

# Reflections on space

AS AN American accustomed to vast distances – and as a New Yorker watching a fast-changing urban landscape – I was struck anew by the open spaces and more modest pace of life on the European continent.

There is, of course, substantial new development, but what remains in the central cities is very much as it has been for decades, if not centuries – an observation most visitors to the “Old World” will doubtless confirm.

Within this smaller and, to these eyes, slower world, there are nevertheless significant differences, with one variable especially revealing of national and perhaps socio-cultural dimensions. It is the ratio of public to private space, both in terms of quantity and observable quality.

New York is perhaps the most notorious for its lack of public spaces, considering its size and position among world cities. While there are indoor arenas of scale and grandeur all over town, nothing could hold the mass rally for peace and disarmament except the Great Lawn in Central Park – and even that requires unusual logistics.

Paris, on the other hand, has any number of places, from Concorde to Chaillot, or the Petit, let alone the Grand Palais, to accommodate a throng, if the French ever get themselves together for any demonstration short of a revolution!

The boulevards, bridges, riverbanks, parks and gardens that comprise the public Paris are its true glory. The 16th arrondissement and some other choice locations have their share of private opulence, but most of Paris lives better *in public* than *at home*.

There is scarcely a private dwelling remaining within city limits, let alone a real hotel particulier.

This contrast exists *within* Europe, too. Take Amsterdam, for example.

The grandest space in this Dutch city, the Dam, is rather less imposing than one imagines and its Royal Palace, with its restored interior befitting the empire of which it was the seat, offers only a nondescript exterior backdrop for the milling human scene.

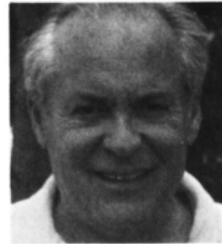
It is as if the House of Orange wants to shadow its splendid past while staying in business, just as the Sun King and Bonaparte dominate contemporary Paris, where they are safely entombed.

A sad monument to such a policy is the big, empty hole at the most

LAND & LIBERTY correspondent Philip Finkelstein has died of a heart attack at the age of 51.

Mr. Finkelstein, one of New York's leading land tax campaigners, was a professor at Adelphi University.

After serving as deputy city administrator during Mayor John Lindsay's administration, Mr. Finkelstein left and founded the Center for Local Tax Research. He explained later that he had been “harassed” into resigning when he refused to drop a study of New York's property tax assessment system.



● Philip Finkelstein

The study was published by Praeger in 1975 as *Real Property Taxation in New York City*. Mr. Finkelstein be-

came Director of the Henry George School in New York, and he was developing a leading role in enlightening the American public on the problems of the present property tax.

● Fred Harrison writes: Phil is survived by his wife Claire and three children. He had just agreed to serve as a director of Land & Liberty Press. We will miss his contributions to the development of the journal.

We publish here the last article he filed to us, following his recent tour of Europe.

prominent bend of the river in Amsterdam, where the opera house will not be built because of protests from those demanding housing.

PARIS also protested the loss of its beloved Les Halles market for the almost-universally condemned Centre Pompidou. But the aggressively modern museum was built anyway, flaunting its coloured guts in the old gray square.

What is shocking is not the avant-garde design of the Beaubourg but its sheer bulk. Like every other public place in Paris, it is enormous, defining its space without competition, pushing its more private surroundings into a mere supporting role.

Old or new, it is the public Paris that demands and receives attention, from visitor and resident alike. Perhaps this tells us something about the way a society sees itself. France, for all its old-fashioned republicanism and new fangled socialism, is still caught up with *la gloire*.

Paris saw itself – and in some vestigial measure still does – as the capital not only of a nation, of an empire, but of a continent, indeed a civilisation. The individual needs and wishes of people could be transcended by the grander goals of La France.

An even greater extreme between public splendour and private squalor can be seen in Latin American capitals, with a typically grand plaza bordered by palace and cathedral – now government buildings – in the centre

of the creeping hillside slums.

Witness also the contrast between official and private Washington, D.C., the one American city modelled directly on Paris.

Are dirt and disorder the price we must pay for a better mix of private and public space? Not necessarily.

New York has its slums and Paris its crime and Amsterdam its share of both.

*No modern metropolis has a monopoly on virtue, or vice. Yet, we could wish for a better balance between old and new, beautiful and efficient, personal and private and the public places that we use “for show.”*

The difference is not in the nature of ownership but in our attitude towards privilege – how much we demand for ourselves and how much we will tolerate in anyone else.

I, for one, was offended by the inordinate size of private estate lands remaining in the English countryside. A few score acres in Devon loom a lot larger than hundreds do in Texas. But land-use experts would scoff at the traditional American dream of a single detached house with front and back yards, garage, patio and pool and other private amenities.

Do we need to have it all for ourselves, or is it enough to be able to use spaces shared by all? Perhaps the only way we can make effective choices is to know the true costs – and their value – of both our private and public places.