

## **Making Sense of the City: Place, Space, and Rhetoric in Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square**

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Public squares have historically functioned as the core of salient public communicative exchange and played host to collective gatherings for a wide variety of people and purposes.<sup>1</sup> More recently public squares have played a central part in urban revitalization projects as attempts to address often absent public “commons”<sup>2</sup> for public engagement about communal, political, and social life.<sup>3</sup> Many

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<sup>1</sup> The Agora, for instance, was a public square in which a man's (in particular, as women were not originally a part of this Ancient tradition) worth was often determined by his ability to persuade citizens of various legislative or judicial decisions that ultimately defined the “public good.” See, e.g., Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 248-325; Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977 [1976]); and Mark C. Childs, *Squares: A Public Place Design Guide for Urbanists* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 3-11.

<sup>2</sup> As explained in Childs 11-35.

<sup>3</sup> Some notable urban revitalization projects that have included revitalizing particular public squares include: Portland, OR and Pioneer Courthouse Square in 1983; Washington D.C. and Courthouse Square in 2002; New Orleans, LA and Jackson Square since Hurricane Katrina; Detroit, MI and Campus Martius in 1999; and New York, NY and Union Square Park in the late 1980s, to name a few. More recently, Boston, MA has announced plans to renovate its City Hall Plaza; Phoenix, AZ has announced plans to renovate its downtown, including overhaul of an existing public square and plans to work with the new ASU-Phoenix campus to build a new public square; and Denver, CO has hired a famous architect, Gio

city centers have experienced a rebirth, with increases in the number of residents moving to (or back to) downtown areas.<sup>4</sup> Studying how people make sense of the city as a particular place and/or space is more important than ever for city officials, architects, landscape designers, planners, and urban critics as they make decisions that affect the ways in which we experience a city on an everyday basis. The official rhetoric of city planning, for example, can be inclusive and more widely applicable if it incorporates its varied population's preferences for use and/or accessibility in addition to its planning goals. In renovating a dysfunctional public square, understanding which people use a city's public squares and for what purposes can lead to new design ideas that encourage a more integrative environment for people to engage for both "official" and "unofficial" purposes.

Although variable relationships and their effects are interesting for city planners and designers, investigating the larger, and more complex, sense-making processes of public areas such as public squares can provide valuable insight into the processes in which such places and/or spaces *become* meaningful in different ways. How people make sense of their central public square often reflects how they understand what it means to live in a particular city. For instance, living in New York City requires recognizing the role Times Square plays in reflecting the city's reliance on tourism and consumerism; and living in Portland, Oregon involves making sense of Pioneer Courthouse Square (PCS) as a reflection of the "various walks of life" that comprise the larger city.<sup>5</sup> In both of these

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Ponti, to help redesign downtown's City Park Square. See Project for Public Spaces website for more details and information, 5 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.pps.org>>.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Frey, for instance, discusses the "graying of the suburbs" which is leading towards a resurgence of youth moving to urban areas and Les Christie writes about population trends in 3 big U.S. cities that support such a move. See William H. Frey, "The New Urban Demographics: Race Space & Boomer Aging," *The Brookings Review* 18 (2000): 18-21; Les Christie, "Cities are Hot Again: After Years of Urban Flight, Americans are Finding the Appeal of Places like Philadelphia, Nashville and Seattle." June 15, 2006. 30 Jan. 2008 <[http://money.cnn.com/2006/06/15/real\\_estate/return\\_to\\_cities/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2006/06/15/real_estate/return_to_cities/index.htm)>.

<sup>5</sup> Quote taken from an interview with Ari, a repeat vacationer who has spent time in PCS while in Portland for this very reason

examples, the way in which we understand a city and its public squares to be meaningful are closely intertwined. Each city is often connected to a central public square in discussions of the city's health, culture, and demographics. And each public square often (re)presents itself to the world in terms of the city within which it resides. The public square, in this case, plays a pivotal role in determining how people make sense of the written, oral, and performative texts that are consumed within and about it. Such sense-making processes include individual and collective interpretations of public squares, which take into account two different types of understanding: spatial (grounded in concepts of space) and platial (grounded in concepts of place).

Both spatial and platial approaches to understanding always require each other in some degree but continually appear as privileged or disadvantaged in particular sense-making processes of how some aspect of public life is meaningful. In other words, place functions in an inherently dialectical tension with space; both are used in sense-making processes, articulated in discourses, and performed in meaningful ways. Understanding a city's public space requires both understanding how that space is made sense of in terms of particular places, and how a particular place provides definitional parameters for making sense of more abstract public discursive space. A central public square is one way that this abstract-tangible, space-place relationship can be seen to appear in the ways its users articulate and perform its meaning.

I make theoretical distinctions between place and space to ground a further investigation of the sense-making processes of a public square. I argue that these sense-making processes are inherently tension-filled, and I seek to investigate how tensions appear "in the world" among nuances of meanings and the wide variety of people who comprise a "public." For instance, a person without a home may make sense of a public square as a place to sit without getting hassled, while a tourist visiting the same square may make sense of it as an historical landmark. This tension does not preclude collective negotiation to reconcile different sense-making processes or even coexisting contradictory meanings, but it does require recognizing the multiplicity of possibilities, including verbal,

written, and performative aspects that collectively comprise a rhetoric in and about a public square.

The critical project of investigating both official and unofficial meaning-making processes about a particular public square can reveal not only how voices and meanings are understood as “ideal” or “desirable” but also alternative ways of making sense of a public square and its relationship to the city in which it resides. By participating in the investigation *and* discursive creation of a public square as meaningful, the city in which a public square functions can be seen in ways in which spoken and written texts alone cannot. In looking to both traditional and participatory methods of gathering and analyzing rhetorical texts of a public square, different people can be seen to make sense of it in different ways.

Some people privilege the square as a place and others privilege it as a space. In these differing sense-making processes, it is possible to see how a theoretical distinction between place and space can help to further explain the practical consequences competing sense-making processes have for a city in both official and unofficial ways. By combining qualitative methods of data collection (e.g., interviews and participant-observation) and rhetorical analysis of texts (e.g., interview transcripts and performances) in and about Portland, Oregon’s Pioneer Courthouse Square, I seek to illustrate how a mixed methodology can serve to enhance existing approaches to investigating how cities are communicatively constructed as meaningful. Analyzing rhetorics of performance is already an engaged practice within the field of communication more generally and among rhetoricians more specifically.<sup>6</sup> I argue that employing both qualitative *and* rhetorical analytic methods in studying place and space in the city can enhance both rhetorical theory *and* move that theory into action.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Carole Blair, “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places.” *Western Journal of Communication* 65 (2001): 271-94; Carole Blair and Neil Michel, “Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial.” *RSQ: Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 (2000): 31-55; and Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photograph.” *RSQ: Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31 (2001): 5-31

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With this as my focus, *I aim to simultaneously show how rhetorical theory can and should conceptually differentiate between place and space and more specifically consider the consequences of preferencing place or space in meaning-making processes of public squares and the cities within which they reside.* First, I will explore why both place and space are important in a discussion of the city more generally and of a particular public square more specifically. Second, I will discuss the benefits of engaging in a multi-method approach to studying the rhetoric of a particular public square, and the ways in which such a study can be extended to a discussion of the city within which that square is experienced. Third, I will show how analyzing Pioneer Courthouse Square can serve as an exemplar of how such a theoretical distinction between place and space can appear in sense-making processes in and about it. Fourth, I will explain how such an analysis has consequences for understanding the square itself as meaningful *and* for understanding the city as a whole from a more critical perspective. Last, I will discuss how this type of work can serve as a call to rhetoricians more generally to extend their analyses and theories to practical applications and processes of design, (re)development initiatives, and discourses of use in the city.

### **Place and Space in the City**

Traditionally, a city's public squares serve as unique forums for political, social, and communal debate. The recent trend in many urban centers has been to reclaim public squares as a way to revitalize previously abandoned and/or rundown sections of the city. This trend has placed public squares at the forefront of many city (re)design projects that seek to overhaul public squares into functional sites to encourage more interactivity within and about a city.<sup>7</sup> Historically, public squares have been sites for demonstrations

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<sup>7</sup> For a general discussion of this, see Fred Kent, Kathy Madden and Phil Myrick in "Launching a New Tradition of Great Public Squares," *Project for Public Spaces* 31 Jan. 2008 <[http://www.pps.org/squares/info/squares\\_articles/squares\\_intro](http://www.pps.org/squares/info/squares_articles/squares_intro)>. For a specific example, see Pioneer Courthouse Square's official website for their mission statement, "Welcome all to our community gathering place": "About Us,"

of power, resistance, and other communal gatherings.<sup>8</sup> Public squares provide a rich site for participating in and observing rhetoric that inherently embodies place and space. Such processes are not only verbalized but also symbolically performed through dress, movement, and interaction. In this way, rhetoric has played and continues to play an integral role in helping scholars study social interaction, community formation, and civic engagement from a communicative perspective without relying solely on verbal or written texts.<sup>9</sup>

Recent theoretical distinctions have been made between place and space in rhetorical studies, most often in an attempt to discuss public memory in relation to museums, monuments and other public commemorative structures, and landscapes.<sup>10</sup> But other disciplines have produced scholarship also attempting to differentiate the terms conceptually before practically concerning themselves with the effects. For instance, Philip Sheldrake argues that the difference between place and space exists in the (lack of) concreteness of each term.<sup>11</sup> Place, in this distinction, is a concrete and tangible entity and

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*Pioneer Courthouse Square*, 16 June 2006 <<http://www.pioneercourthousesquare.org/about.htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Savannah, Georgia alone has 22 squares and its city plan traces back to 1733 when the Oglethorpe plan took into account the central public square as a way to organize entire communities and neighborhoods (see Lisa Chamberlain, "Savannah Adds to the Master Plan of 1733," *New York Times on the Web*, 23 May 2007, 31 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/23/realestate/commercial/23savannah.html>>).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., Angela G. Ray, "The Rhetorical Ritual of Citizenship: Women's Voting as Public Performance, 1868-1875." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93 (2007): 1-26.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of public memory and museums, see, Ekaterina Haskins and Justin DeRose, "Memory, Visibility, and Public Space: Reflections on Commemoration(s) of 9/11." *Space and Culture* 6 (2003): 377-93. For an analysis of monuments and other public commemorative structures, see, Carole Blair, "Reflections on Criticism and Bodies" and Blair and Michel, "Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics." For an analysis of landscapes, see S. Michael Halloran and Gregory Clark "National Park Landscapes and the Rhetorical Display of Civic Religion," *Rhetorics of Display*. Ed. Lawrence J. Prelli (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006) 141-56.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 13.

space is abstract and intangible. *Space* generally refers to abstract and intangible evocations of discourse, as a host to discourse about place, or as an overarching contextual backdrop in which discourse occurs. *Place*, on the other hand, is generally discussed as a physical or tangible entity in which social, political, and cultural discourses are understood, a limited or bounded area in which rhetoric emerges in and about, or as an approachable or exclusionary tool for making sense of a larger discourse in specific ways. Particular contexts require particular rhetorical strategies to be effective.<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, I do not intend to privilege either place or space as a conceptual frame for studying rhetoric but rather explicate possible consequences of adopting one over another in any given situation.

Sometimes scholars have chosen to privilege space over place in their discussions of rhetorical “effect.” For example, Benjamin Barber downplays place in terms of its relationship to democracy (and/or capitalism): “The communities that communitarians yearn for are not likely to flourish between the crowded freeways and the denuded public squares of an overweening commercial civilization, where corporate developers claim they have won another victory for democracy every time they build a new mall.”<sup>13</sup> Barber presents squares as connected places and very different than the destination for lively discussion of “public good” that occurred in the Agora or polis of antiquity. The “public good” in Barber’s discussion is determined not by all interested parties’ involvement in open debate, but by the most powerful voices that are able to effect the creation of policy. Instead of a collectively experienced and negotiated understanding, place for Barber is the effect of a larger system gone awry. The consequence of adopting this meaning, Barber claims, is a hyper-focus on the particular with little thought to how the particular affects the general. Without understanding that the larger community within which a public square resides may not need another

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<sup>12</sup> Bitzer’s “rhetorical situation” helps us understand this rhetorically as organized around context, opportunity, constraint, problem, and solution. See Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) 48.

commercial venue but instead an open and accessible forum within which to participate is a consequence of privileging one conception of place in a sense-making process about the square as meaningful.

Barber advocates instead for privileging space in the sense-making process of a public square. He discusses this as a haven to which democracy should return: “The denizens of sprawling suburbs, of busted inner cities, of gated communities founded on fear and escapism have to look long and hard to find anything resembling a genuine civic space. Yet, without it, democracy cannot survive.”<sup>14</sup> For Barber, privileging space over place changes the consequences of adopting one meaning of the square (a civically-minded, openly-accessible idealized space) over another (a place to develop and commercialize). But even this sense-making remains closed to alternative meanings, not open to the process of negotiating meaning in terms of the larger systems—community, neighborhood, city, government—within which such a square functions. While Barber privileges space over place, others employ the idea of place over space in their explanations of the public sphere.

For instance, Sennett emphasizes place as the location where ideas take action. He grounds his concept of *theatrum mundi*, or the ability to hold codified beliefs that allow us to understand drama in the theater as apart from and simultaneously reflective of everyday social interaction, in the connection between performance of meaning and a larger sense of belonging.<sup>15</sup> Place and space are coordinated in this manner but remain consequential in the way they are understood, employed, and interpreted in any given situation. For Sennett, the place where people gather signifies both the opportunities and constraints people understand to be a part of their sense-making processes of place. In this view, we can only perform what we understand to be possible “in the world.” What we see as possible is determined by the opportunities and constraints present in our surroundings—both in terms of the tangible resources at our disposal but also in terms of the intangible belief structures that are formed through our experiences and discourses about those

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<sup>14</sup> Barber 48.

<sup>15</sup> Sennett, *Fall* 64.

experiences. Although the latter is engaged in specific discursive spaces with others, Sennett sees the physical places where these beliefs are enacted to be the more valuable in helping to understand how our cities are meaningful.

Rather than hypothesizing about abstract spaces that host ever-changing and competing discourses, Sennett points out that all experiences and social connections are all grounded in particular places. Similarly, all discursive spaces are bound by opportunities and constraints connected to the situations and places within which they occur. These practical reflections, however, often raise even more questions of possibility: If we are only able to create meaning based on our experiences grounded “in the world,” then are we fated to live within the realm of current possibility forever? Can we ever move beyond the tangible constraints within which we understand the world to be meaningful? Or can we eventually imagine a world void of such tangible constraints that allow us to entertain possibilities of meaning not accessible in our current experience “in the world”? For instance, if we were only able to understand “race” as meaningful within the realm of experience with existing policy in the Southern United States before the Civil Rights Movement, our understanding of “equality” would be very different. Thus, studying how rhetors (in both official and unofficial rhetorical situations) make use of rhetorical strategies like platial and spatial language can help us to more critically explore specific places, like public squares, as contested understandings, constructions, and interpretations with various and real consequences for the possibility of meaning. Without embracing the inherent tension between understanding a public square in terms of place and space, voices espousing meaning not aligned with the dominant wind up marginalized as not relevant in the participatory process of meaning-making.

### **Investigating Place and Space in the City: A Mixed-Methods Approach**

Examining place and space requires a mixed methodology that combines qualitative approaches to gathering data and rhetorical

analysis of that data as in insightful way to investigate the city.<sup>16</sup> In this way, including a wide variety of participants who find a particular public place and space meaningful in different ways can be investigated as a complex and ever-changing process rather than a closed and objective snapshot of “what is.” The communicative aspects of theories of place<sup>17</sup> and space<sup>18</sup> help us to better understand these processes as often privileging some sense-making processes over others. A public square is one site of study in which a diverse gathering of a city’s population can both articulate and perform the meaning of the square itself and that square’s relation to the larger city within which it resides. Such multiplicity of meaning is inherently rhetorical.<sup>19</sup> Recent rhetorical scholarship has investigated texts such as physical landscape design, spatial movement, and public memorials/monuments as rhetorical constructs.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars

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<sup>16</sup> E.g., see Dwight Conquergood on the combination of ethnographic methods of data collection and rhetorical analysis as insightful for communication scholarship: “Rethinking Ethnography: Toward a Critical Cultural Politics.” *Communication Monographs* 58 (1991): 179-94.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., Casey *The Fate of Place*; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol.1*, 2 vols. trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996 [1991]); Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Knopf); and Tuan *Space and Place*.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g., Barry Brummett, “Some Implications of ‘Process’ or ‘Intersubjectivity’: Postmodern Rhetoric.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9 (1976): 21-51; Robert L. Scott, “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic.” *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967): 9-17.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of physical landscape design, see Carole Blair and Neil Michel, “Constructing Memories . . . of What? Reading the Landscape of the Astronauts Memorial.” *Places of Commemoration: The Search for Identity and Landscape Architecture*. Ed. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Studies in Landscape Architecture, 2001, 185-214); Greg Dickinson, “Joe’s Rhetoric: Finding Authenticity at Starbucks.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32 (2002): 5-27; Lawrence W.

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have extended rhetorical scholarship to include not only formally produced texts by those with “official” access to channels of communication but also informal texts that reflect vernacular—and often “unofficial”—positions.<sup>21</sup>

Organic social interactions occur on a daily basis in a public square. Such unofficial performances of social interaction can be considered alongside more official rhetorical texts, such as formal presentations during planned events by square management. Exploring the often hidden or marginalized symbolic aspects of communication has already had a direct effect on rhetorical scholarship by expanding the approach of rhetorical analysis and criticism to include more than traditional close-reading approaches.<sup>22</sup> In this examination of public squares, such expansion allows for a more comprehensive and complex rhetorical analysis, which distinguishes between space and place and their direct relationship to meaning-making.

As Amy Elizabeth Grim argues, analyzing vernacular rhetoric extends our understanding of rhetoric beyond consideration of

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Rosenfield, “Central Park and the Celebration of Civic Virtue.” *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*. Ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, 221-66); Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994) and *The Fall of Public Man*; and erin daina underwood, “Boulder’s Boulder: Analyzing the Vernacular Rhetoric of a Boulder Landscape,” Paper presented at the Rhetoric Society of America conference, Memphis, TN (2006). See work on spatial movement and rhetoric in Michel de Certeau. Vol. 1 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 2 vols. Trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988 [1984]) and Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996 [1991]). For an analysis of public memorials/monuments as rhetorical constructs, see Blair and Michels, “Constructing Memories”.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g., Gerard A. Hauser, “Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion.” *Communication Monographs* 65 (1998): 83-107; Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); and Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse.” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 19-46.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., The “close reading” approach discussed by Michael C. Leff in “Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln’s ‘House Divided’ Speech.” Published under separate cover as the first in the series of Van Zelst Lecture in Communication (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University School of Speech, 1984).

formal texts, focusing on rhetoric as it “happens in the world.”<sup>23</sup> Grim builds on Hauser’s analysis of vernacular rhetoric, which he claims “reaffirms the place of actual discourses as the locale of socially salient meanings” and helps rhetoricians to study everyday formations of public opinion (rhetorical *praxis*) to make-sense of an ever-changing world.<sup>24</sup> Just as studying the formation of public opinion should include vernacular ways of speaking to incorporate the multivocality of a “public,” studying public squares should take into consideration of vernacular performances that make a square meaningful in various ways. Investigating public opinion formation requires discussing “official” rhetorical texts in relation to their “unofficial” counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, investigating public squares requires considering both place and space as contradictory, yet relational ways of sense-making about a square that have corresponding consequences for how people understand a square—and the city within which it resides—as meaningful.

Qualitative methodologies offer an additional way to approach studying public squares that considers the accounts of many different meanings as they emerge. For instance, Times Square’s meaning as iconic of New York City from a qualitative perspective can help emphasize alternative (and often conflicting) sense-making processes.<sup>26</sup> While people from all over the world travel to and through the square, its meaning is understood collectively—albeit to residents of New York City in different ways than to tourists. The ways in which Times Square might be made sense of as both a destination (e.g., for New Years Eve gathering) *and* as an experience one engages (e.g., by walking through it). Similarly, a tourist may make sense of Times Square as primarily a site to visit and

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Amy Elizabeth Grim, “Citizens Deliberate the ‘Good Death’: The Vernacular Rhetoric of Euthanasia.” PhD diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Hauser *Vernacular Voices* 103.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g., Hauser *Vernacular Voices* for a more detailed discussion of terms.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g., Daniel Makagon, “A Search for Social Connection in America’s Town Square: Times Square and Urban Public Life,” *Southern Communication Journal* 69 (2003): 1-21; Daniel Makagon, *Where the Ball Drops: Days and Nights in Times Square* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

photograph (as a place) whereas a long-time resident of Manhattan may make sense of the square primarily as that which surrounds the theater district (as a space). Each understanding relies upon multiple, yet collectively recognized meanings for the square as they are articulated (differently) by various people. Both place and space play equally important parts in understanding Times Square as meaningful in these examples but the consequences of privileging one set of conceptual terms (patial or spatial) in the sense-making process should not be dismissed as insignificant.

The difficulty these two language strategies have in considering one another in deliberative ways precludes an open and dialogic process of public engagement about a city's "public good."<sup>27</sup> If one meaning—or meaning-making process—is privileged over another, it seems an inherent obstacle to free and open communication characteristic of a successfully functioning public sphere.<sup>28</sup> In an effort to move beyond mere identification of these meanings as "privileged" in one way or another, I additionally posit that patterns of *spatial language* (grounded in the concept of *chôra*) and *patial language* (grounded in the concept of *topoi*)<sup>29</sup> are reflected or ignored in performances of a particular public square.<sup>30</sup> These connections have

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<sup>27</sup> See Mikhail. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, 272) for a more detailed explanation of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Seyla Benhabib, ed. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996) have all addressed this issue in their work.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Casey distinguishes between place and space by tracing the concepts back to their Greek roots (333). Place is associated with *topoi*, meaning the commonly negotiated and understood categories (commonplaces) that help us to make sense of our world in particular, tangible, and contestable ways; space is associated with *chôra*, referring to the "room" within which bodies move and is understood to shape those bodies' opportunities in abstract, hypothetical, and intangible ways (70-73).

<sup>30</sup> I am most interested in the term "public" here as it is understood to be openly accessible and useable by the largest variety of people within a given set of guidelines and/or rules.

larger implications for a city's opportunities to make use of its public squares to achieve larger governmental, institutional, and community goals and serve as a forum for engaging difference rather than just tolerating it.<sup>31</sup>

### **Pioneer Courthouse Square as Place and Space**

In analyzing sense-making processes expressed through verbal and written texts and performances in and about Portland, Oregon's Pioneer Courthouse Square (PCS), I argue that dominant presentations of the public square as a well-ordered, ideal representation of the city generally utilize *spatial language*—language that is abstract, intangible, widely applicable, and without clear limitations or borders. Non-dominant, alternative, sometimes resistant, understandings of the public square generally utilize a sense-making process framed by *platial language*—language that is particular, tangible, specific to a location or situation, and understood within a set of limitations or borders.

Over the course of three weeks, I engaged in intense participant-observation of one nationally touted “successful” urban public square—Portland, Oregon's Pioneer Courthouse Square.<sup>32</sup> I gathered and analyzed the spoken, written, and performative texts produced in and about PCS in an effort to discuss the role of place and space in meaning-making processes of the square. I looked for ways in which various people made sense of the square in terms of place and/or space as a way to discuss how such sense-making is 1) related to the city within which the square resides (Portland, Oregon), and 2) consequential for those officially and unofficially associated with the square in similar or different ways. A mixed methods approach combining qualitative and rhetorical analysis methodologies guided my three weeks of intense fieldwork and thirty-four interviews with people both “officially” associated with the square and who

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<sup>31</sup> In the spirit of Young and Benhabib.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Project for Public Spaces, evaluative measures. See *Project for Public Spaces*, “Pioneer Courthouse Square” 15 Feb. 2006 <[http://www.pps.org/great\\_public\\_spaces/one?public\\_place\\_id=19](http://www.pps.org/great_public_spaces/one?public_place_id=19)>.

“unofficially” used this square for a variety of activities.<sup>33</sup> Interviews ranged from approximately 5 minutes to over an hour and a half, and serve as the spoken and written texts on which my rhetorical analysis focused.

I also considered performances of meaning that emerged during my participant-observation and related these performances to the spoken and written texts I collected. These were captured in photographs and video clips of PCS as well as detailed fieldnotes from my time spent as a participant-observer “on site.” Performances varied in their structure, collectivity, and consciousness in conveying meaning; however, all performances were directly engaged in a rhetoric of the square in some way. Ranging from a pro-Israel rally to organic social interactions among people in the square at any given time, performances varied widely and continuously emerged. Treating these performances as rhetorical data requires grounding their interpretations in rhetorical concepts; in this case, place and space.

By extending my rhetorical analysis beyond written and spoken rhetoric to include performances of meaning in and about PCS, I attempted to see how place and space emerged as meaningful ways in which people made sense of PCS within its confines and experiences. This further allowed me to consider the consequences of such sense-making for both the square and the city of Portland. First, I searched for how participants’ sense-making processes about PCS revealed concepts of place and space in their articulations of meaning; second, I looked at how these articulations of meaning were performed (or not performed).

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<sup>33</sup> People “officially” associated with the square include management, event coordinators, heads of security, heads of janitorial/maintenance staff, permitted vendors, people who grant or deny permits for events held in the squares, and historians. “Unofficial” uses include eating lunch, meeting people, attending events, “hanging out,” people-watching, drinking coffee, reading books or newspapers, taking breaks from work, sight-seeing, and using the square as a temporary “home”.

*The Language of Place and Space*

Participants' articulations of PCS as both a meaningful place and space warranted an investigation into how their language choices reflected these concepts differently. In particular, I wanted to see if different people tended to privilege place over space or vice versa in the ways they made sense of the square. Rhetorical analysis of spoken and written texts produced in and about PCS revealed one frequent way of making sense of PCS: as "Portland's living room." Newspaper articles, television news report headlines, the PCS official website, the Portland Department of Parks and Recreation website, and various brochures and promotional materials each referred to PCS as "Portland's living room." Additionally, people who used the square on an everyday basis also overwhelmingly referred to the square as "Portland's living room" in their articulations of the square as meaningful. Interestingly enough, this phrase was adopted by various people to explain the square in significantly different ways.

These differences revealed several consequences for both the people making sense of the square and for the opportunities and constraints understood to be associated with PCS and the city of Portland. For example, Jim, a member of the security team hired to patrol PCS, used the "living room" metaphor when describing his job. "The square is always known as 'Portland's living room,' and my job is to keep people's feet off the furniture. I look for people that put their feet on the furniture. Um, people who are misusing the square..." Jim's explanation both presents the square as controllable ("misusing the square" is punishable) and also universally meaningful (PCS is "always known as 'Portland's living room'"). He discusses PCS as an easily recognizable room in anyone's house, and his job as enforcing the expectations of being in the living room. He fundamentally assumes that the "living room" means the same thing to everyone who uses the square. In describing the square in this way, Jim does not consider the possibility that people may not universally understand the "rules" of being in a living room in the same way. As an enforcer of rules, Jim does not entertain the notion that some

people may find it appropriate to put one's "feet on the furniture" in the "living room."

Jim's use of "living room" privileges space in the way he refers to the square as a hypothetical living room always understood as part of a hypothetical larger structure and only a temporary stopping point as people move through that larger structure. Although a "living room" is a tangible entity in some people's houses, it remains abstract until it is evoked as a particular living room in a particular house. These particulars allow a collective to organize around its associated meaning in attempt to resist and/or introduce alternative meanings that also relate to those particulars. In this way, privileging *place* (associated with the particulars) rather than *space* (associated with the hypothetical) in the sense-making process of PCS has different consequences for people's ability to disagree with—or resist—meanings favored by those officially associated with the square, like Jim. Even if we were to accept the universal claim that being in one's living room does not coincide with putting one's feet on the furniture, coming to a consensus on what exactly constitutes furniture in PCS runs into many of the same difficulties just described.

Consequently, the power of spatial language allows the rhetoric of people who are "officially" associated with the PCS to utilize abstract and overarching terminology to present one meaning of the square as shaping all individual sense-making opportunities. In the same way, Casey's explanation of *chôra* requires understanding the shape of the "room" to understand the bodies within it.

Platial language, on the other hand, requires contested rhetorics to bump up against one another in "unofficial" ways, turning to tangible, collectively recognizable ways of sense-making as producing socially constructed, tension-filled meanings of PCS that are subject to change as new elements are introduced to the sense-making process. Similarly, Casey's association of place with *topoi* requires understanding a grouping of elements to be collectively named within a given category at a given time and under a given set of circumstances. For instance, is the brick-terraced area in PCS a series of amphitheater benches or a set of stairs? This interpretation directly affects my determination of whether I should sit or stand on

them and is affected by whether I understand the purpose of the square to be host to a music concert or a throughway for commuter traffic.

In Jim's example, the "living room" description is helpful in terms of accessibility: most people have had experience with a living room at some point in their lives and therefore recognize the category (*topoi*) as a common reference to a room in the house. Jim, however, has the ability to *individually* determine the meaning of how to appropriately behave in the living room and his personal interpretation of meaning serves as a universal guideline for enforcement. In other words, Jim's overarching meaning of how one *should* behave in the living room has consequences for those whose individual interpretations of meaning differ. If alternative sense-making does not fit into the "shape" of Jim's meaning of PCS as a "living room" (*chóra*), it cannot add to or change his meaning. Conveying what it means to be in *the* "living room" of a city is not a tangible, concrete experience that most people are able to articulate but the way in which such meaning is performed often reveals various—and contentious—interpretations not otherwise easily noticeable in verbal or written articulations of meaning alone. Reliance on abstract, intangible, unclearly delimited language (*spatial language*) to articulate meaning about a public square has different consequences than tangible, specific, and experientially-grounded ways of making sense of a public square (*patial language*). Similarly, performing meaning within and about the square is also illuminating in ways language alone cannot reveal.

Encouraging city officials to think of the square—and the city—in terms of place and space as distinctive concepts can allow for planning, design, and development to more coherently address the multiple and complex needs of maintaining a "successful" public square. Consequently, the ability for people who understand and experience PCS in the everyday to critically assess how a heteroglossic environment is maintained in the way the square is experienced as *publicly* accessible requires a brief reflection on issues of power as they encourage and discourage alternative meaning-making processes to develop and engage.

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**Fig 1: Street Sign to Everywhere, PCS June 2006**



**Fig 2: PCS during Noon Tunes, with moveable furniture, June 2006**

*Performing Place and Space*

As I sat down amidst the seemingly infinite number of bricks that make up the terraced side of the square from which I observed, I noticed many things that I had detected before. The woman who carried her shopping cart filled with various personal affects pushed slowly through the square, twitching and talking to herself about something. Tourists wandered aimlessly with cameras dangling around their necks, always stopping to take a photo of the twisted street signs that connect PCS in relation to the rest of the world (fig. 1). I watched the tunnel doors below Starbucks slowly open and three men dressed in all black emerged one after another with dollies stacked tall with white plastic chairs. The tall stacks of chairs were wheeled to each corner of the square's flat section and pushed off the dollies. The men returned, this time emerging with a stack of tables. Each man returned to where he had left the stack of chairs minutes earlier. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, the flat surface below me was scattered with round, plastic tables, four chairs to a table, and umbrellas (fig. 2) opened one after another.

This same scene played out almost every afternoon I had been at PCS, and the break down process happened just as quickly. I remember my utter confusion when I sat at one of these tables my first day only to find all the chairs disappearing around me within two hours. No one asked me to move, nor did they tell me they needed my chair. But as every other table and chair was wheeled back into the tunnel behind the big brass doors, I sheepishly gave up my chair because I felt I was supposed to. It would have been much nicer to sit at this table, shaded from the sun and with much better padding than the uneven bricks that formed the "steps" (or "seats") of the amphitheater-like design. As I later discovered, square management had implemented a policy to immediately remove all moveable furniture—including these chairs, tables, and umbrellas—so that no individual or group could monopolize, steal, abuse, or otherwise use as a territorial marker the furniture for their own purposes. Such a policy seemed to simultaneously meet the need for people to have furniture during scheduled events while also displaying a distrust of

all people's ability to responsibly use that furniture during non-scheduled events. Regardless of how I felt about the moveable furniture policy, it was thanks to my seat with an upper level vantage point that I noticed one tourist in particular.

Ari strolled into the square from opposite of where I was seated. I noticed him immediately because he was not in a hurry, as were other people who were cutting through the square to catch a train, bus, or move onto somewhere else. He stopped to look at the tourist attractions—the crossed street signs, the historical explanations, the plaques. But then he watched the table set-up process and gingerly approached an open table. No one else sat with him, so after looking around for a bit, he opened his novel. I decided to approach him and ask if he might be willing to help me with my research. He smiled and said he would be delighted. In our next few minutes of interaction, Ari told me about how he was here on vacation with his family; his wife and son had gone shopping nearby. He, however, preferred to hang out in the square. He had been before and felt that sitting in PCS was a great way to observe “all walks of life interacting.” He was originally from Iraq but had lived in New York for the last twenty-five years, he told me.

In the middle of our conversation, the white, middle-aged woman with dirt smudges on her face and a shopping cart whom I had seen many times before approached him from behind. She held a clenched fist one-inch from his ear. I noticed her first, and as he continued discussing how great it was that so many types of people were always present in the square, he eventually turned his head slightly and saw the fist. Neither of us said anything for a few seconds, and then he continued talking as if she wasn't there. The woman squished her face and grimaced, relaxed her fist, and then re-clenched it even nearer to his head. After what seemed an unbearably long time—Ari still talking through it all as if nothing was happening, cautiously looking out his peripheral vision—the woman quietly went on her way.

What I had witnessed was an amazing interplay between verbal articulation of meaning and performative reinforcement of that meaning. Ari's decision to not move himself to a *place* where he could protect his private expectation of freedom from harm left him to

perform the role of a person in a public forum, obligated to share the *space* around him in a way that may have challenged his own understandings of what is “his” (i.e., “his” space) and what is communal (i.e., the square as accessible to everyone). The square as a particular place is both evoked and challenged in this example in the way it forced Ari to not only talk abstractly about what it means to exist in the square together with “all walks of life” but simultaneously to perform that existence. I doubt that getting punched in the face by a stranger for no apparent reason would be interpreted by anyone as a “common good;” however, Ari’s lack of reaction to this possible threat to his person reified his articulation that the “common good” was about co-existing *in this place* peacefully with others. His lack of privileging *space* in both this performance and articulation was apparent in the way that he did not move out of her way nor did he discuss a need for avoiding “all walks of life” in some circumstances (like this one). He never altered his description of the square as intended to accommodate diverse use nor did he perform in a way contradictory to this description. Ari’s words and his deeds both reinforced the meaning he attributed to PCS and the larger city of Portland. The *topoi* of public square allowed Ari to draw on the meaning of PCS as open and accessible to “all walks of life,” even if some were more (un)desirable than others; the *chôra* of the public square shaped the way that Ari performed the meaning of PCS as a *particular* public place with “all walks of life.”

However, other performances of PCS reflect the complexity of the sense-making process more clearly. In stark contrast to Ari’s performance that reinforced his articulation of meaning, one woman I talked with performed and articulated the meaning of PCS (and the city of Portland) in very different ways. She proudly told me about how she was a mom who brought her kids to visit PCS and downtown Portland regularly so that they could experience the diversity of the city in which they lived. As we were talking, however, she began nervously watching a middle-aged man start dancing with her small children a few feet away. She abruptly ended our conversation, took her children by their hands, and walked out of the square. Although this mother’s articulation of the square was as a desirable destination that helped teach her children about the

wonderful city in which they lived (subsequently reifying the ideal articulated by PCS management), her performance of that meaning actually contradicted her depiction of the square—and the city—as enjoyable, safe, and educational for her children. Her performance opposed the idealized articulation of PCS (and Portland) as progressive, inclusive, desirable, and safe.

Such examples illustrate how sense-making processes about a public square can be experienced, articulated, and performed in terms of both place and space. But stopping here seems only to point out differences not previously reflected upon. Understanding that in different circumstances different people seem to emphasize place or space in their sense-making allows the consequences of such sense-making to also be investigated. Everyday contexts generate myriad presentations and representations of the city. Traditional oral and written texts provide only a partial insight into the processes of producing and interpreting meaning. Such processes often reveal inherent contradictions in particularly idealized (re)presentations of a public square (or city), and allow more comprehensive and critical rhetorical analysis to be engaged in their investigation. The consequences of making sense of a city's public square as primarily platial or spatial can be related to the ways in which such meaning-making processes reflect and/or construct perceived "success" of a public square like PCS and the city in which it resides.

### **Critical Consequences for the City: PCS as "Portland's Living Room"**

I employed mixed methods of research to engage in rhetorical analysis of already produced texts like interviews and written materials while also seeking to determine what that rhetoric accomplishes within a given context by looking at performances of sense-making in and about PCS. Such an approach gives dimensionality to rhetoric that moves it beyond the realm of hypothetical application and into the realm of practical consequence. Performances are both embedded in the articulation of meaning (how we "should" act in a living room) and reify or contradict that articulation (how we "actually" act in what we describe as a living

room). Analyzing seemingly mundane processes such as these can have far more critical consequences for understanding how a given public square is meaningful itself and in relation to the city in which it resides.

Of concern here is not whether sense is made in terms of place *or* space but to recognize the importance of both in the larger processes and negotiations of meaning of a public commons like PCS. For instance, Barber's distinction between place and space has clear consequences for what we perceive to be legitimate and accessible rhetorical strategies for a given situation; his clear advocacy of using space as a privileged sense-making frame analyzing democracy has practical consequences for understanding a public square as meaningful in collectively understood and experienced ways. Where does this space reside? Doesn't this space have physical constraints? For instance, what if "civic space" exists within an open public square sandwiched between two heavily trafficked highways; aren't the opportunities this civic space presents constrained by the physical experiences of the place? These same issues (with different consequences) can also be seen outside the frame of democracy in Sennett's use of place and space as a frame for analyzing social interaction more generally.<sup>34</sup>

Those continually negotiated meanings are performed in ways that reflect a larger set of experiences within which they occur (like those associated with a neighborhood, community, town, or city) and simultaneously shape the way in which a set of experiences is understood by others with whom members communicate (intentionally or unintentionally). Sennett sees this connection between performances and meaning-making as existing with a particular purpose: to identify "problems." What is understood to be a problem in one place may not be a problem in another place: "The problem of the [public] square [is] magnified to the problem of *quartier* and neighborhood."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Sennett discusses the public square, as generally understood, to be an open and accessible

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<sup>34</sup> See Richard Sennett on "place" and "space" as frame for understanding social interaction. E.g., Sennett *The Fall of Public Man*, *The Conscience of the Eye*, and *Flesh and Stone*.

<sup>35</sup> Sennett *Fall* 135.

forum for all members of a collective to gather and participate in the process of defining problems (and solutions), both officially and unofficially. The idea of performing rhetoric plays an important role for Sennett in understanding the public square as a *place* rather than an “empty” *space*. This relationship can be seen as connected to rhetoric in two main ways.

First, place precedes rhetoric as a performance in itself. It provides material context for rhetoric, and in this way, can be understood to construct meaning and inform sense-making processes for individuals and collectives alike in particular and tangible terms and enactments. Second, space encompasses place and rhetoric in a way that allows for both to be imagined and negotiated in meaningful ways. Different people imagine (and practice) sense-making about a public square that reflects and engages larger understandings of opportunity and constraint presented in and about the city within which it lies.

In terms of PCS, patterns of privileging place over space (or vice versa) emerged as distinctly different between those people “officially” associated with the square in some way and those people who “unofficially” engaged the square and its occupants in vernacular terms. Most noticeably, those “officially” associated with the square overwhelmingly used spatial language more frequently in their explanations of PCS than did their “unofficial” counterparts who used the square on an everyday basis for a variety of purposes. This distinction can be seen in the (re)presentations of the square in formal rhetoric, and many people’s vernacular rhetoric performances, of ideal or desirable meanings. For example, the ways in which Jim is able to discuss the square are necessarily bound up in the way that policy is created, interpreted, and enforced under various circumstances and in relation to a wide variety of people. In some senses, this must occur abstractly in order to allow the “common good” to be ethically negotiated in the moment and in terms of the particulars (place). This same approach to sense-making can also be seen in the way the mother espoused the ideal meaning of the square as a diverse public from whom her children can learn about the city of Portland while simultaneously performing the square as an unsafe and undesirable influence upon her children’s sense-making

processes. Although several participants also privileged place in their sense-making processes of the square, those examples and a corresponding discussion of their consequences will be saved for another forum.

Before discussing the consequences that emerge when privileging place or space in sense-making about PCS, I must first posit sense-making as a multi-faceted process. Sense-making entails reflection, articulation, and language choices. Sense-making also includes (sub)conscious choices in movement, orientation, interaction, and reaction to others. The way in which we both articulate *and* perform meaning of a particular place, like a public square, can help us to understand how a collectively experienced public square can reflect a larger (re)presentation of the city within which it resides. A city's "health," "success," "diversity," and "safety" can all be discussed as discernible from its publicly accessible places and spaces.<sup>36</sup> When one way of articulating and/or performing a public square (as a place *or* a space) becomes privileged, however, there are consequences: 1) for the people making sense of the public square (in this case, PCS), and 2) for the public square itself and the city in which it resides.

When the use of spatial language is privileged over platial language in the way the square is articulated as meaningful, hypothetical, generalizable, and/or abstract ideals of what *is* and what *should be* emerge rather than actually experienced, particular, and/or tangible explanations of meaning. The sense-making processes that emerge as dominant inherently possess a power and position of influence that often precludes resistance to them. Those in positions of influence are able to (intentionally or unintentionally) present an idealized, abstract depiction of PCS to the public as "what *actually* exists in the world," and "what *should* exist in the world." Simultaneously, individual performances of that ideal concurrently reify (in the case of Ari) or contradict (in the case of the mother and her children) this depiction as the only "appropriate" or "desirable" meaning of the square. This disempowers those who employ

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<sup>36</sup> Many of my interviews with both those "officially" associated with the square and those "unofficial" users of the square revealed, PCS was often described as a "social microcosm," "petri dish," or "representation" of the city of Portland.

alternative sense-making processes about PCS because there is no way to resist the ideal in its abstract state. Alternative meanings presented in and about the square can only reinforce the existing ideal or reject it. There is no way to hypothetically or abstractly propose a new meaning of the square because those in positions of influence are able to use spatial language to continually dismiss such alternatives as “unacceptable” or “undesirable.” There is no ability for those who may disagree with the dominant view to engage in discourse about the particulars of difference or their particular consequences.

For instance, Jim’s description of his job as “keeping people’s feet off the furniture” reflects the abstract nature of the square’s policy distinguishing between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” behavior in the square. Policy language about a public square, for instance, may embrace a hegemonic presentation of the square that translates into official rhetorical texts and employs overt spatial language. Such a use of spatial language, however, does not allow the people who use the square in practical—i.e., non-policy-oriented ways—to talk about how those abstract guidelines are specifically enforced in ways that often make them subject to “exclusion” in disproportionate ways to the rest of the square users. One example of this was revealed to me when Lenny, a local unhoused man who spent time in PCS every day I was there, complained about how his friends often got citations from security for putting their lunch wrappers or soda cans on the ground, even if for a few minutes, before they walked to the nearest trash can to throw them away. Business people, he told me, were never cited for such actions. Since the spatial language of “violation” in the square policy leaves out any particular circumstances under which Lenny and his friends can file a grievance, they are often left without a way of relating their particular experiences in the square (in terms of place) to the more abstract policy regulations used for enforcement (in terms of space).

The differences between using hypothetical or abstract language and practical or empirical language revealed a distinction that connected closely to participants’ experiences with power. The focus of this study is on the symbolic aspects (both linguistic and performative) of sense-making processes in and about PCS. Such a

focus enables a more critically nuanced discussion of power as it appears both symbolically and materially in both Pioneer Courthouse Square and Portland, Oregon. Although I do not employ a critical studies approach here, it is impossible to dismiss the effects, practices, and experiences that power has on participants. For example, Jim (a security officer) and Lenny (a man without a home) make sense of the square in fundamentally different ways. Jim relies on criteria for enforcement of “littering” as it appears in existing policy. Lenny relies on empirically-based criteria to determine what “littering” entails, and is unable in this example to resist Jim’s (security) criteria for (dis)allowing people in the square if they “litter” (equated with “putting one’s feet on the furniture”). All Lenny can do is disagree with the general policy, claim he was not engaging in “improper” behavior, or adopt an alternative sense-making process about what it means to “litter” (or “put *his* feet on the furniture”). The lack of ability for Lenny’s partial articulation to engage Jim’s spatial criteria constrains Lenny from being able to participate in the creation of PCS as meaningful in an equitable way to Jim.

The lack of “common language” that makes up the discourse in and about PCS is only one aspect of how such a power differential can be experienced by participants in the study. The opportunity for Jim to open his experiences of PCS as meaningful to alternative ways of sense-making are constrained by his fellow management’s expectation for using spatial language in policy as a guide to enforcing “appropriate” ways of making use of PCS and discouraging or punishing “undesirable” ways of using the square. However, even if Jim alters his linguistic descriptions of enforcement criteria, he still remains in a position of authority and Lenny still remains subject to that authority, or he will face consequences (like being banned or removed from the square). Although power, in this case, seems to be abstractly discussed and articulated in terms of policy and enforcement of that policy, more importantly *spatial language enables power to be experienced in generally undetected—and uncriticized—ways*. The result of such articulations by those in positions of power is that the *effects of power* are inconsequentially included in the way that norms of behavior, desirability of people, and/or idealized images of the square are “officially” maintained and enforced. According to John Allen,

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*power is understood and experienced in place:* “People are placed by power, but they experience it first hand through the rhythms and relationships of particular places, not as some pre-packaged force from afar and not as a ubiquitous presence.”<sup>37</sup> In this study, what is “desirable,” “enforceable,” and “(un)fair” are all understood and experienced within and in relation to not just any public square, but Pioneer Courthouse Square. To extend this idea, Pioneer Courthouse Square is then inherently connected to the way that power is practiced and experienced in the city of Portland as well. This connection was specifically revealed in how Elizabeth, a member of the PCS management team, discussed the city of Portland as embodied in Pioneer Courthouse Square on a daily basis.

Elizabeth talked with me at length about PCS in terms of how it engages a variety of people in an effort to sponsor accessible and desirable events, promote the square as representative of the city as a whole, and look at issues that arise in square as indicators of Portland’s “health” more generally. “You could say that PCS is the Petri dish for the rest of the city,” she said. Elizabeth discussed particular issues that continually or suddenly arise in the square as indicative of issues that need to be comprehensively addressed by the municipality (the city and its residents) as well. She talked about issues involving panhandling, mentally ill persons, people without a home, and “intimidating groups of people” as some of the more common “issues” that the PCS management team addressed. Although these issues may not neatly fit into the “living room” metaphor in the same way that Jim alluded to earlier, Elizabeth discussed each of these “issues” in very particular ways, involving specific people and events, not as abstract, overarching hypotheticals. Her sense-making process privileged platial language over spatial language in an attempt to describe PCS—and Portland—as meaningful.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

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<sup>37</sup> John Allen, *Lost Geographies of Power* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) 2.

By studying PCS using a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative methods of data collection and rhetorical analysis to examine those data, I argue that determining the “success” of both PCS and the city of Portland is an inherently communicative—and more specifically rhetorical—process. Understanding how people (dis)engage difference in the meaning-making processes of public places and spaces can help identify and address those crossroads without the ability for forward movement. This calls for rhetoricians to use a rhetorical theory of place and space. Rhetorical theory, in this way, has the potential to empower a city’s residents, visitors, and government officials to engage each other in particular public forums. Public commons, like PCS, can serve as foci around which dominant and marginalized meanings engage each other in sense-making processes that allow for new design, new understandings, and new collaborative, cooperative initiatives and events. A rhetorician can examine, analyze, theorize, and help implement these adaptations (with the aid of others) to make the “reclamation of our city centers” a heteroglossic and participatory process—one that engages, not just tolerates, all of its public voices.

Finding the moments when discursive spaces host particular dialogues that openly engage and contradict one another provides the opportunity for the conditions of dialogism to arise.<sup>38</sup> Dialogism provides people an opportunity for their own individual, particular experiences with formal policy (e.g., whisking away a chair as soon as music is over for the afternoon) to simultaneously consider and affect the more abstract, universally applicable policy itself (e.g., making furniture temporarily available so that no one can put their “feet on” permanently).

For example, if Lenny and Jim could sit down and talk, they might just find that how each makes sense of the square is affected by the other. What Lenny really wants is for business people in the square (people dressed in suits and ties) “to share” with people like him (people who don’t have a home or regular access to clean clothes and showers). And what Jim really wants is for all people to respect the square so that it can be around for people to use for a long time.

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<sup>38</sup> See Bakhtin on “dialogism” 280

By engaging each other—rather than just tolerating each other—they may find a different way altogether to talk about the square as meaningful. Perhaps they can talk about the square as a “resting place” or a “safe place” instead of a “controlled place” or a “problem place.” Perhaps the entire metaphor can change from a “living room” to a “foyer” or a “stoop.” A city may have the best of intentions in their design of a public square but without encouraging design that fosters ongoing, malleable discursive spaces in which all people can participate if they desire, it will inevitably fail in its goal to reinvigorate city centers for many years to come.

Without the ability to construct and perform alternative sense-making processes capable of resisting the dominant and/or ideal presentation of a public forum, such as the public square, the status quo is difficult—if not impossible—to change. The strategic and mindful use of spatial and platial language can enable or constrain an open dialogue about meanings of a public square to emerge. Further, the use of *only* platial or spatial language can preclude the participation of marginalized voices and alternative or resistant sense-making processes that complicate individual and collective understandings of public commons like PCS.

Rhetorical theory, place and space, traditional and performative texts, and urban communication theories and practices have the opportunity to inform each other in an attempt to more comprehensively investigate and understand public commons, such as public squares, as closely tied to the (re)presentations of the larger cities within which they reside. Public squares are once again becoming central parts of city life and urban identity. Portland prides itself on Pioneer Courthouse Square and all that it offers its residents, visitors, and city officials alike. Other cities are also reclaiming their central public squares in an attempt to follow suit—the city of Phoenix has plans to redesign Patriots Square to encourage use its lack of shade currently discourages, the city of Boston has plans for renovating its concrete abysmal City Hall Square, and the city of Denver has hired renowned architect Gio Ponti to reface its downtown City Park Square to promote the same increase in use that its renovation of the art museum achieved.

In discussions of politics, society, tradition, and public memory (among other aspects), communication theory has not explicitly theorized or differentiated between place and space in a unified way, and conceptual differentiation carries weighty implications for both communication theory and the public practice of rhetoric. The ability to both distinguish between—and understand the consequences of—privileging place or space in articulations and performances of public commons such as public squares is important. Place appears in rhetoric as a way of reifying or opposing a status quo. Space appears as abstractions and intangibilities that avoid any resistance to the particulars by only speaking in terms of ideals or hypotheticals. The rhetoric analyzed and discussed here is an example of the inherent “struggles” that differences in interpretation, application, and interaction of place and space engender in both their articulation and performance.

A discussion of rhetoric—both official and unofficial—should be further grounded in critical theories of rhetoric than this essay allows. Extending this analysis to more directly investigate the relationship between platial or spatial language choices and enactments and effects of power is a cause worthy of investigation. Rhetoric inherently reflects urban life as complicated, progressive, tension-filled, and subject to continual engagement of what the “common good” can and should entail. Relationships among place, space, and power are intertwined to affect consciously (and subconsciously) the way we produce and interpret meaning. As these sense-making processes reveal themselves through rhetorical texts and performances in and about public squares, an ongoing and long-term discussion of methodological approaches, theoretical implications, and practical consequences for urban designers, planners, residents, laborers, and visitors of all kinds should be sustained. Particularly, people both “officially” and “unofficially” associated with our urban centers should be looked to continually as sources of inspiration and pictures of imperfection as they consider the ever-changing city within which they all live, work, play, and seek to make better in some way.