MARGARET CRAWFORD:
FROM THE FEEL GOOD CITY TO THE JUST CITY
EVENT TRANSCRIPTION

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Next up is our second keynote speaker, Margaret Crawford. She is the Professor of Architecture at UC Berkeley, and prior to Berkeley she was a Professor of Urban Design and Planning Theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and before that she was the Chair of History, Theory and Humanities program at SCI-Arc, the Southern California Institute for Architecture here in Los Angeles. Crawford has been the recipient of numerous fellowships including the Guggenheim, the Fulbright, the Quadrant, the James Marsden Fitch Foundation, and the Graham Foundation. So she was one of the keynotes at the first Contesting the Streets Conference five years ago, and she was hugely influential to me, and I thought it would be a great interplay here to have her be one of the keynotes because she brings positive attention to on the ground urbanism, things like swap meets, yard sales, and street vendors, the blurring of the public and private realms. I've been particularly taken with her because of her love, unabashed love for Los Angeles [laughter] and countering what she calls the narrative of loss that some schools of critical theory can seem to almost disempower our agency, our ability to create our cities and our future, she gave us hope. So, Margaret.

>> Margaret: Thank you Rafael, Abel, and Annette for inviting me, and I'm very happy to be here at this second iteration of this conference, and I agree. The first one was really exciting. I learned a lot, and I anticipate learning even more at this one. It's very nice to see you, Ananya, my former colleague at Berkeley who is always a really hard act to follow. So I'm here today really as a representative of the design professions, architecture, urban planning, urban design, and maybe even landscape architecture, and these professions claim public space as their professional territory, right. They are in charge. It's their domain, and so I'm going to discuss public space in both professional terms but also in, I hope, a much larger sense of what it means in the big picture, in the struggle for democracy and against inequality.

Now I'm very concerned in particular about a increasing gap that I see between designers and planners and so-called... and so-called public space advocates and very different groups concerned with social justice and space and what we might call spatial justice, and I was very alarmed and shocked to discover just how wide and deep the gap is between these two groups at a recent conference I attended in Buenos Aires. The speakers were the Project for Public Space from New York, the Congress for the New Urbanism, and a number of professional designers whose offices specialize in public space, particularly Jon Gale of Copenhagen, and all of their presentations were remarkably similar, and this is kind of my summary of [laughter] pretty much what they all said, and I think you can see it bike lanes, bicycle, pedestrianized streets, festivals, sidewalk cafes, more bikes, [laughter] street performers, farmers markets, plazas, fountains, and lots of umbrellas. So now I'm making fun of...
them, but actually their images are extremely compelling, and partly they're compelling because they focus on human experience, and they call themselves "designers for people," and that is really what makes them, I think, attractive to many people.

Now if this were just a discussion about how to design nice public spaces, I wouldn't be so alarmed because obviously within the design professions, there is room for many different approaches, but what is alarming, I feel, is that this discourse of place making now dominates discussions of public space in much larger forum, and I would actually mention for example, UN Habitat is partnering with a Project for Public Spaces, for example, on two developed public spaces around the world. More than 39 countries ranging from Argentina to Kazakhstan to Columbia have hired Jon Gale to redesign their public places in the image of Copenhagen's pedestrianized city center. So, you know, there is nothing wrong with those places. They're pleasant. I actually like to use them myself. Not criticizing there, but I think the entire framing of this particular enterprise is very questionable. These place makers paint a socially benign and aesthetically purified picture of public space that completely fails to acknowledge the exclusions and the inequities that exist in actual public spaces, and I think this is really dangerous to the larger project of equality and democracy. So in this talk I'm going to criticize them. I'm going to look within the design professions to see where this particular discourse comes from, and then I want to redirect the public space discourse to a different focus, one on rights in public space.

Now and I really believe that this particular vision has been uncritically accepted by many, not only in the design professions, but even more significantly in municipalities, in government offices, and by, even shockingly to me, the UN because it not only maintains the status quo, but I would argue that it exacerbates ethnic disparities and inequalities.

So in order to understand this, I'm an historian. I always go back to history. I'm going to look at two historical figures whose influence is still very strong and it's often cited in the presentations and the discourse of this kind of feel good public space. I call this feel good public space because that's its goal is to make everybody who's there feel good, and it works for those who are there. Now, so a few umbrellas and everyone is happy. Now I'm going back quickly 150 years to New York Central Park, obviously Frederick Law Olmsted was a brilliant landscape designer, master of the picturesque aesthetic, even really an early precursor of ecological design, but as I'm sure many of you already know, he saw himself as a kind of social engineer, and he designed the park as a civilizing tool, particularly for the huge numbers of immigrants who had come to New York, and so in the very beginning he limited the park's activities to the genteel pastimes of carriage rides, strolling, and ice skating, the favorite activities of elite New Yorkers. He also focused on experience but experience of the passive and contemplative type, particularly the contemplation of a naturalistic landscape. He ignored and, in fact, saw the park as an important alternative to the other kinds of public activities that were taking place on the streets of New York, such as street vendors, street markets, commerce, demonstrations—this is a demonstration against child labor, and then baseball games. Although Olmsted wanted to pacify the immigrant working classes through contact with nature, in fact they began to demand their own kinds of public spaces and really proposed a very different vision of public space, and by the turn of the twentieth century, you can see the working classes made their way uptown to Central Park where they actually started to have picnics on the grass, something that Olmsted was completely against. They demanded playing
fields for active sports, particularly baseball, and they even ultimately got a playground, although in 1926. So it took awhile. Now this is an ongoing struggle as I'm sure many of you also already know that the Central Park Conservancy, which is a group of elite New Yorkers, has recently taken over the funding and operation of Central Park, and they are really trying to restore Olmsted's original vision, and they're doing that by reclaiming land from things like baseball fields in order to make the green lawn that characterized the original Greensward Plan for Central Park. So this is an ongoing struggle, but Olmsted is usually cited by place makers as one of the most important historical figures who has influenced them, not only because of his design talents, but because of his vision of creating a certain kind of experience. Now probably I'm going to get attacked here and people will send me hate mail, but another key moment in the creation of this particular place making discourse is the 1960's when Jane Jacobs published her classic work, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." It's also referenced in the New York Times, a very important work that actually really promoted a new look at cities. I don't have to tell you about how influential it is, a devastating critique of basically all twentieth century urban planning proposals, but the most influential chapters are the first three chapters that present the sidewalks of the city as the primary public spaces of New York, and for Jacobs the sidewalks with their myriad human interactions embodied the essence of public life, and her lesson was really learned by many, many urban planners who completely took her critique to heart and changed their ideas about cities, and certainly I think that it's very evident in all design today. Her celebration of the intricate street [inaudible] that took place outside of her house on Houston Street, Hudson Street, in Greenwich Village became a foundational text for subsequent concepts of people-centered public space, but there is a glaring omission, and that omission is race. The street character she describes are all white, working class Irish and Italians. The only person who violates the unspoken rules of sidewalk etiquette is an oblivious suburban teenager, but if we look at Manhattan during that period, these scenes were not typical at all. In the late 1950's, particularly in Jane Jacobs' own neighborhood, the overwhelming fact was the post-war great, second great migration of African Americans, more than a million African Americans immigrating to New York. During the same period, Puerto Ricans also moved to New York in large numbers. Pressure from these new groups reconfigured the urban spaces in New York, expanding barrios and ghettos and increasing segregation, and the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village where Jane Jacobs lived was actually one of the few places where non-white New Yorkers could freely mix with whites on the street, in jazz clubs, and in cafes. Now I'm not claiming here that Jane Jacobs was a racist. Actually she was very active in civil rights movement and was an outspoken advocate of racial equality, and in fact, as some historians have claimed, her silence on race was typical of racial liberals of the period who preferred to stress the similarities between people than the differences, and certainly discussing racial tensions in New York would not have bolstered her arguments about the benefits of city life particularly to her main audience, which were white people who were leaving the city in large numbers for suburban locations, some of them to escape the changing demographics in a process known as White Flight, but I would also point out that at the same time Jane Jacobs was celebrating the sidewalk, other Americans were making far more radical demands on public space, and actually in doing so, completely redrew the boundaries between private and public, and here we have the sit-ins in Greensboro, North
Carolina, with activists occupying stools in a lunch counter waiting to be served. They actually made the claim that public laws against discrimination should prevail even in the private spaces of commerce. Other protests transformed buses, sidewalks, streets, and even the Washington Mall into discursive sites where physical presence asserted the rights of equal citizenship. So there's really a very, very different approach here than Jane Jacobs and a much broader and more contested idea of public space. At the same time Jane Jacobs, it took several decades for her ideas to really become part of a larger discourse, and every single one of the place makers, I have to say, in this conference referred to Jane Jacobs as really the source of a lot of their ideas, and so I think what happened here is that a new generation of people unquestionably accepted these ideas without examining the omissions and exclusions and the limits that are embedded in them, and we can see this particularly in their claims that public spaces are for everybody and bring people together, and, in fact, if you go on Jon Gale's website, he is currently starting to demonstrate how his designs actually foster community and democracy. So I guess that I would argue that this is a problem. They reduce highly diverse populations to a single universal group of users, and almost all of them actually claim, and Jon Gale most, explicitly that people are the same around the world. They all respond to public space experiences in the same way, and that's why he can practice in this broad swath of nations in every conceivable continent. So placemakers promote public spaces where people feel safe and good. Such places combine feelings of comfort and pleasure with a limited amount of diversity, and this approach assumes the same white middle class audiences that Olmsted and Jacobs addressed ignoring the facts that many whites automatically link the presence of blacks with danger and criminality, Latinos with gangs and illegal immigration, and now what happens when racial tensions emerge? They become a problem to be solved rather than a fundamental condition of life in urban life, and what happens when you remove race and ethnicity from public space issues? And I would argue that what happens is basically that Bloomberg's New York, and there is a direct line from Jane Jacobs to Amanda Burden, who is Michael... was Michael Bloomberg's planning commissioner and a close associate of the mayor. Burden really also was an environmental determinist and under her direction the city legalized sidewalk cafes, undersaw the design of corporate plazas, redeveloped the waterfront, made many, many streetscape improvements, and sponsored such high profile public spaces as the high line, and I think you can see here, this is one of the most celebrated of Bloomberg's public spaces is the closing off of Broadway to cars in order to create this nice public plaza. Burden's policies also were very resonant with the Transportation Director, Janette Sadik-Kahn, who tried to reimagine the streets for pedestrians and cyclists, and those who praised all of these new public space improvements and, again, often cited at this conference in Argentina, rarely mentioned another Bloomberg public space initiative, which, of course, is stop-and-frisk. This highly controversial policy allowed the New York police department to stop, question, and search any suspicious pedestrian. In 2011 alone, police stopped nearly 700,000 people, nearly all African American or Latino males. Many of these... most of these stops occurred in neighborhoods far from those with newly improved public spaces. To these citizens literally being on the sidewalk made them into a potential criminal, and this demonstrates how easily feel good public spaces can coexist with policies that essentially denied the right to be in other places to large numbers of the public, and although the Bloomberg administration claimed that this policy improved public safety, in
fact, it actually produced very few arrests, and in fact stop-and-frisk is the opposite of feel good space, and one study concluded that such stops compromised the mental health of those who were stopped, creating anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological traumas.

So given the limits of feel good public space, what could be an alternative approach? In order to come up with one I've looked to the geographer, Dan Mitchell, and what he calls Rights Talk, that is the demands of different kind of rights to public space. So instead of depending on a concrete set of physical elements, Rights Talk focuses on social, political, and economic considerations and directly connects public spaces with issues of equality, democracy, and citizenship. Rather than embedding these issues in specific types of public spaces, it concerns itself with the rights of individuals and groups to specific spaces. Thus many kinds of places can function successfully as public spaces. Unlike the generalizable principles of feel good public spaces, these are not abstract principles. These rights are... I'm sorry, these rights are abstract principles, but they can only be realized when they are actualized by real people in particular places in specific circumstances.

So here's a list of rights that I think would constitute new definitions of public space. One, the right to access. Now this is formally recognized by law in the United States, which acknowledges universal access to public space, and advocates of feel good public space simply accept this without question, and assuming that, again, our public space is for everybody, our work is beneficial for all, but this ignores the actual content of American public spaces, and certainly political philosophers have questioned the idea of universal public space and argued that there is no universal public but rather multiple publics differentiated by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and many other elements. Thus in spite of legal claims to equality, strong publics such as white males claim more power and right than weaker publics such as ethnic minorities or the homeless. In particular African American and Latino men clearly occupy more restricted public spaces than other races, and for them behavior that would be normal for others becomes questionable and phrases such... and even threatening... phrases such as DWB, "driving while black," and recent incidents of police shootings of African American men suggest that simply being black in public can involve not only discrimination but even death. So in order to create just public spaces, we need to acknowledge and address these differences in public spaces and certainly movements like "Black Lives Matter" are actually attempting to do that, and confronting this fact is not easy or painless, but it needs to be in the forefront of all current public space discourse. I think this cartoon makes it really clear. Now the other, the flip side of the right to access is the right to difference, and this is connected... this assures the rights of different publics to claim public space with their specific identities rather than as a part of a larger generalized public, and if a single minority body is perceived to be threatening, congregations of these bodies are even more alarming, and I'm sure you know of many examples of this. The one that I'm showing here is Freaknik, which was a spring break gathering of African Americans in Atlanta. African American college students came together in this automotive spring break event that basically every year caused a moral panic to break out in Atlanta, and the result was incredibly heavy police presence, arrests, and finally there were so many police that the event just petered out and died much to the pleasure of the city, the police, and many, many white people there, and there are many, many other cases I could site. The gathering together of large numbers of minority almost always results in a kind of alarm in the mainstream media and
Tagging is always associated with minority youth and often incorrectly with gang activity, is depicted as a extremely troubling loss of public space. Even signs in other languages are seen as being an invasion of public space. So the right to different acknowledges that different publics have the right... have the right to be different in public and the right to represent their difference. Another right is the right to participate. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the Sherry Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation, and if we look at feel good public space and place making we can see that management and collection of materials of narrowly conceived public needs really comes up to basically the third or fourth level and never really reaches genuine participation, which would mean that people would actually take an active role in not only responding to projects but actually initiating and defining those projects themselves. The next is very relevant to our discussion of street vending, the right to livelihoods. This right would acknowledge that public space is an economic space and a workplace. We already know that street vending, day laborers, and many other occupations use public space as their main economic venue, and these obviously vary from place to place. I'm not going to say very much about this because I know that we'll hear a lot of this from other people, and so each occupational group really needs to defend their economic space particularly on the sidewalk, and this has been, of course, the focus of a lot of struggle. Another key right is the right to make demands on the state and the economy, which is very relevant to what Ananya was presenting, and at this conference I was really shocked that no one mentioned the Occupy Movement, which certainly was a key event in the history of public space, and a highly organized occupation of public space, it galvanized public discussion and debate. It introduced new concept into the vocabulary of most people such as the 1% and the 99%, and events in physical space were amplified by print, broadcast, and other indigenal media to a broad audience prompting a national response. Another really important point about Occupy however is that it also demonstrated the limits of public space, and after several months, city governments across the country evicted protestors from all of the sites, and this made it clear that the right to public protest was clearly bounded by legal restrictions on time and space, and then finally the right to make your own spaces, and this is really a right, one of the rights that [inaudible] defined that's the right to the city, the right for people to create the spaces they want and need rather than simply consume spaces that other people have created for them, and this changes them from consumers of public space to producers of public space, and if we look around we see numerous often temporary examples of these, such as gorilla gardeners. Here's a skate park, one of many that were built often underneath freeways.

This is one in Oakland that was built at night, existed for a long time, and then was finally closed down by Cal Trans. There are other examples of this. So they're often invisible in the public space discourse, and like the claims anti-eviction campaign, they are important because they use the borrowing of space rather than ownership. So they create a new attitude and a new relationship with owned property. So this is the most challenging of all rights to public space because they do challenge property rights and other legal claims, and so they're highly contested. So finally, I just want to end by saying that public space is a complex and contested social and spatial condition, and in order to realize rights, we have... our definitions of public space have to move beyond just feeling good in public. Struggles to define and redefine public
space are ongoing. That is, they will never end. Public space is going to continually be transformed by demands and struggles, and recent events such as the "Black Lives Matter" campaign both demand rights and operate in public. They demonstrate in the most literal way the centrality of public space in the struggle for greater democracy and social justice. Thank you. [Applause]