. There is an important distinction between open and public space. Open space is a natural feature of the earth; it is the natural environment, with a plurality of habitats and ecosystems. Public spaces, including squares, and parks, are built places open to the plurality of human actions that constitutes urban life.

To actualize my commitment to the public domain, as a young idealistic architect I chose to forsake the rewards and privileges of tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to work as an urban designer at the Chicago Park District. As a public servant, I encountered democracy in action, it is no panacea. Here, as a case study, I will present a new park in the South Side of Chicago; it was like "*Parks and Recreation*" (2009-2015) *avant la lettre*.

Practicing democracy means acknowledging, and engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders beyond the client who pays the bills; design is a process with which to negotiate and reconcile diverse interests and perspectives. If used wisely, this process can allow the final design to be more inclusive and socially responsible, and less exclusively determined by the pursuit of profit. Practicing democracy means reaching out and broadening the constituency for Architecture, listening, engaging in a broader dialogue with people from all walks of life, breaking down the walls of our isolation.

Architects are eager for public relevance; we want to contribute, to be engaged. In the academy, there is a renewed call for "*activist architects*". Advocacy of populist values does not automatically engender a popular faith in the claims of architects. Most people have a healthy skepticism of self-pro-claimed prophets - whether their message is salvation or doom -and in any case, people do not expect architects to be prophets. There is a discrepancy of expectations between reality and desire. Practicing democracy calls for giving up architectural omnipotence.

Buildings do not contest power relations; people do. Architects cannot challenge power in their professional role; we can only do so as citizens of a democratic culture, as participants in the civic life of our respective communities.

Being on the trenches taught me humility; we are servants, neither saints nor heroes. Public projects succeed thanks to local advocates and leaders; in the long term, they endure when people love and embrace them as their own, as integral to their lives and their struggles. As the site of the commons, community solidarity provides a safe setting for communion.

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