

Harold M. Tollefson Square:
A Case Study for Contested Urban Space

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T URB 301, The Urban Condition
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March 28, 2008

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Harold M. Tollefson Square presents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate and apply knowledge of the concepts of “urban” and “contested space” in the Puget Sound metropolitan area. There are many different approaches that can be used to study the civic gathering place; Study might focus on any or all of the plaza’s characteristics of: planning and design, use or disuse, social and symbolic value, and even history of change or what some may call “urban renewal.” Due to the nature and scope of the Contested Spaces Project, not all of these methods or approaches will be explored in-depth. The primary focus aims to use the planning and design approach, although care will be taken to ensure that significant elements of other approaches are addressed, as well. To explain why Harold M. Tollefson Square is a great example of both urban and contested space, I present the plaza through the eyes of discussion, analysis, and inclusion of ideas made evident or introduced by some of Urban Studies’ most respected authors. To begin, it is necessary to understand why **Tollefson Square is urban**.

The question “What makes Tollefson Square urban?” is actually quite thought provoking, because the plaza is both urban and not-quite-so-urban at the same time. To better understand this idea, let us refer to Kingsley Davis’s(1956) definition of the term *urbanization*. Kingsley asserts that urbanization “refers here to the proportion of the total population concentrated in urban settlements, or else to a rise in this proportion.”(p.27) With this in mind, part of the definition of the word *urban* must be the idea that (within the subject area) there exists a higher proportion of concentrated versus non-concentrated (sprawl) settlements. Notice the use of the word “part.” This word choice is to suggest to the reader that the word *urban* is actually best described using a conglomeration of ideas (not just one). It turns out this is actually quite true: The editors of *The City Reader*(2003) demonstrate such complexity by breaking up their anthology into eight completely different, although related, sections. Readers of this anthology are therefore left with the idea that for something to be urban, it

has at least some historical, economic, political, social, cultural, and spatial elements – elements which surround an overarching theme of community-building (to support human survival). With this general definition in mind, what can be said about Tollefson Square?

Anyone who goes to or sits in Harold Tollefson Square at any given time will probably agree that the plaza is empty – but it sits in the middle of a bustling city! By Kingsley’s definition of urbanization, Tollefson plaza is both not urban and highly urban at the same time. This is shown through an observation of the space: If people must go to the plaza, they generally walk around it or do not linger inside it very long. As a result, the population density of this specific piece of land is essentially zero when studying at a micro level. However, if one were to jump in a helicopter and hover above the plaza, it would be easy to see that the plaza is located in a highly urban city center with bordering properties being heavily used on a daily basis (University students attending class, businesspeople attending conventions, etc.). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the plaza is discussed on a macro level and an assumption is made that it is in fact urban due to its location and proximity to urbanized, dense living and working areas. Since the people who form what is urban (based on Kingsley’s ideas) are there and exist, why doesn’t the plaza see more use? **Is the park a contested space?** Does the design of the park contribute to the contestation of the space or does it help resolve it? An exploration of the site begins to answer these questions:

Harold M. Tollefson Square is best described as a triangular (ironically not square) plaza located in downtown Tacoma, Washington. The site (Tollefson Square) is significant in the Puget Sound metropolitan area due to its recent history, contestation, and proximity to other nearby and significant urban public/private enterprises and institutions. These surrounding institutions include the Greater Tacoma Convention Center, the Courtyard Marriott Hotel, Tacoma Art Museum, and University of Washington, Tacoma. The plaza features a (relatively) large expanse of concrete, a water display, some

small patches of grass, and garbage cans secured to staircase handrails. The square is designed with plenty of built-in seating for plaza users, and makes use of anti-skateboarding technology (metal fixtures to discourage dangerous skateboarding stunts). Much of the plaza's architecture can be described as impressive: Tollefson Square was designed with plenty of straight lines – the kind of straight lines that appear striking in conceptual drawings (like straight benches and tables, for example). While these types of designed-in elements are pleasing to the eyes from a distance, they are not functional for day-to-day use. As a random example, it is uncomfortable to eat soup while sitting on a bench with no table. (A hot soup bowl or cup could burn one's hands if holding it were required) The heavy use of straight-line architecture (and its effect on usage) segues well into a discussion on public space design, which draws from one of William Whyte's works, appropriately titled "The Design of Spaces"(1988).

In his work "The Design of Spaces," William Whyte studied several parks and plazas in New York City to help the municipality better understand why some parks were well-used while others fell into disuse. To accomplish this task, Whyte used time-lapse cameras aimed at each plaza and analyzed the resulting footage to look for patterns occurring between dawn and dusk. Whyte also mentions that his team also interviewed people, "but mostly we watched what they did."(p. 430) While some patterns that appeared in the study were not surprising, others were very counterintuitive. For example, Whyte notes that location is extremely important (not surprising), and goes on to mention that sun exposure and the amount of space are both irrelevant, contrary to popular belief. (Very interesting!) The results of Whyte's study mentioned that built-in seating, height of sittable space, the types of sittable space, and relationship to the street were paramount for a park to be effective. Okay, so what might Whyte have to say about Tollefson Square?

Based on Whyte's work in "The Design of Spaces," it is safe to infer a few things about Tollefson Square: the size and shape of the park is irrelevant, the designed/built-in sittable space does not

adequately meet the needs of people who want to sit socially, and the location can have an effect (both good and bad) on the usage of the plaza. This is very significant, because it begins to answer the question posed earlier which asked if the park's design contributed to or ameliorated contestation of the site: the design does contribute to the site's contestation by changing the ways in which the property can be used, and by favoring some types of plaza use over others. (For example, sightseeing vs. skateboarding) The following is a closer look at some of these design issues, pulling from Whyte's work in New York, and personal experience with Tollefson Square.

The size of Tollefson Square is totally irrelevant. While this may seem shocking initially, Whyte's work explicitly states that size is not an issue. In his work studying New York park utilization, he says that "we found no clear relationship [referring to a correlation between space and people]." (p.433) However, if the vast open space isn't a problem, then why do I feel so out-in-the-open and kind of vulnerable when I visit Tollefson Square? The answer is scale, and what is actually *in* the park. Guests may feel vulnerable in the park because they are, in fact, out-in-the-open: it probably has something to do with a primal, subconscious effort to always have an escape plan in case something attacks. With this in mind, the park might benefit from either more people or more things (such as an abundance of large enough art pieces, or large enough trees, or a small business, etc...) to bring the scale back down to a comfortable level. With these people or things in place, the park could very successfully attract more guests – but how can these guests be convinced to stay in the park? In other words, how does one sustainably maintain high levels of park utilization among the general public? A good answer to this question may be to provide a place for guests to sit and be social. These places need not be exotic; a simple set of movable chairs would suffice. This idea is developed further when Whyte's discussion on useful seating surfaces is explored. Consider my favorite quote from William Whyte:

Whyte's quote "It takes real work to create a lousy place" (Whyte, 1988, p.433) accurately expresses a truth on Tollefson Square: On the Pierce County Assessor-Treasurer's online map (which has not yet been updated to reflect the change), today's Tollefson Square is shown in its former state as a sloped hunk of dirt with a street on top. (Pierce County Assessor-Treasurer, 3/2008) It is very expensive and laborious to remove a paved surface, level the resulting ground, and then to install new concrete, terraces, and a water display. Someone went to a lot of work to make the previously simple (and technically already developed) area into a new urban plaza. The designers also went to a lot of trouble to design and then install immovable seating (terraces), but it is worth noting that this installation was probably an effort to prevent theft of property (unlike chairs, terraces cannot be stolen very easily). Obviously, security issues exist for public open space, and therefore warrant further exploration. (One author also presented in *The City Reader* has done just that, and her work will be discussed later, at greater length.) This dialogue on useful seating surfaces is quite significant, and Whyte's ideas on the topic can be applied to Tollefson Square, as well.

Although Whyte doesn't seem convinced that immovable seating surfaces in general, are explicitly ineffective, he does have a big problem with excessive seating height and all types of benches – both of which may be a problem at Tollefson Square. The current seating structures are therefore problematic because most of the plaza's sittable space is provided by long, mostly straight terraces. These immovable surfaces are installed as if people want to collectively look at something and not look at each other. However, without some event, show, or performance to look at, such views quickly become lonely and boring – and since the surfaces cannot be moved to a more social layout useful for effective human interaction, the plaza itself becomes just as lonely and boring as the view it offers (a distant mountain, and an art gallery advertisement). The terraced seating surfaces are also stacked like bleacher seats, at a steep angle, so if one is sitting on the terrace, it "feels" like the wall behind is coming down on top of them. Clearly a boring, lonely, seemingly unsafe place is not the kind of place any

human will want to stay very long – this produces aversion and has a negative impact on plaza usage. An obvious and cost-effective method for remedying these seating issues may be to install movable chairs. Although the installation of movable chairs wouldn't eliminate the bench-like terraces, it would certainly add another more comfortable option that people might use. As a corollary to the importance of movable chairs, location is a key aspect of usefulness; for example, a tool used to grate cheese is probably most effective when located in a kitchen – if it were located in the garage, it probably wouldn't grate very much cheese. The key word here is location. Though the importance of location is obvious, there are a few location issues still worth noting for Tollefson Square.

Although the plaza's location is away from (and not on top of) nearby populations such as the school, museum, and convention center, the plaza is in fact located in the middle of a dense and clearly urban downtown core. As such, it can be argued that Tollefson Square has both negative and positive location-related characteristics, both of which may have an effect on the usage of the plaza. Since the aim is to improve the usage of the area, here is just one idea that may prove useful: If the students from the University had an ongoing and consistent reason to visit the convention center, or if businesspeople at the convention center had an ongoing and consistent reason to visit the school, then it might create more pedestrian traffic through the area and possibly improve the plaza's exposure to these two relatively exclusive population groups. Perhaps some ongoing career expos at the convention center or some other event could "bridge" the institutions together and generate pedestrian traffic flow between them. This same concept could be expanded in a number of ways: for example, the art museum could coordinate with the hotel to hold some sort of overnight art exposition. Any method to get people to cross paths at the plaza is probably a worthwhile endeavor, and definitely aiding these efforts is the operation of the Tacoma Link Light Rail.

In Tacoma, the Link Light Rail ferries a huge number of people from their cars at the train station garage to their offices downtown – and this (low-speed) train track cuts right through Tollefson Square. This has a particularly clear implication: a large number of people already go through the plaza almost every day of the week! The section of track could potentially make use of signage to inform these travelers of an event worth attending at the plaza. [It should be noted that the art museum already makes use of billboard-sized signage to advertise their events in the direction of these travelers and plaza users.] Such advertisements needn't be expensive or large, but could be a particularly useful tool for the city to improve plaza use. Besides offering travelers an excellent view, the Link Light Rail serves another important function, as well: security. The train currently carries a security guard and a significant number of passengers. The guard can be thought of as institutional security, and the people can be thought of as non-institutional security. These passengers automatically function as human surveillance cameras (just by looking out the window) and actually have the ability to stop the train (by hitting the emergency stop button). In the event of an observed emergency, the train could be stopped and more institutional security (police, fire, etc) could be called to the scene via radio. This non-institutionalized form of security is something Jane Jacobs discusses in her work and directly affects Tollefson Square.

The City Reader(2003) includes an excerpt from one of Jane Jacobs' pieces entitled "The Death and Life of Great American Cities"(1961), and the editors introduce the piece quite well. In this introduction, they explain that Jane Jacobs started writing about city-related issues "as a neighborhood activist, not as a trained professional."(p. 114) Although her experience as a normal person doesn't necessarily lend extra credibility to her work, her work is nonetheless quite credible through the existence of an inverse relationship between her (practical) knowledge and the (formal) knowledge of professional planners of her time. In other words, her credibility comes from what is often colloquially described as "street smarts" vs. "book smarts." Although technically unconventional, this knowledge is

both practical and useful in the study and improvement of park utilization, and therefore worth consideration when discussing contested space. This is true because if a park is not secure, not all citizens will want to use it; therefore the park would become contested between some people who may want the park sold for private development and another group of drug users (for example) who wish to keep the park as a place to participate in their illegal activities. In “The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety” from her work entitled “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”(1961), Jane Jacobs uses the word “eyes” to describe the type of surveillance that is one of the cheapest (free) and most effective (sustainable) ways to prevent crime, make people feel safe, and consequentially increase (the wanted type of) use of a given public site.(p. 117) She mentioned the importance of building windows that face the street (not a sidestreet), as well as the importance of people presence – i.e. people outside walking around (at all hours). As Jacobs points out, if a population is present – a population which cares about, and has a vested interest in the area – thieves and vandals become insecure, knowing that they are being watched from the street, windows, etc., and therefore there is less crime in the area. Jacobs’ claim that public security is increased through “eyes” can be strengthened and supported through personal experience:

What makes one place very pleasant during the day can turn the same place into a scary nightmare at night. The University of Washington in Tacoma is actually a prime example. Since many of UWT’s students do not live on campus, which is common knowledge among students, the campus is very quiet at night after everyone leaves. I remember staying overnight once, and I remember how disturbed I was by the fact that I was one of the only people around within a three block radius. I felt unsafe, even though I was in a locked building and behind a locked door, because there was nobody else around – nobody had their “eyes” on the streets, to borrow Jacobs’ word. This case of nonexistent population at certain hours (and its effect on perceived security) is significant and since it occurs right next-door, it most likely affects Tollefson Square, as well. To avoid this problem, more mixed-income housing in the area would allow for more of Jacobs’ “eyes” to improve safety at all hours, and keep the

park crime-free, friendly, and inviting for people to visit. The idea of “mixed-income” is so thoroughly significant that it begs to be discussed further. The big question here is this: was the park designed for the general public to use, or just a small segment of the city’s population?

Another author who is also the source of some particularly applicable material is Sharon Zukin. In her work entitled “Whose Culture? Whose City?” (1995), Zukin brings light to the ideas of what she calls “the symbolic economy”, using culture as a base for the economy, rights to use public space, and security among ethnically diverse populations. (p. 138) Sharon Zukin raises questions in her work which can be applied directly to many urban and contested spaces. In fact, all of these questions bring up contestation issues:

- Who paid/pays for the space?
- Who monitors the space? (Is it public, or private? Who benefits from the monitoring?)
- Who is the space designed for? (Is it designed for the correct groups of people?)
- Does the space aim to change the city’s culture, or simply augment or emphasize it? (Would such a change divide the park’s use among groups, or encourage universal group usage?)
- Regardless of who it was designed for, who actually uses the space?

Zukin’s work therefore brings power, privilege, race, class, and gender into the discussion of contested urban space. If she were to study Tollefson Square, she might ask how these issues play into the plaza’s design, use, and disuse. An article published in the *Tacoma News Tribune* entitled “Ideas to improve Pacific Plaza will be revealed at luncheon” (2006) offers an excellent case-in-point. The article announces that a meeting will be held at The Tacoma Club to discuss methods and strategies for turning Pacific Plaza (Tollefson Square’s former name) into a more inviting civic gathering place. It is revealed that the meeting will cost attendees a fee of \$15 to attend. While many people will see this and disregard it as unimportant and insignificant, other people may actually find this appalling. ***This is potentially one of the most significant contestation issues surrounding the plaza***, because it has so

many implications and because such a large population is affected – the entire population of the city of Tacoma, plus visitors!

The key idea here is that the plaza is supposedly designed for the general public to use, yet the only people who will likely participate in this luncheon planning discussion are those with either free time or plenty of money on their hands, or more realistically, both. In general, people with differing levels of political and economic power, privilege, race, class, and gender are likely going to also have a diverse range of income levels which may allow or disallow them from participating in the meeting that was held regarding the future of Pacific Plaza. This definitely creates a contestation issue: these people who are essentially disallowed from the planning process are therefore also barred from future use of the plaza because the place will most likely not focus on their needs and wants with respect to culture and race (Yet despite not being allowed to use it, they are still expected to pay the city's taxes that support the site). The bottom line is that the city is participating here in a form of institutionalized discrimination, accidentally, or intentionally, by changing the physical layout of the city in favor of (one or more of power, privilege, race, class, gender) segregation or separateness using income as a tool for discrimination. In more concrete terms, the city is supporting the urban renewal of the area by allowing the building of expensive high-income local housing, such as the new Thea Foss condominium complexes, and allowing this population to participate in Pacific Plaza's planning, but at the same time the city is not necessarily assisting in the proliferation of more normal housing for a more diverse civic usage of the area. (A diverse civic usage refers here to a usage that more accurately reflects the median socioeconomic standing of Tacoma's residents) Some authors in Urban Studies such as Brown et al in "White Washing Race"(2005) may actually call this a "color-blind" city policy that literally supports modern-day racism through inaction, rather than action. Although the idea of color-blind racist policies is **very** significant, it is not the focus of this paper, and as such I leave it to the reader to read more about it on their own. The point worth taking away from this section of the paper however, is simply the idea

that not just one but actually all of power, race, class, gender, and privilege can have an effect on urban contestation issues; works written by Sharon Zukin and Brown (et al) support this claim, and their knowledge in the area of study can be applied directly to the case of Tollefson Square.

Tollefson Square has so many urban contestation issues, that it has been very difficult to limit the discussion of these subjects. In the interest of brevity, some contestation issues were shortened or omitted, such as the historical issue of displacement of business – a service station – when Light Rail was installed through the property, and how William Whyte and Jane Jacobs' theories apply to gender and park utilization. This reduction or omission does not aim to suggest that such issues have little or no importance, but rather simply that they cannot be discussed in-depth in the interests of time and space. Should the reader find these ideas interesting, further exploration of the topics can be facilitated by a review of the sources cited in the bibliography. Additionally, the UW Tacoma Library has a captivating collection of historical photographs from the area that are worth looking at to see how much potential the area has for success with regard to public use. (The photographs often depict large crowds of people walking the city streets of Tacoma.)

When comparing Tollefson Square to class readings/ discussions and works by prominent authors within the field [urban studies], many different exploratory angles were shown to be useful in learning more about what it means for a site to be urban, and contested space. While not all of these angles were explored deeply in this paper (in the interest of length), some areas of study were explored significantly, such as planning and design. A general definition for the word **urban** was given, and placed in context with Kingsley's definition of urbanization. The concept of **contested space** was then explored through a discussion on elements of planning and design, use and disuse (who the parties were in disputes, how they used the plaza, etc.), and security (informal/formal). These subjects are highly influential and have a significant impact on the current use, as well as potential impact on future use of

Tollefson Square. Additionally, it was shown that planning and design can be used either to spark off or to resolve many different contestation issues. Historical roots, power, privilege, race, class, and gender all play heavily into contestation of public space, and these influences have been issues for Tollefson Square. Potential solutions were presented which aimed to be cost-effective and well-balanced, supporting inclusiveness (and not exclusiveness) as a primary goal. Additionally, discrimination (both intentional and unintentional) was introduced as another angle worth exploring. Knowledge of what it means for a site to be urban was demonstrated, as well as knowledge of what it means for a site to be contested space.

Readers are left with the following thoughts: It is true that the public stands to benefit from any betterment of the available public space; however, a development which explicitly strives to serve the needs of the largest numbers of its surrounding urban population is the type that will always be the most successful. Successful public spaces are good, and worth trying to create: these spaces produce an environment which is secure, positive, and diverse without being a fake representation of the real world. (Such as the environment created in a gated, upper middle class, mostly white community.) Such an environment fosters what was called at the beginning of the paper “community-building.” In other words, public gathering places have the potential to aid in the effective development of humans and society in general, because they provide venues for people to speak socially – to talk about everything from current political and military coups to the proper way to cultivate a vegetable garden. The city should see this (the creation of successful public space) as a worthy goal to aim for, and should exercise plenty of caution when making future decisions regarding redevelopment or renewal.

Special Thanks

As for any successful work of art or science, this paper was most certainly not produced solely through the author's knowledge. It would not have been possible for me to write the paper without reading works presented by many authors in *The City Reader*, and without attending classroom discussions. I remember many classroom discussions detailing issues pertaining to the Burgess Model with concentric rings, accidental physical separation in cities by race, anti-panhandling ordinances, suburbanization, city parking issues, gentrification, displacement, development on lands previously deemed as environmental nightmares, expansion of transportation networks, and many other subjects. Many ideas that I had not originally thought of originated from **Linda Ishem**, and I took those ideas, looked up various sources, and weaved them into my paper. For example, it was Linda's idea to look up the \$15 access fee for the plaza planning meeting, which actually proved quite useful!

Additionally, I occasionally have trouble with my English; more specifically, I have trouble with overusing the passive voice, and writing with an overly-conversational style. Here is where I would like to extend a special thank-you to my high school friend **Jennifer Landree**, who recently graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle and is currently teaching English in France. After sending her a copy by e-mail, Jennifer carefully walked me through the final drafts of my paper, scribbling red ink all over the place using Microsoft Word's commenting and editing functions, and pushing me to use more effective word choice and of course, the active voice. So thank you Jen! I really appreciated the questions she posed, and especially when she made comments like "WHOA WHOA WHOA this word is way too controversial" and "Can you really say that? What evidence do you have? How does her history as a normal person actually lend more credibility?" Therefore, Jennifer was a valuable resource who helped me get what was stuck in my head out onto the paper.

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