

It is convenient to assume that many of the most beautiful and best protected places found in wealthy nations of recent democratic tradition arrived there because of a dedication to democracy. To the contrary, many are remnants from a prior era that was precisely not democratic, instead born of imperial regime, autocratic vision, colonial usurpation, or generic empire building. Grand boulevards, elaborate parks, and august colonnades served the purpose of exalting power, not distributing it. And as the everyday human consciousness evolves to include an increasing number of interactions independent of physical presence through digital communication, the very definition of the space which we occupy has grown dramatically, perhaps ad infinitum, contrasting with the previous limitations of physical human space (which is almost certainly fixed unless further inhabitable places are found).

One might contend that the relative import of physical landscapes has diminished as an unfettered growth of an electronic space has emerged and marched forward unabated. Effort to counterbalance this shift in relative influence may be necessary to realign the human sentiment with a more natural biorhythm, but this of course requires a desire to progress in this direction. This is a desire I'm not convinced exists.

As well, the issue of democratic places is complicated by a more thorough inspection regarding the development of the space – which might occur in an entirely undemocratic manner – and a subsequent evaluation of the use of the space – which might fulfill many definitions of modern democratic function. Indeed what might be deemed a deplorable incursion on democratic process could with time be appreciated for furthering discourse and engagement. When we live in a time of much certainty in our personal beliefs and their reinforcement by forces present in these non-physical spaces such that we express certainty whether sincere or otherwise, it is essential to recall that with time and space from its nascence a landscape often comes to a different evaluation. Thus we owe the very landscapes we study, praise, and lament the benefit of our own humility that they develop and transform to another meaning in an alternate context. In other words, looking at the past, present, and future, we must always ask the question “democracy for whom?” as what may well be deemed democratic in one circle may be an exclusionary compilation when viewed through a wider or narrower lens.

Democratic pursuits of landscape are a welcome and necessary realm, yet we must caution ourselves to overstate the efficacy of democratic methods in bringing about desired outcomes. Indeed even within democratic systems power structures inherently form, occasionally questioning whether these systems are ever truly democratic at all. Wealthy democracies at present are creaking under their own weight as their sovereign populations express seemingly louder backlashes and discontents in any number of powderkeg moments in recent years. Some would call these expressions fundamentally democratic against a world dominated by power brokers advocating through and for democracy in little else but name. Whether the frustrations are warranted is not for me to decide here, but it is essential to state that they cannot be ignored, lest we welcome further ambivalence, dissatisfaction, or perhaps violence, by definition an antidemocratic outcome which undermines humanity. Ultimately a decision is always taken even in a democratic process, as well the do-nothing option is itself a decision. Thus, we must not neglect the question of where decision-making power rests within any democratic system and ensure that the appropriate decision efficacy matches the sentiment for the discourse on a given question of landscape, the question being whether that authority is deemed legitimate. In any landscape challenge, authority ultimately rests with the sovereign who view the landscape as pertinent and their ability to form that sentiment.

Streets themselves from the lowly alleyway to the treelined avenues may represent the most fundamental landscape of democratic engagement. This role appears dramatically different from even a century ago due to any number of social, economic, and technological changes. Today most streets

are thoroughfares, functional pipelines in effect through which humans flow from origin to destination, perhaps without ever stepping foot on the ground. This contrasts with historic images filled with pedestrians milling among streetcars, horse-drawn carriages, market stalls, certainly still flowing less directly from one point to another, but also tangibly interacting with the other elements in a chaotic turbulence. Instead these spaces now embrace mechanized uniformity, especially in wealthy countries, often bordering on causticity, despite humans flowing throughout. Is this democratic? Certainly not in the traditional sense of meandering discourse. Does a human have the right to not be frictionless? To pursue non-laminar movement? There is certainly a conflict about the role of these spaces. To what extent are humans permitted to physically occupy them without vehicular accompaniment of any type? It's an essential question which I can't answer here. However there is no doubt that these spaces are increasingly unwelcome for democratic expression, seen as too important for the messy inconvenience of marches, protests, and signage contrary to their presumed – and regulated – use, to say nothing of simple benign activities such as strolling with the dog, cycling recreationally, or playing with a ball. One can imagine this carrying forward to any number of spaces that are ostensibly public but only for a narrowly defined set of activities. If certain human activity grounded in freedom of expression and gathering through benign activity is not permitted in these streets, then there exists a repression of their democratic function, supplanted because some other function, likely economic, is seen as too sacred to be curtailed. Yet economic realities are as real as any, and they occupy an increasing share of our self-perception, so I understand the source of such resistance. Certainly few hearts and minds are won by a troupe of protesters blocking one's commute to a long-sought job interview. Nevertheless I value the vision to reclaim these thoroughfares for humane spontaneity and purposeful meandering. Perhaps even greater long-term economic realities might be born out of the disorganization in these spaces should be wise enough to allow it to proceed.



Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, a site of protest and recreation and numerous other uses, proposed at the behest of Emperor Maximilian, who was subsequently executed. Nonetheless the construction subsequently took place in the dictatorial vision of Porfirio Diaz. Democratic origins it had not, but now functions as a primary artery of expression.