In praise of social distance in public spaces

We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify.

(Glissant, 1997, 9)

We design, build and maintain public spaces with the hopes that – in addition to providing access to clean air, recreation and nature – they will also bring people together. In the ideal scenario, public spaces are places where people of many differences can be in the presence of each other. We can see and be seen. We can ‘know ourselves as part and as crowd’, to use Glissant’s phrase (1997, 9). In a certain sense, public spaces can be the places where we experience ourselves as public beings.

In the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, many have voiced the concern that social distancing – keeping six feet apart – in public spaces (Figure 1) could negate our ability to connect with others and thereby diminish our sense of social belonging. In an interview with CNN, Associate Professor Jordi Honey-Roses states that an important question to be asking about public spaces is, ‘Can we still achieve connectivity if we all keep social distancing?’ (Holland, 2020, para. 22). Michael Kimmelman (2020, para. 6) argues that ‘our response [to the ‘anti-urban’ forces of the pandemic] so far – social distancing – … runs up against our fundamental desires to interact’. Joe Cortright (2020, para. 21) claims, ‘When cities work well, it’s because, in all their spaces, they overcome or bridge social distance … The reason we find social distancing so difficult, and so off-putting is that it runs counter to so much of what makes life, especially city life, worthwhile.’ All these lead to conclusions that social distancing is, as Richard Williams (2020, para. 12) comments in a New York Times opinion essay, ‘of course by contemporary Western standards antisocial, even misanthropic’.

In this essay, I argue that the opposite is true. Social distance does not threaten our ability to connect socially; it is a critical requirement for social interactions within public spaces. Public spaces work well precisely because they allow for social distance, not because they overcome or bridge it. The most important connections that public spaces provide are those of a public and social nature rather than those of an intimate or personal nature. Public-space interactions are ones where we encounter people we do not know and people who are not always like us. These interactions are best achieved with a little spacing. Social distancing is not antisocial or misanthropic; it is a spacing that...
allows us to be with each other, as strangers, ‘as part and as crowd’ (Glissant, 1997, 9) in a public place. It is a spacing that allows us to overcome fear and build trust.

Social distance as prejudice or physical spacing

The assumption that social distancing harms social connections stems from a confusion over the meaning of the term. The current epidemiological use of the term refers to a specific physical distance (approximately six feet) we should maintain while in social settings. But many interpret ‘social distancing’ to mean a psychological distance from other people, a ‘being distanced socially’. For example, the Editorial Board of the *New York Times* (2020, paras 8, 9) uses ‘social distancing’ to refer to the flight of the wealthy to suburbs or vacation homes. Their conclusion that ‘social distancing as a salvation of society’ is ‘dangerously misguided’ does not refer to the simple six-feet-apart physical spacing advocated by epidemiologists. Because of this confusion, the six-feet-apart ‘social distancing’ becomes labelled alongside other ‘social distancing’ as both a cause and an effect of prejudice. Because of this confusion, the World Health Organisation now advocates using the term ‘physical distancing’ instead (Kaur, 2020).

This confusion has deeper roots than the current crisis. It stems from two separate lineages of the term ‘social distance’. In sociology and psychology, ‘social distance’ refers to a ‘differentiating oneself socially from another person or group’ (Swim et
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Figure 2  Diagram of interpersonal space categories developed by Edward T. Hall. Social distance is the physical spacing of four to 12 feet apart

al., 1999, 61). The social distance scale, developed by Emory Bogardus in 1924, is a series of questions (for example, whether you would invite a person into your home or allow them to marry into your family) that is still widely used to measure prejudice (Ethington, 1997; Wark and Galliher, 2007). Bogardus’s social distance is not a physical spacing; it is a measurement of psychological attitudes towards other people outside your own social group.

The second root of the term, however, does refer to a physical distance. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall uses the term ‘social distance’ to designate one of four physical distance zones (intimate, personal, social and public) of how close we tend to stand with each other based on specific ‘types of activities and relationships’ (Hall, 1966, 114) (Figure 2). Hall’s ‘social distance’ refers to a physical distance of four to 12 feet between people, a distance that, according to Hall, is commonly used for ‘impersonal business’ and ‘casual social gathering’ (Hall, 1966, 121).

The current epidemiological ‘social distancing’ of six feet falls in the range of Hall’s ‘social distance’ of 4 to 12 feet. This kind of social distance does not necessarily distance us socially; it is a physical spacing that many humans prefer to use for encounters with people we do not know personally or intimately (Figures 3 and 4). Public spaces, as the spaces where we encounter people outside our intimate or personal spheres, therefore should embrace Hall’s social-distancing recommendations, not try to overcome them.
Figure 3  Even before the coronavirus pandemic, people choose to sit and walk with at least six feet spacing between strangers. Madrid’s Rio Park, 2019.
Source: Author

Figure 4  Naturally occurring spacing between strangers in Yerba Buena Gardens in 2008, suggests that people prefer some distance between themselves and people whom they do not know
Source: Author
Strangers, physical distance and prejudice

Hall’s social distance could be a key component of making places where we are comfortable interacting with those outside our personal circle. To make this case, I return to Bogardus’s definition of social distance as well as Hall’s, as both, in different ways, explore the relationship between physical spacing and our psychological reactions to difference. Because Hall’s ‘social distance’ correlates more directly with the epidemiological recommendation of six-foot spacing between people, for the rest of the paper I will use the term ‘social distance’ to refer to Hall’s physical spacing zone of 4 to 12 feet, ‘social distancing’ to refer to the current epidemiological recommendations, and either ‘psychological distance’ or ‘prejudice’ to refer to the sociological and psychological uses of the term.

Robert Park and Bogardus developed their social distance scale from the teachings of Georg Simmel, under whom Park studied (Ethington, 1997; Wark and Galliher, 2007). But Simmel’s description of prejudice in the essay ‘The Stranger’ is more nuanced than the simple conclusion that all distances (psychological or physical) are prejudices that need to be overcome. Simmel (1971b, 143) suggests that the case of the stranger represents ‘the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship’. He observes that ‘even the most intimate relationships’ contain a ‘trace of strangeness’ (Simmel 1971b, 147). Therefore, perhaps, it is not distance per se that needs to be overcome. According to Simmel (1971b, 148), the peculiar tension of the stranger is that ‘what is stressed is again nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in common with many strangers. For this reason strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type’. Simmel

Figure 5 Social distancing at San Francisco’s Union Square in 2008. Strangers can see each other but also maintain a ‘safe’ distance
Source: Author
suggests that the relational problem to be overcome is not a question of distance; it is a question of how we see the stranger.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests that face-to-face encounters are how we can stop viewing each other as ‘strangers of a certain type’:

Access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. (Levinas, 1985, 85–86)

This ‘social relationship’ comes from being in the presence of each other, seeing a person’s individual face and not reducing it to a certain type. This encounter with the face of the Other – not necessarily an encounter of touching or speaking – is the foundation of our ethical relations as public beings. These face-to-face encounters – these viewings of strangers as individuals rather than as types – can occur with social distancing in public space. Physiologically speaking, to see a stranger as an individual, we need to be within 25 feet, but six feet apart will suffice (Figure 5).

Both Simmel and Levinas suggest that a certain proximity (or co-presence) is required for us to see people as individuals rather than ‘strangers of a certain type’ (Simmel, 1971b, 148). This proximity can be translated to a practical measurement of 25 feet or less. But what about the distance? Do we also need a spacing between ourselves? In ‘The metropolis and modern life,’ Simmel (1971a, 324) suggests that city dwellers create a mental separation, ‘a blasé attitude’, in his words, as ‘a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it’. Hall’s physical separation of social distance can similarly serve as a mechanism for coping with the fear and anxiety that arises when in the presence of unfamiliar stimuli. The social distance of four to 12 feet keeps other people beyond arm’s length. As Hall (1966, 121) explains, ‘The boundary line between the far phase of personal distance and the close phase of social distance marks, in the words of one subject, the “limit of domination” where “nobody touches or expects to touch another person unless there is some special effort”. Public distance, the distance for performances or speeches, is also linked to a sense of safety; ‘At 12 feet an alert subject can take evasive or defensive action if threatened’ (Hall, 1966, 124).

**Conclusion: for social distance in public spaces**

In conclusion, if public spaces are intended to be the places where we encounter others different from ourselves, both proximity and distance should be cultivated: close enough to be face-to-face, yet out of arm’s reach. This distance does not isolate
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the most vulnerable and misunderstood from the mainstream; it provides them with a form of protection from unwanted touch or solicitation. With social distance, women can wander alone without concern about harassment. Protests can occur without fear of violence. It provides the opacity that Edouard Glissant advocates for in Poetics of Relation, ‘that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence’ (Glissant, 1997, 191). In a similar vein to Glissant’s claim that the ‘right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms’ (Glissant, 1997, 190), I suggest that social distance (four to 12 feet spacing) does not necessarily create a segregated public sphere; it actually could become the real foundation for improving relations of difference in the public realm.

In this public space with social distance, I can enter alone without fear. I can wander at will, smile at a child who is picking a dandelion for her parent, give a knowing nod to the teenagers who are surreptitiously doing something that I don’t really want to know about, and watch the elderly man scatter birdseed from his park bench. We ‘continue to work in the presence of another person without appearing to be rude’ (Hall, 1966, 123). I do not have to touch or even talk to these strangers to feel connected to them. There would be nothing gained from that breach, yet I feel richer for just being in their presence. This is the fragile yet wonderful relation that public space fosters. It is facilitated by social distancing, not threatened by it.

I do not want to dismiss the concern that social distancing can increase feelings of isolation and loneliness. I only want to point out that the hugs, handshakes and close whispers we crave are from people we have let into our intimate and personal

![Social distance spacing that naturally occurred at Madrid’s Rio Park in 2019](Image)

Source: Author
Katherine Melcher

spheres. Distancing ourselves from personal relationships can be challenging, but these relations are not the primary relations we are seeking in public life and public space.

Questions remain about how to achieve social distancing in public spaces. Several methods have been put forth over the past few months – from the marking of social distance circles in public parks (Figure 7) to the more creative ‘pool noodle hats’ at a restaurant in Germany or robot dogs in parks in Singapore (Schmidt and Guy, 2020; Seipel, 2020; Whiteman, 2020; BBC News, 2020). I believe that, for many cultures, social distance is a natural tendency, and even in cultures that tend to have a smaller sense of personal space, social norms are shifting so that people want social distance in their public spaces. Rather that policing and regulations, the priority should be to give people the space they want and need.

Providing space for social distance can be challenging in high-density cities with few open spaces. A long-term solution is to convert underutilised corridors and old

Figure 7  White circles 10 feet (3.0 m) in diameter, spaced 8 feet (2.4 m) apart, are painted on the grass at Mission Dolores Park in San Francisco to encourage social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic
Source: Christopher Michel, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Francisco_under_Quarantine.jpg
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infrastructure into parks, such as Madrid’s Rio Park (Figures 3 and 6). By burying arterial highways that lined the river, the city was able to add six miles and 360 acres of park land to a series of neighbourhoods that had previously lacked access to green space (Stesney, 2018). The park’s extra-wide pathways and large open lawns afford social distancing. A shorter-term solution is the conversion of streets into pedestrian and bicycle corridors, such as those occurring in cities across the globe, including New York, Oakland, Seattle, Barcelona, Bogota and several municipalities in New Zealand (Colarossi, 2020). Pedestrianising streets gives people space for non-motorised transport and exercise, but it also can turn a street into a place where we experience ourselves in relation to others, a public space. If given the space, I think that people, through cultural conventions and shifting social norms, will create their own safe distances.

Solutions should be unique for each city, each place, each collection of cultures. Still, I hope that as public spaces are developed, we remember that social distance is a valuable part of how public spaces can help us relate to strangers, to differences and to our shared humanity. Social distance helps people feel safe in public spaces. It is something to be embraced if we want an equitable and healthy public life.

References


