# Public Space: The Normative and the Political

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## ABSTRACT

Jacques Ranciere observes that it is the "apportionment of parts and positions based on the distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in ways various individuals have a part in this distribution." Based on this notion of 'the distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity,' this paper addresses the concept of normative public space in the American city of Brooklyn, New York, by considering how it shapes public behavior, and further, how, within the conditions and limitations of its design, it is transformed into political space. Normative experience can be seen as one shaped by a confluence of forces related to use, demographics, spatial relationships, traditions, and historical significance. The normative is the experience of the everyday, uncontested by the expectations of passive public behavior. The political, on the other hand, is the experience of public discourse and social action; within the bounds of its space dwells the activated and the spontaneous. Understanding how the spatial dialectic of the normative and the political are balanced through design, and how they interchange between a normative place of everyday experience and a political place of civil action and mobilization reveals the democratic possibilities – and limitations – of American public space and how it shapes civic culture.

Using a historical approach that focuses specifically on the evolution of the central civic space of Borough Hall Plaza in Downtown Brooklyn, this study tracks over two centuries the changing configurations of its design to expose how each configuration shaped normative civic behavior and how, within the limitations posed by each design, the transformation from normative accommodation to political action was possible. Borough Hall Plaza is unique in that it was formed not by the typical planning approach of the central American town square, but from the remnants of an irregular site that fronts a monumental City Hall – later Borough Hall – that occupied a prominent location in nineteenth-century Brooklyn. It is, in a sense, an accidental space. As such, for close to two centuries now it has been and continues to be redesigned with an intention of controlling public activity; yet given its civic prominence it continues to be commandeered for political celebrations and protests. As an urban space, its continuing evolution provides an ideal case study for observing the evolution of the normative and the political in American urban space.

## Introduction

> Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signaling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible. (Ranciere, 2009, p.24)

> A distribution of the sensible establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on the distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in ways various individuals have a part in this distribution. (Ranciere, 2004, p.12)

In her essay, *Toward a Theory of Normative Architecture*, Joan Ockman asks if there is "major architecture" that is "*territorial*, *apolitical*, and *conservative of the status* quo," that is, *normative* (1997). As the converse of a "minor architecture," a concept she derives by extending Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of the "minor literature" of Kafka, and one that is revolutionary, perhaps subversive, and culturally transformative, or *political,* Ockman investigates how the status of a major or normative architecture in American post-war International Style architecture has in fact supplanted the political stance of the Modern Movement from which it came (Ockman, 1997). Inherent in her proposition is that architecture has the potential for a dialectical status, transposing itself between the political and the normative. For Ockman this interchange is historical in which each state redefines itself in terms of the other in time. This paper extends the premise of the normative and its complement, the political, to the question of public space in the American city, however in this case the historical dialectic is replaced with one that is experiential, one that is participatory as well as reactionary. Focusing on a central civic space in Downtown Brooklyn – what we will refer to as Borough Hall Plaza[1] – normative experience can be seen as one shaped by a confluence of forces related to use, demographics, spatial relationships, traditions, and historical significance. How these forces are balanced, and how they are spontaneously transformed from a normative place of everyday experience to a political place of discourse and mobilization reveals the democratic possibilities of American civic culture and its shaping of public space.

**Brooklyn City Hall**

Brooklyn City (Borough) Hall occupies a once-prominent site where the arcing sweep of a native-American trail[2] that originated at what is now Fulton Landing reached a high point and began its linear extension to the southeast into the center of Brooklyn.[3] (fig. 1)

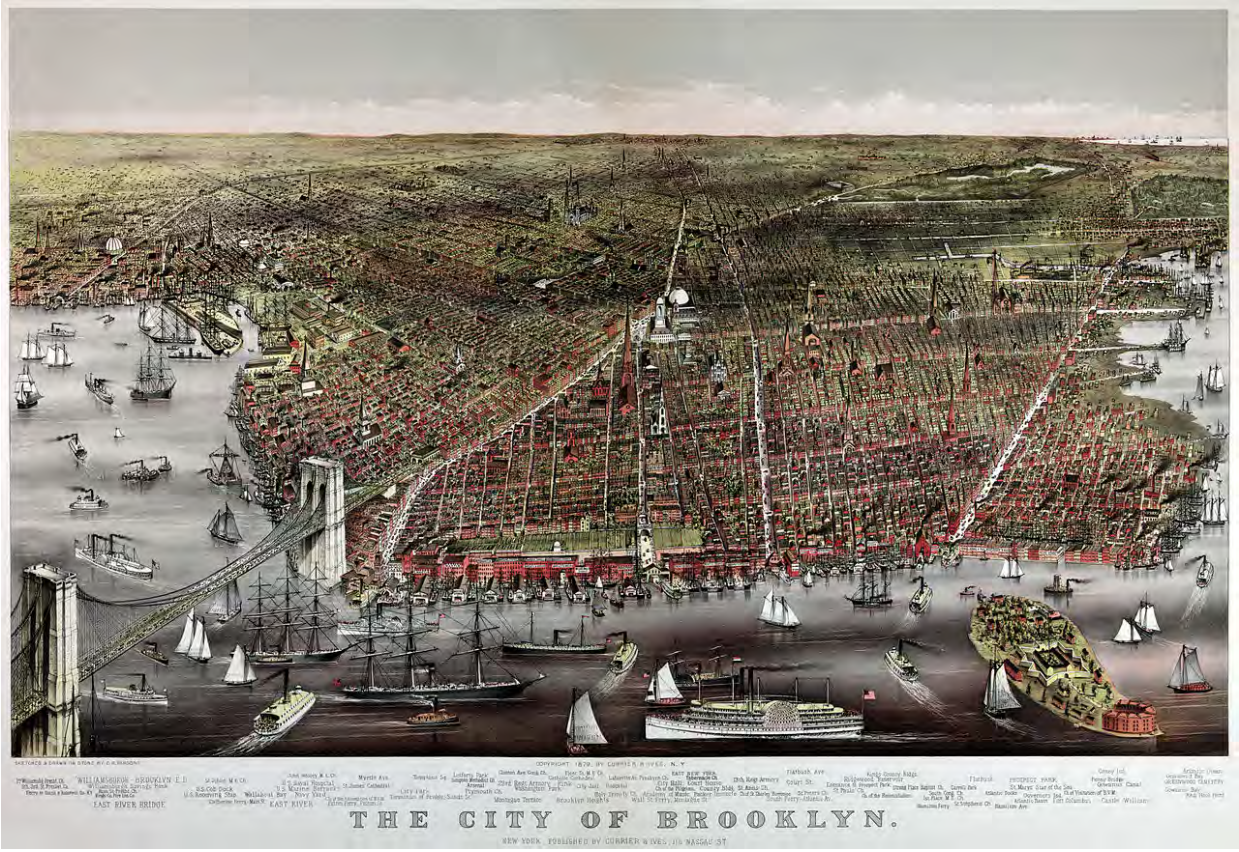


*Figure 1 View of Brooklyn in 1879 showing prominent position of City Hall*

One year after the chartering of the City of Brooklyn in 1834 work began on its new city hall; however, due to an economic recession, work was suspended until 1845 when the architect Gamaliel King took charge (Brazee 2011). On the started foundations of the original project rose the Greek-revival building, completed in 1854, that we see today. Sited on a triangular piece of land, the building backs directly along Joralemon Street. Through a small central portal, city officials could pass conveniently to the Municipal Building, Courthouse, and Hall of Records that at one time lined the south side of Joralemon Street.[4] It is to the north, however, that the building presents a monumental cascade of stairs surmounted by a hexastyle Ionic portico that gives it the ceremony and grandeur appropriate for the new city. The north facing monumental façade faced the heart of the growing city and at the same time greeted anyone arriving in the young city from the ferry, or later from the Brooklyn Bridge, both of which delivered commuters to the critical spine of Fulton Street.


*Figure 2 Early Engraved View of Brooklyn City Hall ca. 1850*

## Nature of Civic Space

Camilo Sitte sees the public square as the place in the city where public life is carried out: " here people trafficked, public celebrations took place, plays were put on, state proceedings were carried out, laws proclaimed, and so on" p. 151 Zucker emphasizes the dual physical and psychological function of the square, noting that public squares "create a gathering place for the people, humanizing them by mutual contact, providing them with a shelter against the haphazard traffic, and freeing them from the tension of rushing through the web of streets (1959 p.1) For Sitte, the importance of the square as a civic place to the citizens of the city demands its aesthetic treatment, raising it above the mere functionality of open space. Civic space takes on a heightened purpose as a "structural organization as a frame for human activities" (Zucker 1959 p. 3). This starts with the public buildings that form the walls defining this outdoor room in the city and extends to the design of space itself: it's geometry and proportion, its lines of approach and points of access, and the placement of elements within the space. The resultant civic space is experienced and perceived through its visual and kinesthetic relationships (Zucker 1959). The public space serving this vital community function is a natural location for the placement of monuments that memorialize people and or events that are considered important to the community.

## A Forecourt for Brooklyn City Hall

The triangular site for the building, then bounded by Fulton and Court Streets, provided an outdoor foreground in which the public could gather and from which the building could be admired from a distance. An engraving dating to the 1850s shows the completed City Hall with its impressive portico fronting onto a simple open space that is unadorned by landscape or park elements, with either pavement or earth track running east to west up to the faces of the commercial buildings fronting onto the space and south to the grand stair. A mention of new City Hall in an 1846 Brooklyn Daily Eagle article articulates the authors' desire for the space in front of the building:

> We hope there will be a proper liberality and taste shown in the 'outside trimmings' of the place – which are often in similar matters so overlooked as to spoil the general effect of all. We allude to the fence, the entrance-yard, and so on. A tasty and solid fence is very necessary to such a building – and by due disposition of flagging, trees, grass-plots, &c., the grounds round the Hall might be made in a high degree ornamental (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1846, p.2).

This vision for the public forecourt of Brooklyn City Hall is in the tradition of the American village green. Indeed, a stereoscopic view of City Hall, possibly taken in the 1870's,[5] shows an elegant forecourt park with iron fences, gravel paths, grass plots with tall, mature trees, and a large circular fountain (fig. 2). The park has clearly defined entry gates, but once inside, the park setting looks to be openly accessible and functional, with the lawn areas likely occupiable for recreation or relaxation depending on the accepted behavior in park settings. The paths and lawn areas neatly integrate the steps of City Hall and the wings of the building, creating a cohesive and unified spatial condition. The image invokes a bucolic and civilized tranquility for this civic monument and seat of government. The civic building in the park setting is a convincing image, but here it is just the first of what will be many iterations of configuration for this public space. It is the rapidly changing configuration of this space, in combination with well-documented events and use of the space over time that makes it a compelling case study of American public space.

*Figure 3: Stereoscopic view of City Hall in mature park setting, ca.1860*

**A Frequently Changing Condition**

Historic photographs and artistic images capture the frequently changing configuration of Borough Hall Plaza from the 1850s to the current condition. The mature park seen in the 1860s is gone by the 1880s, when Brooklyn City Hall is fronted by a very different setting (fig.3). At this point the mature park no longer exists, and City Hall stands with clear prominence in the urban context with the portico fronting onto a large paved area of the full triangular-shaped space between Fulton and Court Streets. The only element remaining from the developed park of the previous decades is a similar fountain surrounded by an iron fence sitting near the point of the triangle. In this space two monumental decorative lamp posts reinforce the symmetry and central axis of City Hall and further mark this axis in the space. Two changes of elevation are evident in the pavement, with an initial curb marking the beginning of the sidewalk and a second step for the primary pavement of the triangular shaped plaza. In this view, no landscape is visible in the plaza. This transformation may have been instigated by infrastructure improvements as well as re-grading of the site. A new landing and additional steps are visible at the grand stair, indicating the lowering of the grade from its previous condition.

*Figure 4: The bucolic setting is gone, replaced by a stark hardscape in 1885.*

The next transformation of Borough Hall Plaza, with a new triangular-shaped planted lawn area largely filling out the previous paved area, takes place in the early 1890s. A smaller paved area remains at the foot of the steps leading up to City Hall. The lawn is edged by a pronounced curb, and within the lawn are a few elements, including a fountain that is similar to the previous one, but without any basin element or the iron fence. Also in the lawn area is the Beecher Monument[6], directly facing the portico of City Hall, flanked by two pedestals with urns. The lawn is not enclosed with any type of fence. In the center of the pavement remaining between the lawn and the street, a series of young trees have been planted in circular tree pits. The angle of the photograph reveals that the elements in the lawn are not axial with the portico, giving the green an informal, casual quality.

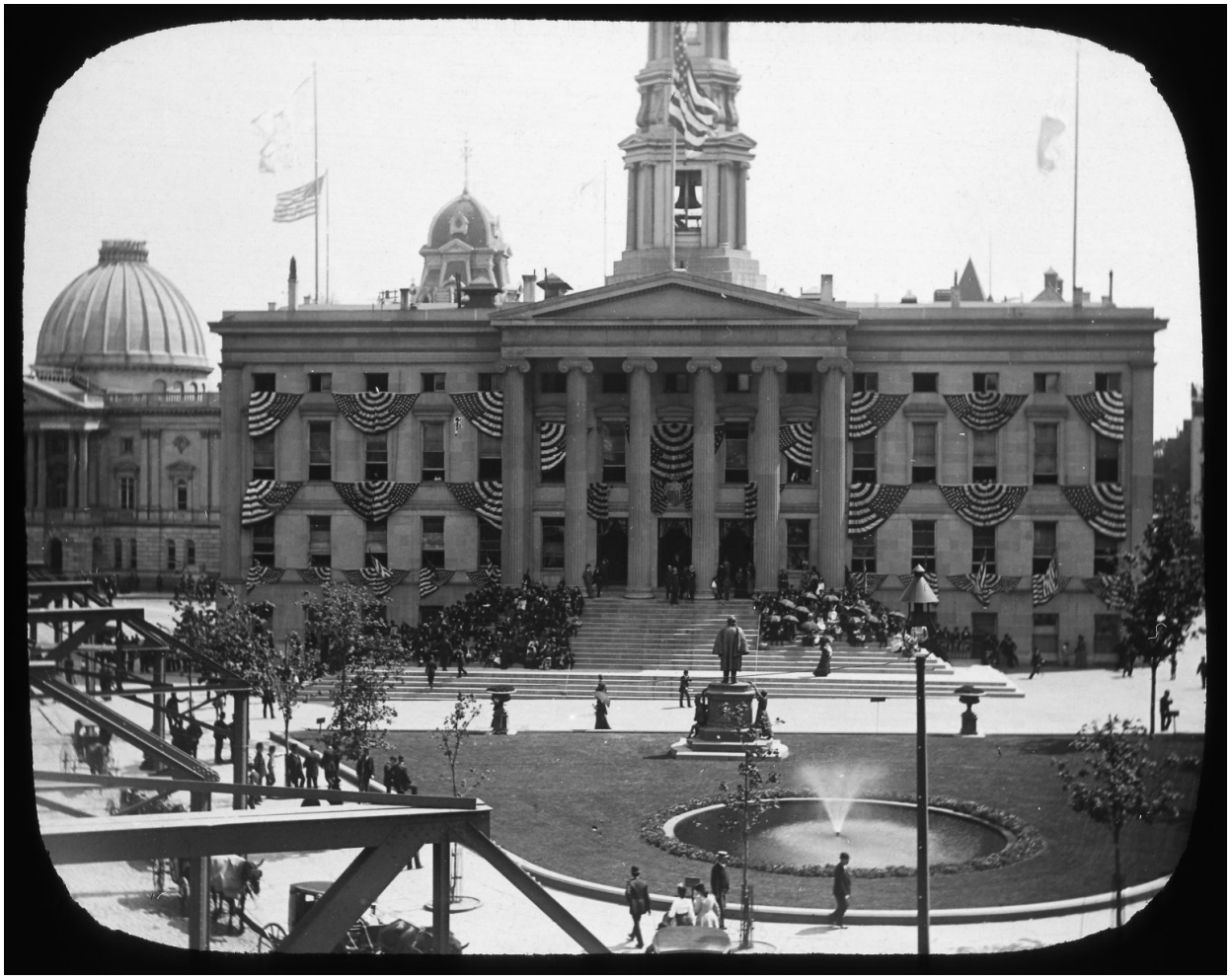

*Figure 5: View of City Hall with newly installed lawn with Beecher monument. Elevated train structure is visible in the foreground.*

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a decorative band of flowers is evident, reinforcing a more decorative focus of the lawn area. By the 1930's a fence is added, clarifying the intention of the lawn as an ornament of the urban space rather than a functional, occupiable space. Within fifteen years, another substantial change occurs

when a new central path is developed, flanked by fenced-in lawn areas. The Beecher Monument has been moved at this point, and the pedestals and urns are not visible. This condition possibly aligns with the proposed plans of 1949 that show a consolidated pedestrian zone with a long central approach leading to Borough Hall from the north. A 1950's view looking north shows the relocated Beecher Monument with the central path, wide enough for benches on both sides and a generous walking zone in the middle. Trees along the sidewalks on the edge of the green give definition to the place, the most mature trees captured in photographs since the early manifestation of the park from the mid-19th century. This configuration emphasizes an axial approach to the monumental portico.

Today, the plaza has been extended with the repurposing of Fulton Street between Court and Adams Street as a pedestrian-only connection; to the north of the fountain, Columbus Park provides a forecourt to the Supreme Court. Despite its incorporation into the greater Cadman Plaza and Columbus Park, however, Borough Hall Plaza itself remains effectively separated, having returned to a configuration modeled on that of the first half of the twentieth century with its gratuitous fenced-off garden.

As this historic evolution demonstrates, there are expectations being placed on civic activity, and each design imposes ways in which the spaces are intended to be used. In its original configuration, the area at the foot of the steps of Borough Hall is constrained by the enclosed landscaping, relegating it to a walkway connecting Montague to Fulton Street. Similarly, in its redesign in 1946, the central walkway is exactly that, a walkway. These spaces are programmed spaces, intended to maintain normative behavior.

**Normative Space**

We can understand public space according two basic categories of civil behavior – normative and political – and normative space, while being tacitly apolitical, nevertheless manifests two distinct characters that correspond to two differing public experiences. In the first case normative space is a *programmed* space that constrains civil protocols into definable territories that reify social behavior. As users of a normative space we have expectations of how we are to act, and we assign those same expectations to those around us. When, for example, we visit the greater Cadman Plaza area, we find zones differentiated for active recreation; areas for markets and commercial activities; pathways aligned with benches for ambulating and other passive activities; areas of grass for reclining and relaxation. These designed features anticipate the behavior and control the activities. Sunbathing and picnics are common in the grassy areas, but discouraged on the benches and in the plazas. Similarly, skateboarders and musicians find their place in the plazas but do not dominate the pathways or green spaces. Normative behavior is socially acceptable behavior ascribed to a place where it is conducted, places designed to maintain the status quo through behavior control. In this case normative behavior is programmed and controlled; it is what is expected and what is allowed. In many public places it is "designed into" the space, and the design, thereby, defines the *territory* of acceptable behavior.

In the second case the normative space is an *activated* place. Activated spaces are usually found in hardscapes where people are joined by others to see and be seen. Places are activated when they are unprogrammed and where assembly is spontaneous; these are the places for social engagement and exchange. The steps of the main branch of New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum exemplify this type of unprogrammed spontaneity where a means of entry is transformed into an unintended place of gathering, accommodating people whose sole purpose is to enjoy their presence among other people. Activated spaces are usually adjacent to highly trafficked areas, are readily accessible, and where the comfort of public assembly is accommodated. It is here that we can have the chance meeting, where new relationships are formed, where the open exchange of ideas takes place, and where the issues of the day are debated; it is the place where an open stage is provided for entertainers and politicians, for inveighers and provocateurs.

Located at the nexus of activity of downtown Brooklyn, Borough Hall Plaza is both an activated space and the symbolic center of the borough. Accessible by multiple subway lines, it is heavily traversed by people moving between courthouses, offices, schools, and homes, and serves as an everyday space amenable to the spontaneous activity of daily life. The steps of Borough Hall provide a welcoming location for casual assembling similar to the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum, yet by not being a tourist destination, it draws on the population that lives and works in the vicinity. Here we find the coming together of a myriad of social forces that are balanced and expressed through public interaction within the space.

Borough Hall Plaza supports a diversity of activities that constitute the thriving public center of downtown Brooklyn as the confluence of social and physical forces that shape its location. By drawing together the Caribbean and African-Americans who frequent the Fulton Street shopping district immediately to the east with the predominantly white enclave of Brooklyn Heights adjacent to the west, the plaza creates a diverse space of shared interest. It links the surrounding business center with the evolving residential neighborhood where new condominium towers rise and old office buildings are converted into apartments. Furthermore, the synergy of commercial activity along Court Street and the programmed uses of the plaza help to counterbalance the austerity of the governmental institutions, particularly the Supreme Court building. Most important, the plaza embodies the convergence of tradition and innovation where it adjusts to the continuous evolution of civic activity while maintaining the symbolic permanence and dignity of the civic center and the borough it represents. All in all, the success of the plaza results from the balancing of the individual and collective, where normative experience occurs, but where freedom of expression is accommodated.

**Political space**

Primacy must be given to free speech since it is through open public discourse that the laws of democracy are debated. The objective of a true democracy is to effect self-government, and it is through the expression of public opinion that those governed feel themselves as participants in the shaping of their government. Accordingly, freedom of speech, as protected in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, is accompanied by

the freedom of assembly, and it follows that the appropriation of public space for political expression is tantamount to exercising the rights of democracy. Political space in this sense occurs when normative behavior is suspended, and when the boundaries that define the territories of civil protocols are erased. Because freedom of speech undermines the expectations of normative experience, political action takes possession of public space and occupies it. Activated space provides a likely site for free expression because, given its spontaneity and its autonomy from a program, it is most easily commandeered for political action; it easily becomes an occupied space seized from normative functions.

Political space, however, does not mandate that it be a place of dissent and protest; it can also serve as a place for commemoration or celebration, where individuals are honored and where politicians make pronouncements. Whether the action is celebratory or dissenting, political space becomes a symbolic space when the message of free speech is given urgency by taking place at the doorstep of a monument or institution at which that political interest is directed. For example, although rallies occurred in multiple locations, the occupation by Occupy Wall Street took place at Zuccotti Park, at the doorstep of Wall Street to "bring the message home." As in the case of Tahrir Square, Tiananmen Square, the March on Washington, and countless others, political space, the site of free expression, is symbolic.

Historic photographs capture some of the political activities and events that have occurred in Borough Hall Plaza, and how public rallies were accommodated. For example, a photograph, datable by the original cupola to pre-1895, shows Brooklyn City Hall festooned with patriotic bunting fans hung across its facade. Two dense groups of people are seated or standing on the steps of the building below the monumental portico, seeming to wait for someone inside to emerge. In the center of the portico, men with top hats are visible, also waiting for the important moment. In the foreground, the paved area at the foot of the steps is largely devoid of people. Around the triangular shape of the park, small scattered groups or individuals go about their business or join the anticipation of the event that is about to unfold. Here normative activity continues unabated as the space prepares for a political event; soon, normative behavior will defer to the event unfolding on the steps of City Hall.

Similarly, a 1930s Armistice Day commemoration shows how the steps of now Borough Hall are used both as a viewing stand[7] and as the stage for dignitaries (fig. 4). Here the steps have a large temporary platform built for dignitaries, with the left and right side of the steps lined with a crowd of either general onlookers or invited participants. Below the steps, a dense crowd is packed in the small dimension of paved area between the steps of Borough Hall and the fenced ornamental green that occupies a large percentage of the triangular space. This document speaks clearly either of the normative behavior of the public in their respect for the fenced-off lawn or of their outright prohibition, possibly reinforced by local police, of occupying the green space that might permit an increase in space for additional participants and onlookers for a clearly important civic event. This is especially poignant as the configuration of the public space limits the participation for anyone not in the small paved area or on the

steps, as they must stand a significant distance away, with poorer visual and auditory connection to the event.


*Figure 6: Armistice Day Commemoration at Borough Hall (1934)*

Another image of this event or a similar event looking from Borough Hall towards the point of Borough Hall Plaza in 1934 shows the low fence around the central green holding a significant portion of the crowd of onlookers well away from the action on the platform. Loudspeakers are visible to help project the speakers' voices, but traffic around the park likely drowns out the voice for those near the point of the triangular space, especially considering the frequent rumbling of the elevated train overhead. In these cases, the goal of providing ornamental landscape, articulated at the inception of the building in the 1840s, so obviously hinders the use of the space for a fundamental programmatic use: civic events.

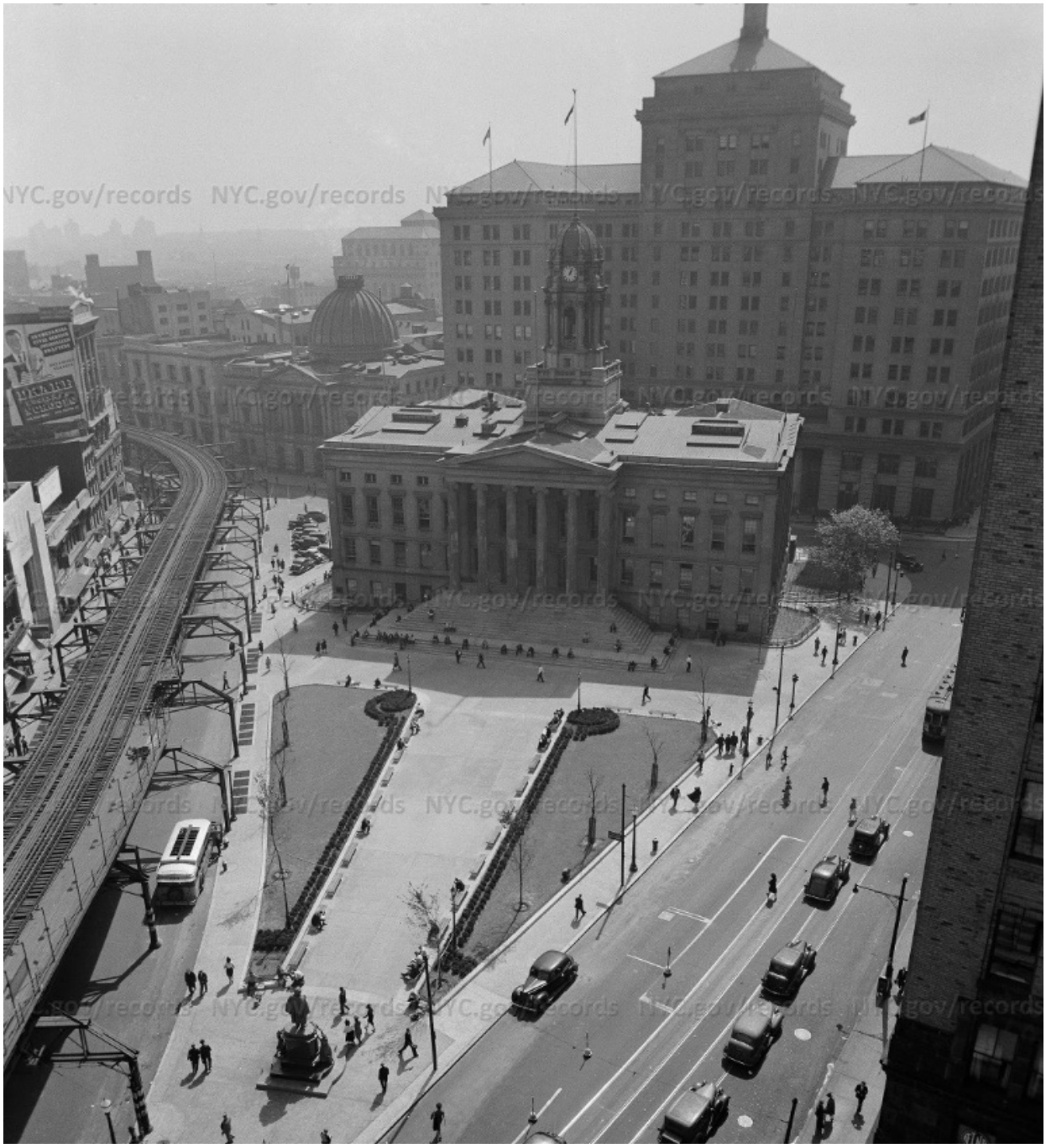


*Figure 7: Aerial view of reconfigured public space with central walkway ca.1940.*

By 1946 there was a change in the layout of the park, with a central walkway dividing the green space of the park into two smaller sections. Here, an image documenting a Veterans Day commemoration shows how the crowd is able to grow in the center, directly opposite the viewing stand on the steps of Borough Hall while the green spaces flanking the central walk still remain empty islands, with the crowd crushing against the low fences. When the park in this configuration was not being used for special events, the wide walk appears to be a place for lingering or slow strolling with the life of

Brooklyn all around. A 1950s view shows a sunny day, with the benches occupied, although not to full capacity. When the Brooklyn Dodgers won the World Series in 1955, the New York Times reported that at the pennant celebration on September 16, 20,000 onlookers attended the ceremony held on the steps of Borough Hall. The photograph capturing this event shows the central walk is packed solid with the crowd while the landscaped area to the east is vacant despite the large numbers.[8] Revealed here are the limitations that programmed space place on the ability to assemble. These spatial limitations seem to subdue the freedom of expression even when the political rallies are celebratory. Judging by the respect shown by the celebrants observing the barriers protecting the lawn, it appears that celebrations such as these are accompanied by normative behavior. In the contemporary context, this can further be observed with the celebration of the arrival of the Brooklyn Nets NBA team, hosted by the Borough President on the steps of Borough Hall, in 2012.

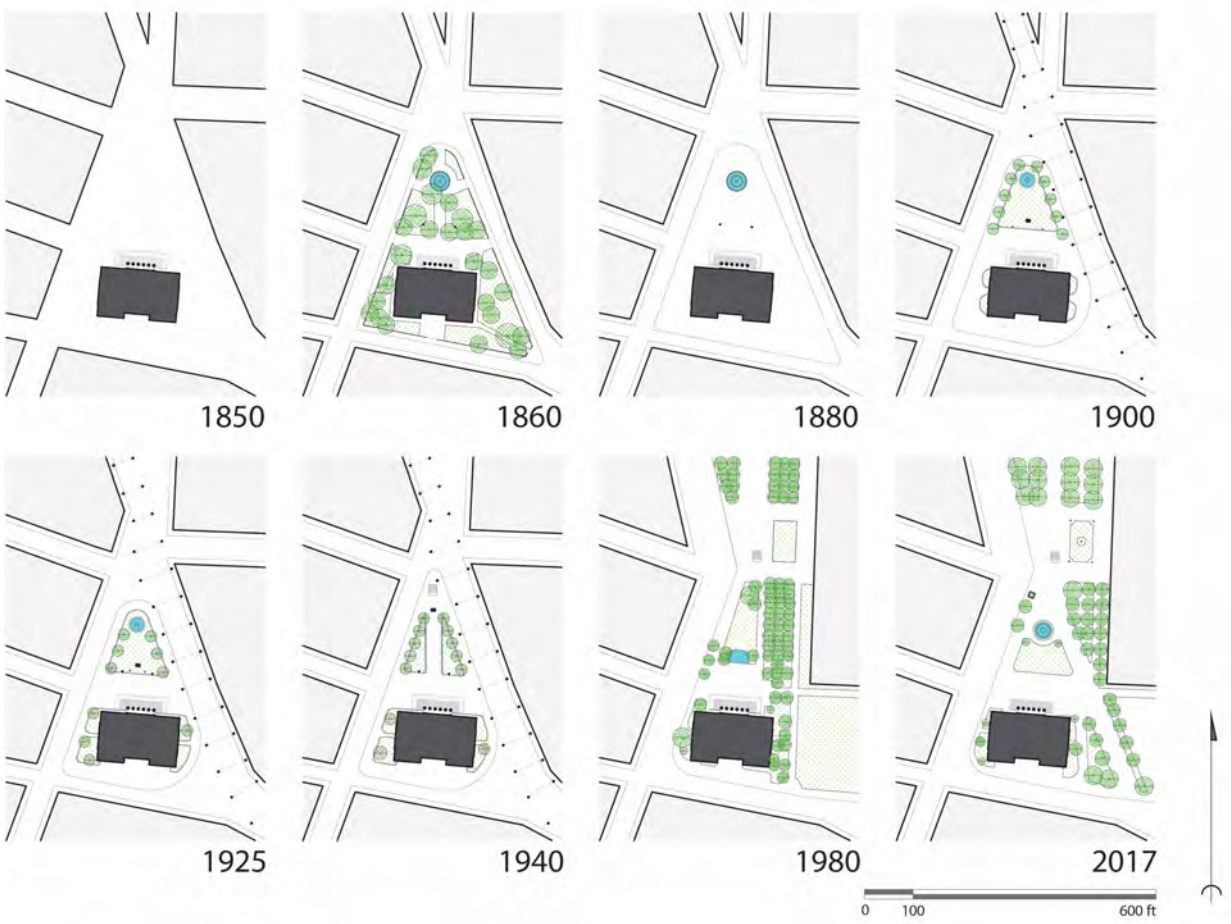


*Figure 8: Diagram of changes to the public space over 167 years*

The symbolic importance of Borough Hall is still relevant to Brooklynites as it remains a place for celebration and dissent. Celebrations and cultural events are staged in Borough Hall Plaza with a regular frequency throughout the year. Rallies and protests are also staged here when warranted by events that trigger a reaction within the Brooklyn community. The Brooklyn Nets arrival was a cause for celebration while a year

later, Solange Knowles led a protest rally on the steps of Borough Hall on July 14, 2013, seeking justice for the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida after the suspect was found not guilty. In Feb 2017, Yemenis bodega workers protested the travel ban targeting Muslims (fig 7).

**The Normative and the Political**

In his essay, "Aesthetics as Politics," Jacques Ranciere posits the concept of 'relational art,' which in contrast to a utopian aesthetic or its converse, a radical art of resistance – both 'minor' or 'political' arts – the object succumbs to a state of 'free play,' that is, a condition of the 'major' or normative that "has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons."[9] "Relational aesthetics," he states, "rejects art's claims to self-sufficiency as much as it dreams of transforming life, but even so it reaffirms an essential idea: that art consists in constructing spaces and relations to reconfigure materially and symbolically the territory of the common."[10] In our context, such a reconfiguration of common territory – namely public space – leads to both programmed and activated territories where common or shared experience is either managed or in the latter case spontaneous. But if the role of art, which here is the design of public space in the American city, is to reconfigure territory for the common, then why is it the practice of urban planners to program public space, thereby territorializing and managing public behavior, rather than promoting the spontaneity and freedom consistent with an activated space of assembly? The paradox here is that when the space of normative behavior is managed, that space is in fact a political space; after all, the control of civil behavior is political. In essence, the apolitical of a normative space is actually political – Ranciere's utopian or radical – and conversely, the political of an activated space is actually apolitical, that is, 'relational.' As Ranciere explains, "Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and pertaining to common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them."[11] Programmed space "frames experience;" it presages normative experience replete with the protocols and expectations that shape everyday public life; it reifies the normative as seemingly apolitical through the exercise of political will.

This brief investigation of Brooklyn Borough Hall Plaza reveals the possibility that within the programmed behavior of normative experience that typifies public space in the American city there can exist a place of action and spontaneity where assembly and free speech flourish. However, in this example its space remains constrained by the pressures of "design" which limit its capacity to accommodate free expression. Yet despite its limitations, it retains the attributes of an activated space of political potential where the social forces of the demographic, symbolic, and functional converge, and where the spontaneity of assembly can occur. "Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of the community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals."[12] At Borough Hall Plaza the "noise" in programmed space becomes the "voice" in activated space: the apolitical becomes the political.

*Figure 9: Yemenis Protest at Brooklyn Borough Hall Feb 2, 2017. Printed with permission of Brooklyn Daily Eagle.*

## Notes:

[1] This refers to the section of the contemporary Columbus Park that was the initial configuration of public space when City Hall was built in the 1840s.
[2] Later developed as the Jamaica Turnpike and subsequently Fulton Street.
[3] As Broadway in Manhattan, Fulton Street, now Cadman Plaza West, is the one street in Brooklyn that traces its original route and does not conform to the gridirons of the rest of the borough.
[4] The municipal building seen today replaced the original; the courthouse and hall of records succumbed to urban renewal in the 1950's being replaced with a widened Boerum Place and the Brooklyn Law School.
[5] *City Hall, Brooklyn NY*. ca.1860s. Robert N. Dennis Collection, New York Public Library, New York. Web. 3 Oct. 2016.
[6] Monument to Henry Ward Beecher, preacher and abolitionist who led the Plymouth Congregational Church in nearby Brooklyn Heights in the mid 19th century.
[7] Other photographs show parades passing below the steps from west to east with the onlookers packed onto the steps.
[8] The lawn area to the west is not visible in this image, but is likely also devoid of people despite the massive crowd.
[9] Jacques Ranciere, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Trans. Steven Corcoron. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009. p.30
[10] Ibid., p. 22
[11] Ibid., p. 24
[12] Ibid., p. 24

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