



PLURAL IDENTITIES AND PUBLIC SPACE

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About fifteen tourists watched intently as two young men moved in unison to the music blaring from a boombox resting on the ground, bold swaths of colorful graffiti art as a backdrop. Then one youth fell to the ground spinning on his back and the other grabbed a microphone and began rapping. A hat for collecting tips lay on the ground. This scene, which I witnessed in the middle of *Independencia*, a “popular” neighborhood of Medellin, Colombia, was made possible by the creation of public space.

The neighborhood’s streets, once too dangerous for tourists to enter, had been transformed by urban integration policies, which focused primarily on improving mobility and connectivity. By making the neighborhood accessible and safe for tourists to visit, a door had been opened for expanded social interaction through which outsiders and residents both could perhaps begin to appreciate the multifaceted identity of the neighborhood, its inhabitants and its visitors. As this essay will argue, public spaces designed to be accessible to all people (e.g., elderly, PWD, youth) can promote the social interaction necessary for people to learn about each other’s multidimensional identities and thereby foster social inclusion.

Identity refers to a person’s sense of self, who we believe we are. Psychology considers identity to be a cognitive construct of the self. It contains both core, enduring concepts (personal identity) and peripheral concepts that allow the individual to adapt to different social situations and adopt various roles and group identities (social identities) (Korte 2007).

Our identity influences the choices we make and how we interact with others in social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual realms of our lives.

At the same time, our participation in these different spheres helps to shape our own identity. “Identity results from interaction in the social world and in turn guides interaction in the social world” (Simon 2004, 2).

This essay reflects on the concept of identity and how identity relates to public spaces. It argues that the ways in which our identities are defined by ourselves and by our communities have an important influence on the way we behave, interact with others, and relate to public spaces. At the same time, public spaces influence forms of interaction between individuals and groups, thereby altering the formation of identity at both the individual and the social levels. Gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between identity and public space can contribute to the design of more effective urban policies and interventions that consider disadvantaged groups, like the elderly, the PWD, and children, and therefore promote human development and social inclusion in cities.

The chapter begins by delineating the concept of social identity as defined in psychology and sociology. Then it explores what additional insights can be gleaned from Nobel prize winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen's collection of essays titled *Identity and Violence*. I will argue that this book can provide relevant insights for understanding identity-based division and social exclusion in the urban context. Finally, it reflects upon how the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations can contribute to fostering social inclusion in today's fragmented urban world.

→ SOCIAL IDENTITY

In psychology, social identity is defined as “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership”. (Tajfel 1978, 63).

People belong to multiple membership categories. Each is represented in a person's mind as a social identity which both describes and determines his or her attributes as a member of the group (Simon 2004).

The process of social identity formation usually involves processes of categorization and self-enhancement (Hogg, Terry and White 1995). Categorization refers to the simplification and ordering of social reality by classifying people into groups in a subjectively meaningful way. The need to maximize our own sense of self-worth leads us to evaluate and make comparisons between the ingroup (the group with which we identify) and the outgroup in a way that favors the ingroup. When a specific group membership becomes the most relevant and overarching group, self-perception and behavior take on stereotypical attributes of the group, perceptions about those outside of the group become stereotypical of the outgroup and intergroup relations become competitive and discriminatory (Hogg, Terry and White 1995).

Social groups tend to share the following three empirical features (Turner 1984). First, social groups are a collection of people defined as a group by themselves and by others (the identity criteria). Second, the members depend on each other for satisfaction of needs, achievement of common goals and the validation of norms and beliefs (the interdependence criteria). Third, the social interaction between members is organized and regulated by status structure and shared norms (the social structure criteria). Turner (1984) argues that while all three of these criteria contribute to the formation of small groups, shared identity alone is what agglutinates affiliation in large groups (sex, race, religion, occupation, etc.). In the latter type of group, the impetus for group formation is often derived from the fact that the group is recognized and treated in a homogeneous way by others.

Behavior in groups will also depend on the belief structure regarding the possibility for social mobility and structural change (Hogg, Terry and White 1995). When group members believe their group's, lower status is legitimate and that movement to the dominant group²³ is possible, ingroup solidarity and intergroup competition will be low. In this situation, individual group members may seek to gain entry into the dominant group. In contrast, group members who believe their group's lower status is illegitimate, movement between groups is not possible and social change is viable will display within group solidarity and intergroup competition.

Social identity theory can account for a variety of types of group behavior, such as conformity, stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice, as well as altruism and cooperation.

Accentuation of ingroup and outgroup homogeneity is an additional aspect of intergroup relations. Lorenzi-Cioldi and Doise's (1990) analysis of the evidence indicates that more frequent exposure to other members of the ingroup favors differentiation within the group and a personalization of representation, whereas frequency of exposure has less of an effect on outgroup homogeneity. For example, members of a self-help group for PWD would tend to recognize the variation in the individual characteristics of group members but perceive nonmembers to be "all the same".

23. A dominant group refers to the social group that is perceived to have relatively more social prestige, economic status, political power, or other traits connected to categorical group membership (Turner, 1984). Akerlof and Kranton (2000) explain that usually "dominant groups define themselves vis-A-vis 'other(s),' and members of the dominant (excluded) groups benefit (lose)—materially and psychologically—from the differentiation.

The evidence also suggests that differences in the degree of ingroup versus outgroup homogeneity depend not only on the frequency, but also the quality and context of encounters within and between groups. High variation in the contexts of interaction between members of an ingroup promotes personalization.

When groups are involved in competitive relations (for example, competition between groups affiliated with opposing political parties), members of the outgroup will be perceived to be more homogeneous and adopt stereotypical attributes.

The psychology literature has also considered the relationship between space and identity. Nation, city, neighborhood, and other geographically bounded areas can be categories of group identity. The term “urban-related identity” has been used to refer to the social image or symbolic meaning (derived from spatial features, social composition or cultural characteristics) that make a city unique and differentiates its residents from members of other spatially defined groups (Lalli 1992). The literature also refers to a more individualized process of identity formation associated with urban space. Porshansky (1978, cited in Di Masso 2012, 167) coined the term “urban place identity” to refer to “a pattern of beliefs, feelings, and expectations regarding public spaces and places, and even more importantly, a dimension of competence relevant to how adequately the individual uses these physical settings as well as the appropriate strategies for successfully navigating through the settings”. It has also been shown that social identities form the basis on which spaces are transformed into meaningful places. As a result, the same physical space can take on different meanings for different social groups (Hopkins and Dixon 2006), and more importantly, for groups with different physical abilities.

Sociology views the self as comprised of multiple, socially constructed identities formed by the diverse roles we occupy within society (Hogg, Terry and White 1995).²⁴ These role identities provide meaning to the self, define role types, establish differences with respect to alternative categories and influence behavior. People tend to rank their role identities by level of importance; their behavior will be determined by what they consider to be the appropriate behavior of the role that is ranked highest in their identity salience hierarchy. An identity role will have greater salience if an individual perceives that many important social relationships depend on the occupancy of that role.

24. Hogg, Terry and White (1995) provide a comparative analysis of the theories of identity in sociology and psychology.

The use of behavior considered appropriate for the group both confirms a person's membership within the group and enhances self-esteem. While identity theory from sociology stresses how roles are defined by complementary or counter-roles (for example, father-mother, with and without disabilities), it does not explicitly explain intergroup behavior. Instead it focuses more on how social interaction between individuals influences identity.

→ SEN'S IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE

In *Identity and Violence*, Sen (2007) considers the ethical implications of how identities are formed and presents normative arguments in favor of a shift in attention from singular to multidimensional identities.

He brings to the analysis of identity key concepts that pervade the rest of his work, such as freedom, choice, value, and public reasoning.

Sen analyzes the concept of identity through the lens of his capability approach. This approach's central argument is that, when evaluating the level of wellbeing or poverty, the metric should not be income or resources but rather "capabilities", or the real freedoms people have to be and do what they value (Sen 1992). Examples of capabilities include being sheltered in a suitable dwelling, working in a safe environment, or having the freedom to walk on the street without fear or access a public sidewalk without difficulty. According to this approach, information on income is not sufficient for understanding wellbeing or poverty because the resources that each person needs to achieve real freedoms will vary according to his or her individual, social, and environmental characteristics. For example, the resources needed to guarantee mobility are higher for a person with a motor disability than for someone without one. If the person lives at the end of a narrow passageway in an informal settlement, even more resources will be needed to guarantee mobility within the city. The capability approach also gives central importance to the idea that people need to act as agents of their own lives and decide for themselves which objectives they value the most (Sen 1985).

Sen's book begins by noting that identity can be a motivating force behind both commendable displays of kindness and brutal acts of violence in the world. Identity can be a source of pride, joy, strength and confidence. Friendships between neighbors and acts of solidarity within communities are positive outcomes of group affiliation and common identities. Social capital is a resource produced through social interaction and the creation of bonds of trust between people.

Economic productivity depends on people's ability to work together and identify with other workers within a firm. Oppressed and excluded groups can gain recognition in society by forging a common identity. However, social cohesion and solidarity within groups can also cultivate division, social exclusion, conflict and violence. Group identity is a powerful weapon used by leaders to manipulate and garner support and is the force behind many atrocities in the world. Sen says that "the imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the 'martial art' of fomenting sectarian confrontation" (Sen 2007, xiii).

Identity, Sen reminds us, is multidimensional. Each person is unique and is comprised of a unique combination of elements, such as gender, age, citizenship, religion, political affiliation, profession, social class, sexual orientation, place of residence, geographic origin, among many others.

Sen says "the same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist..." (Sen 2007, xii). As each person's identity is formed by participation in multiple collectivities, none of them can be considered a person's sole membership category. All of them taken together form a person's identity.

The cultivation of singular identities defined by just one salient characteristic, Sen argues, incites conflict and violence. His book focuses primarily on the violence that has sprung from religious identities such as the Hindu-Muslim riots in India, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the clash between Islam and the West. Yet his ideas can also provide relevant lessons for understanding identity-based divisions in the urban context. The bifurcation of social identity into "us" and "them" is evident both in the violence produced by youth gang wars and in the oppression and exclusion experienced by persons with disabilities or the elderly.

Sen emphasizes the importance of the role of reasoning and choice in determining our loyalties and priorities toward different groups.

While each person must choose from a feasible set of possible identities determined by individual characteristics and circumstances, we still can decide how much importance to give to one aspect of our identity over multiple other categories. Although I cannot be a father or construction worker, I can choose the importance I give to my identity as a mother, an immigrant or a university professor.

Sen questions the “communitarian” idea that people cannot escape the identity defined by their social and cultural background.

The argument goes that a person’s social background determines their patterns of reasonings and beliefs and, as knowledge has not been gained of alternative modes of behavior, one will inevitably “discover” their community to be their predominant affiliation. Sen asserts that while community and culture likely affect beliefs and behavior, multiple other factors influence reasoning processes and will come into play when choosing (within constraints) the preeminent category with which one identifies. The communitarian view, moreover, underestimates individual capacity for reasoning and does not sufficiently recognize the variation in identity categories *within* communities, cultures and other social identities.

A problem occurs, however, when singular identities are imposed by others or are considered to be inevitable.

These types of constraints imposed by society can lead to stigma, discrimination, reduced aspiration, and violence. For example, a man with a motor or visual impairment may be stereotyped as unable to care for himself or as being unproductive. Common stereotypes associated with the elderly include diminished cognitive ability or inability to learn new labor market skills. Similarly, there is evidence that residents of informal settlements face discrimination solely based on their place of residence, making it difficult for them to break out of a singular identity imposed by society.²⁵

The spatial environment is another factor that places constraints on the formation of identity.

25. Prejudice and discrimination were common themes in the testimonies of young people interviewed for a study on secondary school drop out in the informal settlements of Buenos Aires (Mitchell, Del Monte and Deneulin 2018). Silva (2008) analyses the role of the media in constructing social stigma against the residents of Buenos Aires’ informal settlements, known locally as “villeros”.

Pineda (2008) argues, for example, that disability is not an individual property, but rather a function of the interaction between a person with a physical impairment and his or her environment.²⁶

Within Pineda's spatial model of disability, the process of construction of identity of a person with a disability is influenced by the degree to which the social, political and physical environments are enabling or disabling.



Sen (2007) argues that the remedy for identity-based violence in the world is not the suppression of identity (say, by downplaying one's identity as a homosexual, a Muslim or a person with a disability), but rather the recognition that identity is multidimensional. He writes that "the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted" (16).

One method for assessing the degree of recognition of the plurality of identities and the extent of social inclusion in society is to apply the evaluative framework proposed by the capability approach. This would lead us to evaluate the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve the different things that they value. Do people have the freedom to define their own identity? Can people choose where to live, what kind of lifestyle to adopt or how to express their own culture?

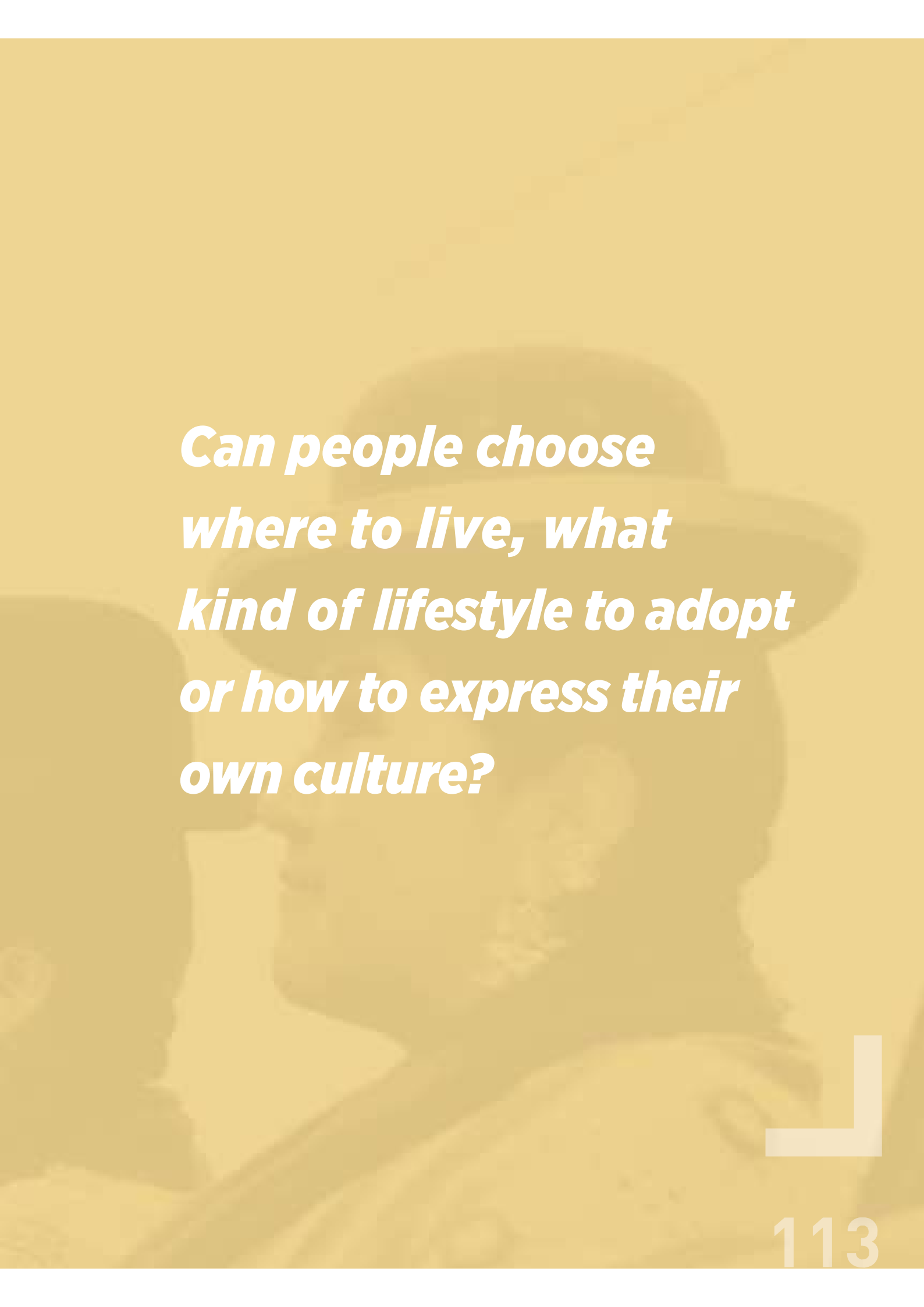
Do people, regardless of identity, have equal access to public services and spaces and to the economic, social and cultural benefits of living in cities?²⁷

26. Similarly, Mitra (2006), using the conceptual framework of the capability approach, defines disability as "a deprivation in terms of capabilities or functioning that results from the interaction of an individual's (a) personal characteristics (e.g., age, impairment), (b) basket of available goods (assets, income) and (c) environment (social, economic, political, cultural)". Disability can result either from social factors (such as stigma or discrimination related to an impairment) or the physical environment (when it restricts mobility) and will also be determined by individual access to resources.

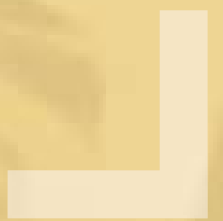
27. Pineda (2008) proposes an alternative normative criterion for evaluating spatial justice based on Rawls' theory of justice, "where the distribution of space is only just if it is to the advantage of the least well-off stakeholders" (115-16).



***Do people have the
freedom to define
their own identity?***

The background of the page is a solid light orange color. Overlaid on this is a faint, semi-transparent image of a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat, possibly a fedora, looking slightly to the side. The person's face and hat are visible but not detailed, serving as a subtle background element.

***Can people choose
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In summary, Sen's book makes one overarching normative judgement about the process of identity formation in the world today. He argues that the singularization of identity is a cause of conflict and violence and therefore "the hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity" (Sen 2007, xiv).

What insights can we draw from Sen's book for the processes of development of inclusive public spaces in cities? My reading of the literature on social identity and of Sen's insightful book suggests some possible connections between identity and public space.

First, public spaces can provide opportunities for people to learn about the varied facets of each of our multidimensional identities, by creating occasions for face-to-face interaction between people. Second, the ability to see beyond group stereotypes and personalize the members of other groups depends not only on the frequency of interaction, but also on the quality and variety of engagements and the extent of competition and discord between groups. Third, public spaces can play a central role in teaching about diversity, the myriad of different physical, cultural, social and spiritual aspects that make each person unique.

Educating about diversity can help reduce stereotyping and discrimination, enable people to make informed choices about which aspects of their identity they choose to give greater salience and foster informed debate and public reasoning processes.



→ IDENTITY AND PUBLIC SPACE IN CITIES

Streets, parks, squares, and other public spaces are, by definition, places that are open to all people.

Public spaces can recall a common history, bestow aesthetic beauty, satisfy a functional purpose or serve as a backdrop for public ceremonies or everyday life. Most importantly, public spaces are socially constructed. The French philosopher Lefebvre (1991) said that social space “appears as the intangible outcome of history, society and culture, all of which are supposedly combined within it” (92).

The way in which people appropriate public spaces and interact within them is intimately related to the process of identity formation.

Public spaces can serve to strengthen and affirm group membership. Monuments and central plazas like Mexico City’s Zócalo are designed to evoke national pride and forge a collective identity. Indigenous peoples use public areas to celebrate and communicate their cultural heritage. At the same time, white supremacy groups display propaganda in public spaces to profess racial hierarchy and foment division. Public expressions of group identity can be both positive and affirming and negative and exclusionary.

Public spaces traditionally have been used as venues for public deliberation and debate.

Although the expansion of digital information and communication technology has created new digital forms of interaction in the public sphere (Castells 2004), physical spaces continue to hold a central role in interpersonal and group interaction. Diverse types of social groups use public spaces to raise public awareness and make claims concerning their rights. Thousands of parents participated in “stroller marches” on the streets of Tel Aviv to demand greater governmental intervention in the provision of childcare services. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, PWD suspended themselves in wheelchairs from a bridge over a major highway and traversed hundreds of kilometers to raise public awareness of their cause and demand public pensions. Socially excluded groups often maintain that the occupation of public space is their only means for forcing people to take notice of their collective needs and demands.

While Sen (2007) points to how interaction between people and groups in the public sphere contributes to strengthening democracy, participation will be truly plural only to the extent that there is equality of access to places of assembly.

The degree to which public spaces foster interaction between individuals and help contribute to the recognition of multidimensional identities of PWD is one criterion that can be used to evaluate the quality of public spaces. Are public spaces safe, well-maintained, and accessible to all? Does the configuration of squares, parks and green areas within the city promote the mixing of people from multiple collectivities? Do transport networks enable access to public spaces for all, regardless of age, functionality, socioeconomic level, ethnic group, etc.? Do public spaces contribute to fostering a collective national or city-wide identity?

The social and spatial fragmentation of LAC cities reduces opportunities for social mixing across groups and contributes to the singularization of identities.

Gated communities and enclosed urban apartment complexes designed to protect residents from insecurity transform public spaces such as streets, playgrounds, and green areas into private spaces available only to residents. In the same way, violent inner-city neighborhoods and informal settlements become inaccessible to non-residents. At both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, residential segregation hinders the type of social interaction necessary for people to recognize the plurality of each other's identities, thereby contributing to stereotyping, stigma, and discrimination.

Some urban integration experiences—such as the case of the neighborhood Independencia in Medellin, Colombia—show how improvements in mobility, security and the availability of public spaces can effectively foster social integration.

Urban integration policies in Medellin included the installation of aerial cable car lines to connect the vulnerable hillside neighborhood with the rest of the city, along with investments in social housing, public spaces, schools and libraries. The interventions were designed to promote universal accessibility and respect for the diversity of users. The neighborhood's vibrant graffiti street art became a pull for outside visitors. The evidence shows that these policies, along with participatory budgeting processes, which involved local residents in collective decision-making about the use of public investments, have contributed to improving quality of life, social inclusion and the local residents' sense of self-esteem (Dávila 2013).

In recent decades, there has been a shift in attention from investing in the technical and functional aspects of transport networks to improving the human and social aspects of mobility. This change has benefited from expanding interdisciplinary work which considers the social, political, time-related and environmental aspects of mobility (Cresswell 2010). If, as some argue (Urry 2000, cited in Cresswell 2010), identities are increasingly based on networks and movements of people, information and things, rather than on location of residence, then policies that foster human mobility could attain even greater relevance as policy tools for urban integration and social inclusion. It is also important to take into account, however, that successful experiences of improving transport and connectivity, such as the case of Medellín, need to be combined with other types of social and participatory policies (Dávila 2013). As each context is different, when there are tradeoffs in the costs and benefits of alternative integration strategies, the participation of civil society in the decision-making process takes on even greater significance.

Educational exclusion is another dimension of social fragmentation in urban LAC.

Divisions across public and private schools because of spatial segregation and the movement of higher income students to private schools have produced high levels of educational segregation by socioeconomic level throughout LAC (Rivas 2015). As a result, public education, which traditionally played an important role in the construction of ties across socioeconomic groups, now tends to reinforce social fragmentation (Kaztman 2001; Kaztman and Retamoso 2007).

The educational inclusion of students with disabilities is another challenge. Despite the policy shift toward inclusive schools in which all children learn together, regardless of their individual differences, lack of access to inclusive facilities (absence of elevators, inappropriate classroom facilities and inadequate transport) acts as a barrier to the educational inclusion of children with disabilities. Evidence shows that school attendance and completion rates are lower for children and adolescents with disabilities across LAC countries, especially at the secondary school level (Hincapié, Duryea and Hincapié 2019). Moreover, the close relationship between poverty and disability (Elwan 1999) means that marginalized communities have a higher prevalence of PWD, exacerbating the problem of educational exclusion in these neighborhoods (Pantano 2014). These challenges to educational integration are especially relevant given the role the educational system can play in teaching young people about human diversity and encouraging engagement in public reasoning processes.

Public spaces designed to be accessible to all people can serve to broaden the boundaries that define the physical space over which people can occupy.

In this way, accessibility can contribute to the types of social interaction necessary for people to learn about each other's multidimensional identities. It is my hope that Sen's reflections on the plurality of identity and the evaluative framework provided by the capability approach provide relevant conceptual tools for thinking about how the urban integration policies described in this book can contribute to fostering social inclusion in LAC.



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