Private Public Land - challenging the exclusion of fractions of society from Public space

Melanie Nicol
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

This article puts forward the Post-Modern ideas that society is fundamentally split into divisions, in contrast to the Modern world view. This is supported by examining how public space, specifically Belmore Park, is used by different groups in our society. Romanticism, Postmodernism, and Post Modern Political theory are utilised to help criticise the exclusion of homelessness and those committing illicit activities in Belmore park, as well as the defintion of the public and progress. The reactions to the changes of Belmore Park highlight that there is no objective truth, no unifying values which creates a common "General Public" or "One-ness, and that progress is indeed relative.

The thesis was reached after many observation sessions in Belmore park. Research undertaken included an examination photographs and maps of Belmore Park at various stages throughout it's history (including the present), extensive background research into secondary materials about how the public use space to aid observation sessions and collection of various Council Management Plans in recent years of Belmore Park.

The article challenges Modern ideology, particularly that of progress, the unified one, and the common value system. This ideology is present in the Town Planners intended function and use of the site. However, in the pursuit of progress, the site was encroached upon and drasticallly altered, changing permanently it's patronage. Belmore Park now has a link with illcit activity. Councils have reacted by creating exclusion policies that are contrary to the assertion of a unified encompassing general public. The article challenges the value system which allowed this exclusion, concluding that a pluralist approach were all voices were equal is preferential.

The present moment we live in is diverse in it's people, idea's and perspectives. Because of this diversity our society, in contrast to the modern world view which believed in the meta narrative, objective truth and basic common values which unified all and allowed society to progress, society is split into divisions or fractions of ideas. The presence and acknowledgment of these divisions adheres to a more Post Modern world view, which questioned objective truth, "One-ness" and replaced the discourse of progress with that of relativism and Post Modern Political Theory. At no point is this clearer then when examining who constitutes "the General Public" able to utilise Public Space, like Belmore Park in Sydney's CBD. Here, Modern and Post - Modern ideas can provide the bystander with a philosophical context to changes to the parks use and the definition of the public more broadly. Modernity should in theory take an encompassing view of the public, as there would be common values in all members of society that allows them to engage with other members of society in public space. This value is reflected in the intended function of park. However, the site was encroached upon by Central railway station with the invention of the electric rail, (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993) creating changes in the use of the site and it's patronage. (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993) Some illicit activities, and social stereotyping have lead to certain groups in particular being excluded from the park, and "...to be denied access to such a place is to be denied citizenship and to be positioned as non-members of the public." (Hodgetts et. al. 2007, 951). Instead, Post Modern Political Theory highlights that recent years, the threat of terrorism and neo- liberalism have creates an us/them mentality in the

West, (White, S. 1998, p 592) and that today who should constitute the general public is in fact relative to each individual. This is reflected in society's current policy towards handling homelessness and illicit activities in the park and interest groups call for a return to a park management strategy like that implemented before the changes undergone in the name of progress. These reactions and changes highlight that there is no objective truth, and that progress is indeed relative.

Modernism was the "the major international movement of the 20th century spanning art, design and architecture." (Anne Stephen, 12th January 2009, p 1). Modernity was a cultural epoch where the world came to be viewed as One. "This belief.. is tantamount to the assertion that a common denominator can be found for all systems of belief and value, that the world is... explicable by a single explanatory system." (Ermath, E.D 1998, 587) Immanuel Kant, a key philosopher in Enlightened modern thought, encouraged people to remove themselves form ignorance and enter the modern world of thought. (Kant, 1784) The discourses of progress, the belief in an objective truth and the universal value system dominated this said modern world of thought, replacing the previous belief in God as truth and the stem of morality and fate instead of self determined social progress. Prior to this, it was the idea that "human societies have the potential to evolve and improve was virtually unknown."(Gillen, P and Ghosh, D. 2007 p 33). The Hero of the enlightenment in the meta narrative of history, according to Jean Francois Lyotard, was "the hero of knowledge who worked toward a good ethico-politico end - universal peace." (Lyotard, J.F. 1997, p. 36)

The idea of the Modern Enlightened Hero and the other discourses which formed the philosophical context of the era are reflected in the intended function of the public space and the reasons behind the changes which occurred to Belmore park. The town planners (the modern enlightened heros) of the time were, according to Maiden (1902), trying to make a park which was "for the public," (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993, p 24) (the unified one), to enjoy and to "increase [their] mental and physical health" (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993, p 24) (the common denominator found in all systems of belief and value). Additions were made to the park to promote its intended function. In 1910, a bandstand was erected, in 1923, a bubbling fountain in the centre of the park, and in 1938, a bird fountain was erected. In 1927, the Council created an "underground convenience for men" (SCC Town Clerk Files, 1927, 5148/26) Draughts was a major activity in the park, as was chess. Six tables were erected specifically for this use. (Duplin, M. Image, 1938)

However, in the pursuit of progress, the site was drastically altered. Alongside the value of a public space in which people could advance their physical and mental health, the Modern era also highly valued progress, in particular technological advancement. (Wright, R (2004) p 4). These divergent values could not both be sustained, illustrating the prevalence of fractionalism. The need for Public parkland had to be balanced against the need for a larger railway station which facilitated the introduction of electric rail (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993) thus part of site resumed to the City Circle rail system in 1923, and again in 1970 (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993). The site lost all it's water features and the chess and draught tables. It is ironic that today in the technologically advanced digital age, we have returned to a more Romantic world view, with the most recent study into the Parks management calling upon a "tree maintenance program" (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993 pg 57), a desire to return the structure to "the essentials of 1906" (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993 pg 57) and a view that "The parks greatest contribution to the urban environment is it's greenness" (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993 pg 55) The Council is called upon to "legislate to protect the rights of the park by sustaining it's present size, containing adjacent traffic and noise and controlling building in

the vicinity to reduce impacts."(EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993 56) This clearly illustrates the multiple perspectives about what constitutes progress and challenges the premise of modern ideology.

Patronage to the park changed alongside the resumptions to City Rail, as did the function of the site. Whilst it was once a respectable place for business men to meet, approximately 25% of those who use the site today are passing through to park to access public transport (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993). Approximately 10% of those who use the site are homeless, and use it as a site to enjoy the sun during the day and as a safer place to sleep then the streets at night. (EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993) The site lost all it's water features and the chess and draught tables. There is a problem with the adequate disposal of rubbish, and the site has become run down, the asphalt paths are cracked, and the grass is bare in many places. There is also a problem with the high levels of intoxication of some of the patrons to the site, although alcohol consumption is prohibited.

By contrast to Modernity, the Post-modern world views accept and embrace fractionism. Post modern ideas gained prominence after the atrocities of the Second World War (Wright, 2004) In this climate, society began to question the ideology of progress and reacted against Modernism. The decay of the site illustrates the post modern concern of the dangers of too much progress. This was highlighted clearly by Ronald Wright in "A short History of Progress" (2004). Wright argues that "Our practical faith in progress ramified and hardened into an ideology" (Wright, R (2004) p 4) and that this ideology "has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to a catastrophe." (Wright, R (2004) p 5). This is because "Material progress creates problems that are solvable only by further progress." (Wright, R (2004) p 7). However, this can be incredibly destructive - Wright puts forward the case of the arms race, where further progress created a weapon capable of destroying the world. In the case of Belmore Park, further technological progress lead to great reductions in the parks size, whilst it's over use from an ever growing urban population lead to it's eventual decay. The need for quick access for transport had many of the parks trees and tables removed, whcih altered it's entire function. No longer was this a place of rest, but a thoroughfare. With this lead to a change in the patronage to the park - there has ben a growth of illicit activity in the park, not uncommon in areas of urban sprawl because of it's location, the removal of many lights with the encroachment of the rail (EDAW) and under-kept nature. This decay of the intended value systems of the site can be seen to be a consequence of the lacking of common denominators which can create and uphold One-ness.

The Post modern world view emphasises "there was no common denominator... that guarantees either the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought." (Ermath, E.D 1998, 587) Post Modern Political Theory explored the concept of 'otherness' in Modern democracy. It

> "...aims at exposing how, in modern liberal democracies, the construction
> of political identity and the operationalisation of basic values take place
> through binaries such as we/them,... normal/abnormal..... fostering
> conformity for those who fall on the correct side of the dividing lines and
> marginalisation and denigration for those on the 'wrong' side." (White, S.
> 1998, p 592)

The differences between those who are homeless and those who are not are wide and vast. They include different use of Belmore Park. Although the majority of users pass through the

park, 10% of the people who use the site are homeless and use it for a place to sleep. However, this usage was against the what the Town Planners and current City Planners intended. "Access to public space for homeless people is increasingly under threat as city authorities and some national governments impose restrictions on access for certain categories of people." (Doherty et al. (2008) 292) Homeless people are often considered to be a threat. Feldman (2004) argued that there is a misrecognition of the homeless as inferior, dirty and disruptive persons who are to be separated out from the public. Although legislations which directly targets the homeless, such as that introduced in the United Kingdom which attempt to criminalize begging, are largely condemned (Doherty et all, (2008) p 304) "Control over access is.. accomplished by the disciplining of behaviour, that is, access is assured only to those who engage in permitted behaviours which , increasingly, are associated with consumption activities." (Doherty et all, (2008) 291). It is also ensured the privitisation of public space through various neo-liberal policies, which makes it easier to exclude people who are unwanted by the proprietors. This portrayal of the homeless as a unsavoury group to be excluded from public space is largely influenced by the media. "... Coverage is largely selective, confirming if not establishing oppositions between those homeless people and us, the civilised public." (Hodgetts et all (2007) p 939). There can not be an all encompassing public if we have a culture of exclusion form the public members considered by the media and state to be unsavoury. These are contradictory statements.

Society has a clear division between the housed and the homeless when it comes to allowing the homeless access to public space, and this is made more troubling by the inability of the homeless to enforce their right. It is also troubling, because as Waldron (1993) states, as homeless people have no personal or private spaces that they can call their own, denial of access to public spaces robs them of a location for basic human functioning and thereby deprives them of a chance of autonomy for action. Their sense of dignity and self resect is compromised. An all encompassing public should include homeless people, and Belmore park does not. A unified one which shared common values, presumably those ratified under the Human Right Treaty, would give the Homeless shelter, a recognised Human Right. But this is not the case. Wright (2000) notes how local narratives, that is the telling of local homeless stories and allowing homeless the chance to connect with non- homeless through the common use of local public space, could be used to contradict the "universal narrative that characterize(s) homeless men as disruptive and dangerous." (Hodgetts et. al (2007) p 951) "Space comes alive from everyday practice." It is only when it can be acknowledged that the homeless are marginalised, that society is divided according to social capital, and the homeless are heard with equal authority of those of the "general public" that society can start to address the issues faced by the homeless' use of public space.

The second assumption in Postmodernism is that facts are in fact relative, as "all human systems operate like language.. construct(ing) and main(ing) meaning and value." (Ermath, E.D, 1998, p 590). "The largest system affecting communication is our culture..." (Wood, 2001, pg 32) as cultural and social habits dictate the ways we act. People then individually and collectively "internalise their position in social space" (Mcnamara, Pers. Comm. 2010). Hence everyday interactions create and maintain our cultural views and social relationships. How we interpret these interaction is relative, as depending upon the level of cultural, economic and social capital the individual possesses, they will perceive these interactions differently. To each these will be objective truths, although they may describe the same situation completely differently. This can be seen in the interactions between the various users of Belmore Park. On one of my many observation sessions at Belmore Park I witnessed an Aboriginal woman begging for money. She hid her face behind a sign she which said "Please

God grant me $45 for a bed tonight because I am pregnant." Police officers saw this and removed her from the park. This woman faced many social power imbalances - as an Aboriginal pregnant homeless woman. Her pleading language illustrates her knowledge of her lack of power. In forcing the woman out of the park, this maintains the value that she is not a part of the public who are actually able to use the park for their enjoyment. There will be a dichotomy of view points on her removal from the park, those for and against, especially because the campaigners for the "Save the Children" charity were allowed to continue campaigning. Why is one beggar able to use this public space and yet another not? All that is certain is that there is no true "One" bound together by a common understanding of a universal value system, there is no true public - certain people are excluded, and this is enforced and maintained in our communication with others.

"The recent interest in public space as a key neighbourhood and community resource is partly the result of the perception that we live in an increasingly divided society where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible.." (Goulding, 2004, 4) The Modern world view of a unifying, true value system which allows for progress, is idealistic but unrealistic, as reflected in the ideal function and intended usage of Belmore Park, in contrast to it's end use and function. The exclusion of groups, namely the homeless, beggars, and drunks, from the park for their misuse of the public space indicates that today the general unified, encompassing public does not exist, due to the fractions in our society. Indeed, even the strive for progress is subjective to the eye of the beholder, as illustrated by the current call for a return to a more green, leafy, Romanticised park. Instead, there are a multitude of ideas about which fractions in society public space should be catered to. Modern and Post - Modern ideas can provide the bystander with a philosophical context to changes to the parks use and the definition of the public more broadly, as it highlights the divisions of opinions and ideas in our society. In light of the divisions created in our society, "Public space where people from all walks of life can meet and interact is arguably more important than ever, therefore, for social exchange and the strengthening of community bonds and thus the building of social capital." (Hodgetts, (2007) p 935) The City of Sydney Council is yet to release a final copy of it's plan for the park and it is unlikely this debate about how to maintain and renew Belmore Park will ease in the near future.

Notes on Contributor

Melanie Nicol studies social inquiry and law at the University of Technology Sydney.

References
Doherty et al. 2008, 'Homelessness and Exclusion: Regulating public space in European Cities' *Survellance & Society 5*(3): 290 - 314
EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1993, *Belmore Park - Draft PLan of Management, Council of the City of Sydney,* viewed 8/3/11 http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/Residents/documents/ParksAndLeisure/POMs/BelmoreDraftPoM1993.pdf"
Ermath. Elizabeth Deed, 1998, Postmodernism, in Craig, Edward (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (vol. 7), Routledge, London
Feldman, L. 2004, *Citizens without Shelter: Homelessness, Democracy, and Political exclusion*, Cornell University, New York
Goulding, A. 2004 Libraries and Social Capital, *Journal of Libarianship and Information Science*, 36:3-6

Gillen, P and Ghosh, D. 2006, 'Progress' in Gillen, P and Ghosh, D. *Colonialism and Modernity*, Kensigton, NSW: UNSW Press

Hodgetts, D et al. 2007, A trip to the Library: Homelessness and Social Inclusions, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 9, No. 8, December 2008

Kant, Immanuel. 2004, *An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightment"*, Berlinische Monatsschrift (Berlin Monthly), December, P 1

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1997, The Post-Modern Condition, in Jenkins, Keith (ed.) *The Postmodern History Reade*r, Routledge, London p 36-38

Stephen, Ann. 2009, *Modern Times, The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, viewed 11/3/2011, < "http://www.hiede.com.au" www.hiede.com.au>

Waldron, J. (1993) (1993) 'Homelessness and the issue of freedom'. In Waldron J (ed) *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers 1981-91*. Cambridge

White, S. 1998, Postmodernism, in Craig, Edward (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (vol. 7), Routledge, London

Wood, J. 2009, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture* (8th ed), Wadsworth, Boston USA

Wright, Ronald. 2004, *A Short History of Progress*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, Victoria

Wright, T. 2000 New Urban Spaces and Cultural Representations: Social imaginaries, social physical space, homelessness, *Urban Sociology 5*:23-57