

# The Seventh Generation

*"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."*

*—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy*



Photo: Tom Angotti

## Sites Speak Louder than Words *Occupy Wall Street in New York City*

*By Samuel Stein*

**Editor's Note:** The next issue of *Progressive Planning* will focus on reclaiming public space at Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square and around the world from Chile to Spain. The following piece was written in mid-October 2011, as Occupy Wall Street was gaining momentum and movement participants were experimenting with new protest encampment sites.



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**O**CCUPY WALL STREET is growing. What started on September 17, 2011 as an encampment of hundreds in one small park has turned global. On October 15th, demonstrations were held in 1,500 cities and 82 countries. In New York City, our numbers are growing, and momentum is building to expand to more sites around the city. As a formally leaderless movement without explicit demands, we are defined primarily by the spaces we create. What do our choices of venue say about our politics, our critique and our vision? The choice of our next sites will communicate more to the world than any list of demands ever could.

We began our movement in Liberty Plaza, a "Privately Owned Public Space" created through a mechanism

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added to the New York City zoning code in 1961. The 1961 revisions were full of new ways to shape development in the city, prefaced on the idea that zoning could be used to transform the city's social as well as spatial patterns. One of these planning innovations, the "density bonus," allows developers to build more than would otherwise be permitted if they create an open space for public use. The spaces could be inside a building's lobby or outside on land owned by the developer. While some of the plazas created via the density bonus supported active street life, many were poorly designed and underutilized, becoming empty caverns among skyscrapers. Left-leaning urbanists have largely written off the program as a giveaway to developers and a retrenchment of the state as planner and provider of open spaces.

Occupy Wall Street's reclamation of Liberty Plaza turns this logic on its head. What was once seen as a boon to real estate capital is now a thorn in its side. Our presence signals to the city and to real estate that social movements will use any and all spaces available to the public, regardless of formal ownership. Claiming a Privately Owned Public Space as our initial home base created a posture for the movement that was critical of both capital and the state, and hostile to their collusion.

In the weeks following the initial encampment, we marched and met at various sites throughout the city. On October 15th, however, the movement formally flirted with spatial expansion beyond Liberty Plaza.

We marched along Broadway in Times Square, a stretch of street closed to traffic as a part of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) *Public Plaza Program*. Under Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, the city has closed several blocks to auto traffic and created paved public spaces. These plazas are designed as sites of consumption, with small tables and chairs suggesting an outdoor café. They are created by the city, and maintained by a local "sponsor" (often the owners of adjacent property). DOT's *Public Plaza Program* is the mirror image of the Department of City Planning's Privately Owned Public Spaces—two ways capital and government control and share responsibility for open space. Our reclamation of such spaces implies a critique of neoliberal urban planning; whether our critique ends there or extends to a comprehensive rejection of both capital and the state remains to be seen. The full potential of the site was not explored—we held what amounted to a timed rally, with a fairly clear beginning and ending—but we should

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reimagine the possibilities for future actions in these types of publicly owned, privately operated spaces.

On the same day, the movement branched out further to include more Privately Owned Public Spaces and one fully public site, owned and maintained by the city itself. In the Bronx, we held a General Assembly in Fordham Plaza (a Privately Owned Public Space), and turned the Brooklyn-bound 4 train into an open mike. In Greenwich Village, we gathered in Washington Square Park for a speech by post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and a General Assembly to discuss the merits and limitations of staying in the park past closing. Like all of the city's public parks, Washington Square shuts down overnight. Staying in Washington Square Park past midnight would have meant certain arrest, but it would have posed a challenge to the state's limitations on the commons. Most participants chose to exit the park just before it closed.

The choice to move into a fully public park (as opposed to a public-private amalgam) would change the tenor of the movement significantly. Liberty Plaza, Fordham Plaza and Times Square represent the entanglement of capital and government. Moving to public spaces like Washington Square Park would represent a more direct engagement with the state than the movement has so far undertaken. It would imply that our target is as much the city administration

headed by billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg (or the state itself) as the investment bankers on Wall Street, and would project a very different message about the relationship between the people and the state.

The following night, we attempted to move into a space representing yet another form of public land use: a community garden. The space on Houston Street known as "First Park" is a publicly owned lot that is recognized by the city as a community garden. Last summer, the western portion of it was handed over to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the BMW Corporation to run as an outdoor arts space until October 16, 2011. The foundation retained control of the space beyond the end of the demonstration period, however, creating a potential space for a second full-time Occupy Wall Street site. Expecting our mobilization, the police barricaded the entrance and shut us out of the space. The legal justification for this action is murky, at best. Though it remains unclear how suitable a space First Park may be, the target is symbolically significant: moving into First Park would be a reclamation of a public space rife with internal contradictions. The lot transitioned from a community garden to a corporate art project (on gentrification, of all things), and its future is uncertain. Expanding into First Park would be a strike against the outsourcing of public space, and the corporate underwriting of political art.

We have to move beyond Liberty Plaza, and we have to consider what messages different sites convey. If our movement moves indoors, where should we start? Inside public buildings, such as those on the campuses of the City University of New York or city administration offices? In wholly private buildings, including the headquarters of Wall Street's biggest firms? Or in one of the many indoor privately owned public spaces scattered throughout Manhattan?

**[Editor's note:** 60 Wall Street is one of these spaces that has now become a major home to Occupy Wall Street]

While we have so far rejected explicit demands, Occupy Wall Street communicates implicit messages in many ways: through our central organizing framework of participatory democracy and consensus; through our images and media presence (including signs, social media output and The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City); and, most importantly, through the symbolic meanings of our spaces. Each site of struggle suggests a different narrative about our movement. "Occupation," initially a tactic in the broader strategy of claiming a space to question the logic of capital, has now taken on a life of its own and become a de facto strategy. This movement is becoming as much about reclaiming public space as anything else. Occupy Wall Street's implicit demand is a return to public control and ownership over land, no matter its formal ownership structure or tenure. **P<sup>2</sup>**