

Book Review:

Public Space: Notes on Why it Matters, What We Should Know, and How to Realize its Potential

By *Vikas Mehta*

Pat Crawford

Director
School of Design
South Dakota State University

pat.crawford@sdstate.edu

In Vikas Mehta's new book, *Public Space: Notes on Why it Matters, What We Should Know, and How to Realize its Potential*, he builds on his significant scholarly contributions to understanding the social, political and physical complexities of public space. Dr. Mehta approaches public space from a deep disciplinary grounding in planning, urban design, sociology and architecture and his experience as Professor of Urban Design, the Fruth/Gemini Chair and Ohio Eminent Scholar of Urban/Environmental Design at the School of Planning, College of DAAP, at the University of Cincinnati.

The central premise of the book is to capture in one conversation the diverse disciplinary ways of understanding and knowing public space conversation. The book can be read straight through or slowly over time picking up sections in random order. With an A5 format (~4"x6") the book is 'approachable,' circumventing the heft of a college textbook. The viewer is drawn in by the cover with bright green block text on a black background. The simplicity of the cover conceals the visual complexity and richness that pulls the reader through the pages. The combination of disciplinary concepts is constructed through a diverse display of descriptive text, diagrammatic symbols, sketches, typographic hierarchy, graphic page design and color blocking. The page layouts make following the author's intended flow natural and creates space for pause and reflection. Each section is an approachable self-contained dialogue, like moving from conversation to conversation at a party with planning theorists, sign makers, and economists; landscape architects, historians, and social activists; architects, psychologists, and politicians; legal scholars, business owners and artists. Through the lively debate, readers are encouraged to broaden their understanding, or be gently reminded of how disciplinary

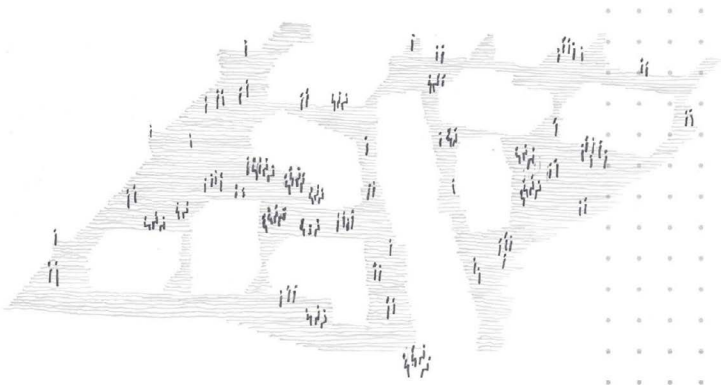
Book Review

Mehta, Vikas. *Public Space: Notes on Why it Matters, What We Should Know, and How to Realize its Potential*. New York: Routledge, 2023.

ISBN-13: 978-1032137025

Figure 1 /

Example diagram from *Public Spaces*.



expertise brings blinders, of how public space is conceived, perceived, and used.

The text is best approached as an experience that requires engagement. Vikas organizes the book into two broad sections. The introduction prepares the reader for the experience, who the book is for, and how to approach the volume. The context is then set with discourse on two framing questions, "Why care?" (pgs. 8-37) and "What is Public Space?" (pgs. 38-89). The second section addresses the challenges of public space, through the lens of Paradoxes (pgs. 90-139), Possibilities (pgs. 130-169) and Propositions (pgs. 170-222).

From the back cover, insights are provided into how disciplinary experts see Vikas's contribution to the scholarly work on public space. A few highlights are worth bringing forward.

"It is an insightful new guide that simplifies and demystifies the public space debate and affirms the value of good and just city life in the time of urban crisis. This book, like its author who is one of the leading authorities in urban design and public space, is innovative, clear and able to open pathways to new ideas." **Tigran Haas**, Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for the Future of Places, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden, Guest Research Scholar at LCAU, MIT.

"This is a must read for all those committed to exploring public space – whether undergraduate or graduate students, planning and design practitioners, those who operate and maintain public spaces, or aspiring civic leaders committed to making the best use of public spaces in their cities." **Miodrag Mitrašinić**, Professor of Urbanism and Architecture, Parsons School of Design, The New School university, New York City

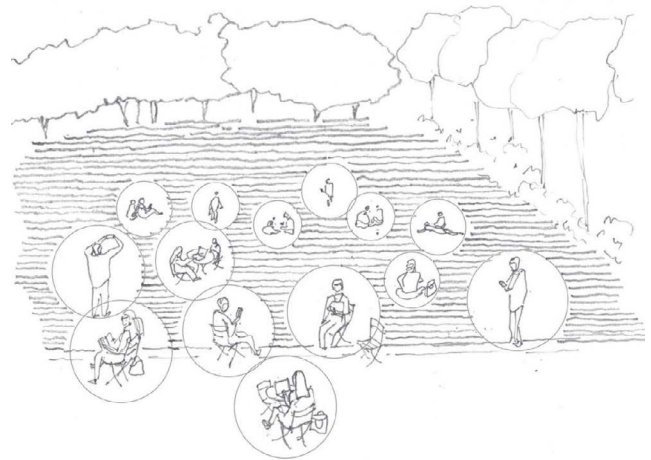


Figure 2 /

Example diagram from *Public Spaces*.

Vikas concludes the book with a challenge to everyone who designs, manages and uses urban spaces: "public space has immense capacity...only limited by our imagination..." (pp.220-221). *Public Space* literally smashes together different ways of seeing public space into a shared exhibition, the page, in the hopes of feeding our imaginations and fostering transformative conversations about public space and public life.

This book is a valuable contribution to makers and designers of public signage. Signage helps people to navigate the spaces and corridors, to understand the social expectations, and builds upon the physical aesthetic of a space. By stepping into the world of others, learning how others think about our shared spaces, we can contribute to the conversation.

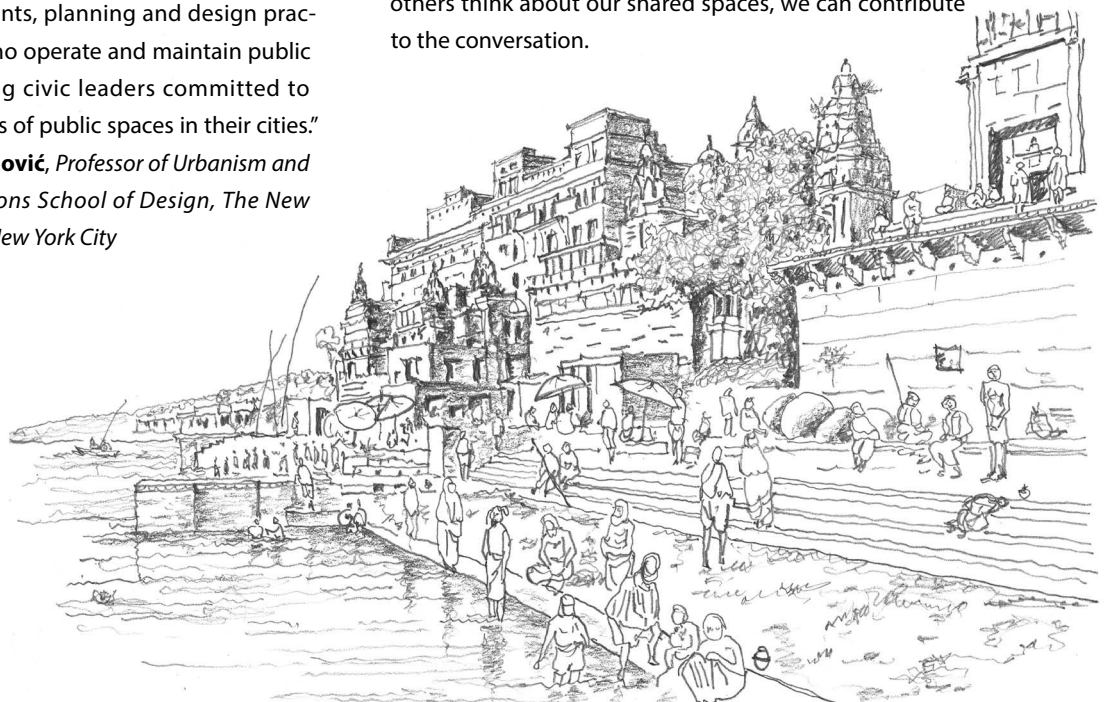


Figure 3 /

Example sketch.