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MAIN SECTION

From the Public Square to the Democratic Square[1]

1 Translated from French to English with the assistance of AI (Claude, Anthropic); reviewed by Claudia Nigrelli and Francesco Di Maio

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the dominant model of the public square as a mineral, geometric, and nature-excluding space, arguing that it functions historically as a device of political control rather than as a genuinely democratic environment. Through a critical reading of emblematic squares from imperial, colonial, and totalitarian contexts, the text shows how the separation of politics from nature produces intertwined ecological and democratic failures. In contrast, the article reconstructs an alternative genealogy of the democratic square — rooted in ancient agoras, republican forums, and Mediterranean traditions — in which public space emerges as an ecologically embedded, socially plural, and action-oriented landscape. Integrating nature into public squares is thus presented not as an aesthetic or environmental add-on, but as a fundamental condition for democratic life.

KEYWORDS
Public Square; Political Space; Democracy; Urban Ecology; Participation.

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Why are our major public squares so mineral? Their ground surfaces are almost entirely covered with concrete or stone; vegetation is absent or, at best, pushed to the margins; trees are rare and, when present, placed in strict alignments or containers. Some will respond that squares belong to the domain of civilization rather than nature, that they are designed for large gatherings, or that their maintenance by municipal services requires vacant expanses to allow machinery to pass.[2] Yet this dichotomy between the political public square and nature raises fundamental problems for both democracy and ecology. Should the assembly of citizens take place outside the world? Could nature not serve as a useful partner in the process of bringing together different wills, opinions, or ways of life? Conversely, does the mineral square not exert a constraining and coercive power that stands in stark opposition to democratic ways of living? In this article, I aim to uncover the pitfalls of this divide and foreground the political stakes of redesigning our most meaningful public spaces — those in which we gather and act together — in favor of coupling culture and nature.

When we think of notable, "historic," and "political" public squares — such as those toward which the "square movements" converged beginning in 2010, or those on which large demonstrations take place — we imagine a vast, open expanse of regular geometric form: a circle, rectangle, or interlocking triangles. Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma in Athens, Taksim in Istanbul, Maidan in Kyiv, but also Red Square and Tiananmen Square in Beijing, belong to this type. Place de la République, designed by Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann, was a parade ground whose spirit has been partly restored since its redevelopment. The same is true of Taksim Square in Istanbul, whose separation from Gezi Park — partially saved from destruction by popular movements that were brutally repressed — is now complete. In the middle of these largely vacant spaces, a monument or statue often stands, symbolizing a historical event, a national "identity," or a religious, political (as in Place Georges V in Brussels), or economic power (as in Place Vendôme in Paris). The ground is flattened; a single glance can take in the entire space. Everything is "visible," designed to be seen and to exhibit itself. Geometrically standardized, the square is also overwhelmingly mineral. It is a slab that separates its users from the earth.

Schematically, the traditional square evokes the ideal city depicted in the famous Renaissance panel known as the *Città ideale di Urbino*. It is an entirely frontal, symmetrical space, empty of people and life, except for a few flowerpots on windowsills and some pigeons. Set apart from the irrepressible fluctuations of wild life — human or otherwise — it represents a timeless, universal rational order, one of proportionality and constancy.

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2 This article draws on elements previously published in "Écologie de la place publique démocratique," *Les carnets du paysage*, no. 33 (2018), 89-99 as well as on material from my book (Lormont: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2018), republished as *Se réunir* (Paris: Premier Parallèle, 2022).

The utopia embodied there is also an *uchronia*. Organized according to a mathematical grid of converging lines leading to a single focal point — the perfectly circular doorway of the central temple — the ideal city depicted on the Urbino panel is not susceptible to transformation, either by its users or by historical or natural events. As Camillo Sitte demonstrated,[3] the geometric organization of a square — whether laid out as a grid, with concentric circles, triangles, and so forth — can neither evolve nor be modified through use. It is therefore removed from historical becoming: it can neither integrate the past, which it erases through the *tabula rasa* of existing structures, nor change as users develop activities within it.

In theory as in practice, the square is therefore conceived as a construction separated from nature. Identified with the masculine, political realm, it is opposed to the feminine, private space represented by the public garden. The tradition according to which the city stands in opposition to nature — urban life against rural life — has become widely accepted, justifying a monistic and purist conception of political practices that continues to explain their democratic deficits. Several reasons are commonly offered. The first, age-old one holds that public squares were intended as sites in which the urban condition could embody and concentrate itself, expelling vegetation — or at least unpredictable vegetation — leveling the terrain, eliminating irregularities, and covering it uniformly. According to Lewis Mumford, the city was originally conceived as a fortress, a place of defense as well as a conquest of the surrounding environment. The square and natural phenomena therefore mutually exclude each other.[4] In the face of conquest's demands, nature has no place. It undermines behavioral predictability; its manifestations contain an uncontrollable degree of risk; and they bring continual changes that contradict any utopia of eternal permanence. Wind, rain, and heat obstruct the smooth conduct of human affairs and interfere with their regulation.

A second reason why squares are separated from nature stems from the political and social functions we believe they should serve. They have been — and still are — conceived as spaces for the exercise and display of dominant power, including that of the people. In seeking to embody sovereignty, they exclude any foreign element, anything wild, and any risk of accident. If vegetation exists there, it must be strictly controlled.

Furthermore, — this is a third argument supporting the artificiality of the public square — we tend to consider political practices as, unlike most others, highly spiritual activities. Bertrand Lévy, for instance, explains that in a square citizens are not connected to manifestations of nature, but rather to the heart of culture, history, and urban memory.[5]

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3 Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (1889), trans. George R. Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins (New York: Random House, 1965).

4 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 196.

5 Bertrand Levy, "Urban Square as the Place of History, Memory, Identity," in *Memory of the City,*

Thanks to an appropriate design, the square would elevate us above our animality and enable us to transcend it.[6] To live in a city is to detach oneself from the earth, to rise toward the sky, as if within a Babel tower rebuilt a thousand times. Here again, the natural environment — and the experience of alterity it brings — has no place.

Finally, the aforementioned goals of urbanization, power display, and spiritualization are all even more fully achieved when the square is configured as an entity frozen in time. With a few exceptions, we prefer to rely on a pure geometric form rather than adapt the square to its environment — for example, by following the terrain's slope, incorporating existing buildings, or preserving preexisting large trees. At best, the square is "greened," meaning artificially planted with external, often exotic species — harmful to local ecological balance — that have no relation to its history. Like many of our "landscaped" spaces, which contain the same species, the same flowerbeds planted in the same way, the same urban furniture, the same circulation patterns, the resulting square becomes reproducible and delocalized. Set apart from climatic hazards, unpredictable natural events, and geographical accidents, it reveals what in human existence is assumed to be constant. In short, the founding act of the square is a design phase: an initial stage of artificial, context-free, ground-detached conception, upon which the space and its movable elements are subsequently configured and situated.[7]

The separation between the square and nature has two perverse effects, which are like the two faces of the same coin. The first is ecological. In the age of global warming, the classical urban square becomes an aberration: excessive heat and glare, immediate evaporation of moisture, concentration of fine particulates, soil impermeabilization — with the soil beneath the slab degraded — risks of flooding, excessive runoff, and so on. In Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, the vast open space serving as the esplanade of the city hall is unusable for much of the year. Only the areas at the far end of this immense square, recently planted with trees and equipped with seating and a shallow pool, can be incorporated into the daily life of nearby residents. It is well known that trees cool cities and regenerate soils. Moreover, squares exposed to the elements — rain, wind, sun — also expose the people and activities situated there. Beyond being uncomfortable and harmful to the urban ecosystem, they reveal our responsibility for the degradation of the climate. Their mineral character and emptiness result from the same desire for control and domination over human behavior that has led to extractivism and the unlimited exploitation of a

ed. Dusica Drazic, Slavica Radisic and Marijana Simu (Belgrade: Kulturklammer, 2012), 156-173; see also Id., "La place urbaine en Europe comme lieu idéal," in *Lieux d'Europe: Mythes et limites,* ed. Stella Ghervas and François Rosset (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2008), 65-85.

6 This is the case, for example, in Hannah Arendt's reading of Aristotle in *The Human Condition* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

7 On the concept of design, see in particular Herbert Alexander Simon, "The Science of Design: Creating the Artificial," *Design Issues* 4, no. 1-2 (1988), 67-82.

subjugated nature. The taming — or even eradication — of nature testifies to a political project of artificially and voluntaristically producing forms of social life. The ecological and socio-political failings of the classical square go hand in hand.

The social constraints imposed by the typomorphological choices that follow from our classical conception of the square are therefore clearly public, but just as clearly anti-democratic. The public square is not a democratic square — at least not necessarily. In fact, the characteristic designs of political regimes such as monarchy, empire, and colonial states are precisely those in which the context-free, ground-detached design with which we are now familiar has been most consistently developed, often with remarkable constancy and little innovation.[8] Royal, imperial, or military squares are manifestly hostile to any expression of freedom. The public's behavior is rigorously framed and channeled through coercive devices that discourage initiative and make any deviant conduct immediately visible. The constraints are postural, circulatory, communicational. The mineralized, emptied, planned, and leveled square grants no potential for action or pro-action to the public. Constraints can be circumvented only through transgression, which in turn reinforces them. Far from supporting the public in the exercise of freedom, the square conditions behavior and strictly limits it.

It is above all in totalitarian regimes that the public square reaches its most extreme, freedom-destroying consequences. For example, the physical organization of Tiananmen Square constitutes a large-scale mechanism of coercion.[9] Mao Zedong multiplied its original size fourfold, so that it could contain one million people. On one side of the square stands his gigantic portrait.[10] The space is oversized and so exposed to the elements and to surveillance that it became an accomplice in the atrocious suppression of the student movement in the spring of 1989. On June 4, artillery and tanks fired upon the crowd and crushed hundreds — perhaps thousands — of people.[11] Before that, another emblematic example of the political public square lay in the vast esplanades designed by the architect known as "Hitler's devil," Albert Speer. A great admirer of Haussmann's Paris, Speer became chief builder of the Third Reich in 1934. Coupled with Hitler's megalomania — he worked on plans for Germania, his ideal city, even in the bunker where he killed himself — Speer transformed

8 On this continuity, see George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (Ithaca-London: Cornell up, 1975).

9 See Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

10 See the online photo portfolio: https://www.buzzfeed.com/gabrielsanchez/disturbing-pictures-from-the-tiananmen-square-massacre.

11 British documents declassified in December 2017 indicate a far larger massacre. In a 1989 telegram, Alan Ewen Donald, United Kingdom ambassador to China from 1988 to 1991, reportedly relayed an estimate by a member of the State Council of the People's Republic of China placing the number of civilian victims at 10,000, most of whom were crushed by tanks.

the public square into a site for civil and military parades, designing the *Reichsparteitagsgelände,* an enormous structure capable of accommodating up to 340,000 people. Speer's idea, writes historian Matthias Donath, was that people should appear tiny and lost in immensity, mere constituent elements of the mass that made up the national community.[12] Construction began in 1938, but halted in 1943. Only a foundation block exists today, cast in 1941 to test the soil's resistance: a cylindrical mass of concrete weighing 12,360 tons, 14 meters high and 21 meters in diameter, made by French forced laborers.

The democratic square denotes — or should denote, though it is rarely realized — characteristics opposed to those described above. In particular, it is neither mineral nor geometric nor hollowed out nor leveled, but, as a few examples show, full of plants, reliefs, distinctive places, and corners. Like the Athenian agora before the fifth century bce and the Roman forum before Caesar, it follows the natural terrain, extends toward building façades, incorporates remnants of the past, and lends itself to subdivision and reconfiguration according to need. Contrary to the regular, empty space that often comes to mind when we imagine the agora as the site of the citizens' assembly, the public squares of ancient Greece — including the famous Athenian Agora — were in fact irregular and complex until the major works of Hippodamus of Miletus, credited with inventing the grid design, which coincided with the democratic regime's erosion and ultimate disappearance.[13] By examining the physical structure of ancient Greek squares, we gain insight into essential aspects of democracy as a form of life. First, pre-Hippodamian squares — as well as Roman republican forums and the pre-humanist squares of Italy — resembled open-air salons where everyone passed through and mingled. Citizens crossed paths with artists and performers, wanderers and philosophers, numerous merchants who called out to potential clients, barbers, shopkeepers, and artisans whose workshops opened directly onto the square — people of all sorts who came to talk, to remake the world, or to play dice or hopscotch. In Aphrodisias, Ephesus, and Perge, large marble gaming tables decorated with carved ornaments and sometimes inscriptions have been found in public squares.[14] This shows that political life was intimately interwoven with various aspects of social life. It escaped the essentialization ("The Political") that tends to separate political action from all other ways of existing and to hypostatize it. Yet what is politics, if not the efforts individuals make to live peacefully with one another? Democratic politics, in particular, relies on negotiated processes through which deadlocks in

12 See Matthias Donath, *Architektur in Berlin, 1933-1945* (Berlin: Lukas, 2004).

13 On these issues, see Maria Ananiadou-Tzimopoulou, Alexandra Yérolympos and Athina Vitopoulou, "L'espace public et le rôle de la place dans la ville grecque moderne: Évolution historique et enjeux contemporains," *Études balkaniques*, no. 14 (2007), 27-52.

14 See Ulrich Schädler, "Faire parler la matière: L'archéologie des jeux antiques: Entretien avec Ulrich Schädler," interview conducted and edited by Natalia La Valle, Barbara Turquier, and Bruno Vétel, *Tracés,* no. 28 (2015), 185-198.

social life, as identified by stakeholders, are politicized. Even Aristotle — far from opposing social life and political life, biological life and freedom — recognized that there is governance within a household, whose members, unlike sheep or bees, discuss together, based on "common notions," the conditions of their coexistence. Self-government depends on this.

Second, democratic squares welcome nature. They do more than "make room" for it: they take it into account from the outset; they preserve and maintain it; sometimes they even venerate it. The palaver tree, the plane tree, the olive tree are not imported elements; they preexist. The very act of considering them affects social interactions. Relations that develop while ignoring or bracketing the surrounding environment differ fundamentally from those that invite nature as a partner in the relations at stake. The form of social life that tolerates a potted tree, a concrete pool, artificial snow, or air conditioning differs from one that constructs the square based, for example, on the slope of the terrain, the dominant wind direction, or the trees already present.

In Greek and later in other languages, *plateau, place, plan*, and *plane tree* (platane) share the same etymological family. Greek squares — *platía platanou* — like those of Mediterranean towns and villages in general, are plane-tree squares. The plane tree plays a well-recognized role. It grows near rivers, close to "runnels of water," as in Plato's *Phaedrus* (230*b*), or near water tables, for it requires a great deal of moisture.[15] The paving of the square is designed to filter waste, allow water infiltration, aerate the soil, and support the growth of roots and trunk. The plane tree precedes the square and marks the starting point of the village. It is credited with numerous virtues — in Greece and Italy especially — above all that its shade benefits mood and health. Socrates discovers the marvelous shade of the plane tree thanks to Phaedrus, who leads him outside the city. That particular plane tree came from Persia. Pliny, the Elder, notes that it was imported to Anatolia, then to Laconia and Italy "for its shade alone" — "for its shade alone" indicating that the tree has no advantage other than its shade: it yields neither fruit nor usable wood, the latter being too difficult to work.[16] It was also beneath the ancient plane tree in the square of Kos that Hippocrates taught medicine and composed his works. He too valued the plane tree's shade for its therapeutic properties. Perhaps he perceived, in the physical and aesthetic union of the plane tree with its site, a form of balance and harmony conducive not only to justice and friendship, as Socrates and Phaedrus experienced in their dialogue, but also to health and to the ethics of medical practice, of which Hippocrates is the renowned founding figure. At the location of that tree — where he once stayed — there survives today its descendant, 500 years old, reputed to be

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15 See Maria Ananiadou-Tzimopoulou, Alexandra Yérolympos and Athina Vitopoulou, "L'espace public et le rôle de la place dans la ville grecque moderne."

16 Pliny, the Elder, *The Natural History,* vol. 3, *Trees — their various qualities,* trans. John Boctock and Henry Thomas Riley (London: Bohn, 1855), §6.

the oldest plane tree in the world. The circumference of its trunk reaches more than 12 meters. Fragments circulate around the world. New trees are also planted to express medical art and the universal importance of its ethical principles. Since antiquity, the plane tree has been regarded as an air purifier. The physician-botanist Pierre-Joseph Buc'hoz wrote that the plane tree "contributes to the purity of the air […] and to the salubrity of this region. It is considered a true specific against plague and all sorts of aerial corruptions."[17]

The plane tree is more than a symbol. Certainly, it is rightly associated with longevity — its lifespan far exceeding that of human life — and with continuity, notably the continuity of tradition (including the medical tradition) that persists through the ages. But it is rather its factual existence that strikes the mind: its appearance, its properties, its often-noted balsamic scent — believed to ward off illness — its relationship to water. Fountains are never far from it. In some cases, a tap is fixed directly onto its trunk. With plane trees, squares become multispecies landscapes whose configuration reveals the links between ecology and democracy. This connection extends to the question of food. A well-known example is the Roman republican forum, designed to establish a lasting and manifest connection among society, nature, culture, and agriculture. Edible plants were part of the city, while plant cultivation was understood as the foundation of any meaningful cultural development. Demeter, goddess of agriculture and civilization, watched over it. In contrast to the imperial forum, which under Julius Caesar became mineralized, specialized, and standardized, the republican forum contained temples and meeting places, the speakers' tribune, public libraries, baths, and shops — and also a little-noticed but decisive feature: a square area four meters on each side that was never paved, even though the rest of the space was covered in travertine. Within this area stood — and still stand — a fig tree, a grapevine, and an olive tree. The current specimens were planted in 1956.

This dialogical relationship between the square and natural phenomena is partially preserved during the imperial period. The fig-tree area survives. The Pantheon, built by Agrippa, for instance, is topped by a dome left open at its apex so that the building remains in contact with the elements. According to Marguerite Yourcenar, "[t]his temple, both open and mysteriously enclosed, was conceived as a solar quadrant […]; the disk of daylight would rest suspended there like a shield of gold; rain would form its clear pool on the pavement below; prayers would rise like smoke toward that void where we place the gods."[18] The ecology of public squares is thus a key element in the democratization of public spaces. If environmental

17 Pierre-Joseph Buc'hoz, *Dissertations sur le cèdre du Liban, le platane et le cytise: Arbres très-intéressans, et qui méritent d'être cultivés en France, non-seulement par leur port majestueux et par leur décoration dans nos forêt, mais encore par les avantages réels qu'ils nous présentent pour l'Agriculture ét les Arts, leur culture étant d'ailleurs très-facile* (Paris: Buc'hoz, 18062), 24.

18 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadria* (1951), trans. Grace Frick and Marguerite Yourcenar (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955), 176.

FIG. 1 The fig tree, the grapevine, and the olive tree (photo by the author)

coercion through architecture — one that denies or even destroys its environment — gravely impacts human relations and imprints upon them a similar violence, it is because consciousness and acknowledgment of the world outside ourselves, of alterity, of the being-other, form the foundation of the values that collectively constitute the basis of political democracy. On the one hand, the environmental or "landscape" square — one that works with the elements, climate, and plants — is also one that grants each being, including humans, a margin of free evolution. "Gardens in movement" (in Gilles Clément's phrase),[19] permaculture gardens, trees whose aerial and subterranean development depends on neighboring plants, wild grasses — these are sources of inspiration and images of freedom capable of prefiguring human behaviors better attuned both to one another and to their surroundings. The few wild animals that many of us admired from our windows — and that moved millions of people during the April 2020 lockdown — were not exotic creatures. Yet they were perceived as symbols of regained freedom, a breath of fresh air in constraining and suffocating cities, a door opening onto nature. Much has since been said about "reconnection" with nature, but the essential point lies elsewhere. Mere knowledge of our connection or interdependence with some reality does not in itself lead to democratic behavior. The master knows he is connected to the slave, and vice versa. This awareness becomes democratic only when transformed into a springboard for liberatory action. By contrast, awareness of the independence of the animals we observed

19 See Gilles Clément, *Le Jardin en mouvement* (Paris: Pandora, 1991).

— moving freely in spaces not meant for them (an avenue, a forecourt, a quay) — proved decisive. We, watching from our windows, had no connection with these beings temporarily freed from the pressure we exert upon them. We recognized, and even valued, the fact that their logic was not ours, their behavior unpredictable, their uses of the city unprecedented.

Freedom does not arise from respect or free will, but from the concrete arrangement of the right distance one that must constantly be adjusted: neither too close nor too far. Democratic relations presuppose a gap between beings who are destined neither to merge nor to dominate one another. This is the work of a public designer committed to democratic principles: to configure public places in such a way that individuals can freely adjust their position with respect to the surrounding world, while preserving that world as such. A good example is Place d'Austerlitz in Strasbourg. Located in the Bourse–Krutenau district, it underwent a participatory redesign beginning in 2008, in which residents and local associations were actively involved. Since June 2012, the former bus-station crossroads has been transformed into a pedestrian area alternating playgrounds, urban furniture, café terraces, spaces for relaxation and soft mobility, and, of course, vegetated areas with exclusively native plants. It has become "an archipelago of nature between the historic and modern city," making it, with its thousands of bulbs and shrubs, its trees, and its 2,600 m² of plantings, the most beloved and frequented square in Strasbourg.[20] The square is at once one and multiple. It is a square made of squares, separating activities (those of children climbing the reliefs designed for them and those of adults seated at the adjoining café terrace) while also connecting them. The disjunction of spaces makes movements at different scales and speeds compatible. Like a Japanese garden, Place d'Austerlitz cannot be seen all at once. One must move through it to discover all its aspects; hence it offers surprises.

How does all this testify to democratic concerns? The reasons are many and interwoven. The main one lies in the substitution of action for spectacle. The traditional square is the space of "theatrocracy" (*Leg*. 701a).[21] The individual faces a spectacle that they contemplate and to which they adhere or which they critique. The spectator's reaction varies depending on the devices deployed (propaganda, deception, edification, publicity of power, threat, etc.), but it remains a reaction — not an action. By definition, a spectator does not act upon the action they observe. Yet this is not the vocation of the citizen: the citizen's task is to practice self-government, to take initiative, to conduct their affairs and thoughts without placing themselves under the authority of a tutor, to associate freely with others, and

20 See https://lollier.com/projets/reamenagement-de-la-place-dausterlitz/. See also Martine Meunier, "Un archipel de nature en ville," *Horticulture et paysage* (2015), 43-45.

21 Cited in Vincent Azoulay, "L'Espace public et la cité grecque: d'un malentendu structurel à une clarification conceptuelle," in *L'espace public au Moyen Âge*, ed.Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt (Paris: PUF, 2011), 74.

so on. Politics begins with participation and, ideally, never departs from it. Thus, a democratic square should not be a "case" in which people's behavior is either displayed or confined, but "animated theaters," as Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis wrote of the squares of Naples.[22] Architecture propels and stimulates experience. Space becomes a site for improvisation, exploration, and discovery. In sharp contrast with spaces that are either too vast or too cramped — spaces that authoritatively orient people's behavior, standardize it, divide it, and forbid any overflow — democratic places encourage uses not defined in advance and possess a plasticity that allows their reconfiguration. It is significant, for example, that Place d'Austerlitz, co-conceived and co-designed by residents, has since 2014 been protected and continually adapted by a local monitoring committee composed of residents who meet three times a year.

Plane-tree squares and other tree-filled squares are only examples among many possible ecologies of public squares. We might also consider other variables: the use of local materials, attention to topography, the role of urban wildlife — wild or feral — orientation relative to wind or the sun's trajectory, and so forth. In every case, it becomes clear that a space is public, common, democratic only insofar as it is integrated into a social and physical environment. We might also consider underground waterways which, as in Paris — from Place des Fêtes to Bastille via République — link urban squares through canals. In the past, these squares housed hydraulic structures and served as points for the distribution of drinking water. At the site of today's Place de la République once stood the Château d'Eau square and its Nubian Lions Fountain (1811), created by an engineer whose ambition was to bring water to the upper floors of working-class neighborhoods: the humanist Pierre-Simon Girard.[23] But the transformation of public squares into instruments of power under Napoleon III erased most features testifying to the natural grounding of Parisian squares. The water is still there, but the canals through which it flows — especially the junction between the Canal de l'Ourcq and the Canal Saint-Martin, as well as the entire route from République to Bastille — are invisible and inaccessible.

The anti-nature character of classical squares thus manifests the political conception whose unfolding has led to denaturing democracy and nature simultaneously. Space destined for the aestheticization of some form of power paralyzes citizens' capacity for action and confines them to the role of spectators of the domination exercised upon them. It standardizes gestures, opinions, and behaviors. It homogenizes, as in a vast crowd, the ways of acting of individuals who thereby become indistinguishable. The

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22 Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis, *Naples* (1925), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (London: Belknap, 1996), 417.

23 Margaret Bradley, "Pierre-Simon Girard, un des premiers ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées: du Nil à l'Ourcq," *Bibnum* (2014), https://journals.openedition.org/bibnum/658.

spectacle does not address each person's individuality — which it negates — but rather what is generic in us, what makes us "similar" to all others. By contrast, as soon as the buds of a tree open or a flock of crows settles, what takes place escapes the interhuman framework within which precise control is possible, the identical prevails over the other, and monism over pluralism. Making public squares into places where nature is present — not mineral, nor even re-naturalized, greened, or vegetated after the fact — also means establishing an essential condition for the realization of free, personal, and varied ways of life, which are the hallmark of specifically democratic forms of living.

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