

Cultural Daily

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ECHOES OF THE CITY: Gathering in Public

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, January 28th, 2015

The gathering-in-public experience: threefold and ephemeral

Much of life in the city expresses itself as occasions for gathering in public, from encounters to meetings, inside and outside of buildings, and between them.

Such gatherings are by definition accessible to those not part of the gathering, and hence accepted as observers. At the core of this mutual acceptance is a learned civic behavior much of which is nurtured by places friendly to such gathering, not only in terms of equipment but also in terms of general expectation of such learned civic behavior.

The gathering experience in public is therefore threefold in nature: the social relations between the gatherers, the social relations between the gatherers and the others, and the social spatial relations underpinning the gathering.

In essence, the gathering experience varies according to the characteristics of the individuals and the collective present.

There is also an ephemeral side to these gatherings in that they will occupy space strategically while happening (see feature image) and dissolve with little to no trace left behind (see image below).



Gathering of friends, *habitués*, and players

Friends



The setting is a public market in the little Italy district of Montreal, more specifically a mini food court area, located near the entrance from the street and from the underground parking.

These three gentlemen speak Greek and, as such, constitute a social isolate of sorts not so much lost in the crowd as finding together something essential to their identity in an encounter centered on the maternal logos.

What caught my eye is their distribution in space, more specifically being three of them, the way

they managed to use two chairs linked to a table-for-two with a third from the adjoining table ... which happened not to be occupied at the time.

From my vantage point it felt like some kind of debate between two fellows being witnessed by a third seated in between ... listening and alternatively looking at one and then the other. Friends in a meeting-friendly place due in part to circumstance: the real intent of table and chairs layout being, of course, to facilitate consumption on site of the food bought at the pastry counters across the aisle.

Habitué



The setting is a coffee house in old Jaffa town.

The gathering is typical of backgammon players, not to say addicts, who enjoy the playing but also the kibitzing of the moves.

Of course, the combination of the playing with the underlying commercial venue offering coffee and small food fare is typical of middle-eastern civility.

Backgammon being common to many middle-eastern cultures, the gathering of players is an occasion to transcend social differences, although, not having been there, I cannot help seeing in the two separate groups a possible expression of culturally and linguistically differentiated gatherings of habitués to the place and the game.

Players



The setting is a linear park bordering an old industrial shipping canal next to a public market and tourist oriented exterior art display area. The city, together with an association of chess players, has installed a canopy-covered series of tables with chessboards and pawns provided to amateurs and observers. The gathering is structured by a common interest, if not passion, for the game and its intent is probably to popularize it and seek recruits to the association.

Can we really speak of a gathering or see here, more accurately, a mix of strangers who meet at a table, friends who come for a mini competition between them, and circumstantial grouping of observers and potential coupling of players?

The tunnel shaped space has no center or discussion area; it is strictly focused on playing and moving, from row to row of tables, to watch the games...it lacks all the charm and spontaneity of the backgammon coffee scene above.

In contrast with the pedestrian and bike paths along the canal on one side, and the art display and general milling about area on the other, it is an activity defined island vaguely intent on being a meeting-friendly place.

Civic Gatherings: small town, big city

Small town



The occasion is a Canada Day parade down the main drag of a small, incorporated town located west of Montreal proper. At the onset of the main drag, where it meets the suburban train tracks, the town has created an island of green, next to a strip of short term parking and a couple of benches on the enlarged sidewalk.

It is along that last band of space that four groups of people have gathered, attracted by the parade at the heart of the civic event.

Out of these groups the one most determined to stay are the foursome to the right of the image, installed on folding chairs they purposefully brought to the site to watch the parade.

The least committed to staying and watching is the group of standing persons to the left ... not being “anchored” to seats seems to suggest that status of non-commitment!

As time gets closer to the actual parade they will be joined by others, seated along the sidewalk edge, or by those milling about water bottle distribution points organized by the local bank and pharmacy.

Big city



The occasion is Montreal’s Winter Festival of Lights, when the city’s cultural hub is taken over by thousands of all night revelers. The scale of the event is matched by the scale of the setting, with its monumental light fixtures and the formal group of auditoria and theaters centered on a plaza of matching scale. If the traffic is kept out of the four city blocks holding the event, the pedestrian traffic is definitely organized for security reasons as the portable barriers indicate.

The event is multi-centered, with bandstands for musical groups, kiosks for food and drinks and for warming up, but the general theme of Winter Lights keeps everyone amused, if not awed at the richness of colored light displays from the Ferris wheel to lit ice sculptures, etc.

The social focus of the experience of gathering in public is extended here to the public itself thronging on this civic occasion and intending to mark the winter solstice, as is done in most northern cities of the world.

If anything the common thread in this civic experience does transcend its urban setting as it embraces a deeper human experience of surviving the winter and celebrating this feat collectively.

Celebratory gatherings: intimate and semi-public

The most intensely colored gatherings, socially speaking, are of the celebratory type; whether it celebrates a person or a group, it is the type of gathering where participants are very much involved

in the definition of the nature and process of the celebration.

Intimate



The setting is a small middle-eastern restaurant; the occasion is the celebration of a year of encounters for the purpose of creating a collective work of art: not self evident for three designers, one sociologist and a copy editor!

But we did it!

The fact that this accomplishment has socially soldered the group is rather evident in the social proximity, the beaming faces and the embracing of each other ... in public!

In a way the group is celebrating itself as much as its performance in this gathering that one should qualify as intimate, rather than merely small. Of course restaurants are usually set up for such gatherings, in corners or separate rooms, mitigating the notion of gathering in public.

Semi-public



The setting is the front yard of the residence of a well loved MD being celebrated at fifty by family and friends getting ready, here, for a bike race around the neighborhood, a sport he particularly loves.

The particularity of this event is of course its size and the fact that its setting has left the traditional interior venue of the house for the wider public realm of the neighborhood, however momentarily.

It should be noted that the phenomenon of the “bloc party” is well know in this economically privileged part of town, and the banner announcing the event is witness to the neighbors’ embracing an event we can safely qualify as semi-public, rather than merely large.

Discussion

It should now be clear, in spite of the small sample of situations presented, that the gathering experience in public varies according to the intent of those who gather and according to age group, gender of participants, shared interest, size of gathering, impromptu or prepared setting, degree of formality, etc.

It can surely be appreciated that gathering in public is probably the most dynamic way to ritually or spontaneously humanize a city and produce a sociable citizenry.

It can be advanced that meeting-friendly places are the heart of the gathering-in-public experience. Just as the archaic fire pit was the heart of gatherings in past human settlements, an improvised roofed-over outdoor area in a housing coop side yard is possessed of such generic meeting-friendliness.



Jaffa coffee house photo credit Sam Amiel

All other photos credit Maurice Amiel

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