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# THE PULSE OF THE CITY: 'GOUARIR' STREET AND THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC SPACES IN ALGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

The transformation of a neighborhood street into a city-wide street reflects the adaptation of urban forms to new usages, evolving as a space of urbanity where animation and social activity develop. Often located on the public domain, the street differs from the layout of plots, which is constantly changing, its underground infrastructure transforming as networks evolve. In this regard, the concept of the street needs to be assessed in light of the transformations induced by the new urban trends in Algeria. The study of the various urban and architectural transformations of "rue Gouarir" in Bordj Bou Arreridj and its evolution enables us to examine both urban recompositions as an expression of changing patterns of life, and the significance of place in contemporary Algerian cities. This study, conducted from an interdisciplinary perspective involving architecture, urban planning and economics. The aim is to assess the urban transformations and dynamics affecting this street and the people who live on it and build it. In order to better understand the dynamics of street transformation into public space, an analytical method mainly founded on socio-spatial investigation was employed. As a result, "Rue Gouarir" is overseen by community residents and business proprietors, with a conspicuous lack of involvement from local authorities. The interactions within "Rue Gouarir" have substantially transformed the surrounding area, propelling it to become a sought-after and attractive district within the city.

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## KEYWORDS

Public Space, Dynamics, Transformations, Assesment, "rue Gouarir"

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## 1. Introduction.

The direct impact of current economic dynamics, changing social needs and broader societal aspirations is profoundly affecting not only the urban public sphere, but also the fundamental structure of our cities [1;2]. The result is a process of gentrification, characterized by the economic and symbolic enhancement of an urban space largely shaped by a specific urban model. This process brings into competition different stakeholders and social groups, unequally endowed in terms of their ability to appropriate and reshape this space[3].

In this context, the tools applied in urban planning are often challenged in terms of their ability to maintain the rhythm of rapidly evolving urban forms and patterns. As a result, public spaces are subject to major urban and architectural transformations, reflecting the reconfiguration of urban environments in response to changing patterns of living. Moreover, these alterations underline the changing importance and role of these spaces in the contemporary landscape of Algerian cities[4]. Focusing on the case of "Rue Gouarir in Bordj Bou Arreridj", this study aims to investigate the profound transformations experienced by this urban public space, and to highlight the implications of the various actors and stakeholders in its urban planning and management processes. Among these public spaces is the street. As a living, diverse space, streets are an essential platform for gathering and interactivity. Its open accessibility, combined with its role as a commercial and service junction, provides a vital space for activity. Much more than a simple physical space, the street embodies a central point of sociability, based on neighbourly relations and community interaction. Involving residents in the design and use of this public space is a key factor in ensuring public safety. The street fosters inclusion, helping to overcome boundaries and promote a sense of security[5; 6].

Thus, examining the concept of the street in light of the transformative effects of Algerian market liberalization offers a unique perspective on the impact of economic change on urban spaces and societal interactions. This paper aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the transformations observed in Gouarir Street, specifically emphasizing spatial changes, socio-economic evolutions, and the multifaceted participation of stakeholders in the management of this urban space. The study employs a variety of methodologies, including ethnographic observation, urban policy analysis, as well as engagement with various urban actors through interviews. In addition, this study aims to engage with the diverse perspectives and experiences related to the evolution of "Rue Gouarir". This research ultimately highlights the changing dynamics of urban public spaces in the Algerian context, using "Rue Gouarir" as a model to understand the complex challenges and complexities of contemporary urban space management.

## **2. Public Space as a Dynamic and Evolving Concept.**

Public space is a polysemous term that leads to a variety of definitions, depending on the disciplines and issues addressed. In urban planning, the most common understanding of public space is often material, emphasizing its urban character and considering urban public spaces in all their diversity and specificity. In many cases, these spaces are defined as outdoor places in the public domain accessible and open to all, with both descriptive and normative connotations. In particular, normative aspects of public space are usually linked to two major issues: accessibility and intersubjectivity. Accessibility concerns the ability of public spaces to play their social and political role by ensuring the simultaneous presence of individuals in the same space.

Public spaces are therefore potential places for encounters and dialogue. Nevertheless, while accessibility is often considered universal in theoretical definitions, it rarely is in practice. Sometimes, implicit control mechanisms can operate in these spaces, raising the question of the inclusion or exclusion of certain uses or groups of people. Consequently, accessibility raises the question of "public" as a noun: who is included or excluded from public space, and for whom is it intended? It also underlines the importance of considering the political and social dimensions of public spaces, in relation to democratic issues and the practices of inclusion/exclusion that can manifest themselves within these spaces.

In addition, public spaces form the backbone of the contemporary city, consisting of a network of streets, squares, parks, public facilities, etc. that permeate and intersect the urban phenomenon. Through public spaces, many other essential networks are deployed, such as those for drinking water and wastewater, energy, different modes of transport, telecommunications, etc., but above all, public spaces enable all city dwellers to meet and provide access to all urban places [7; 8; 9].

The distinctive feature of public space is its plurality, in terms of the places it occupies, the forms it takes and the uses to which it is put [10]. Indeed, public space plays an essential role in the city's image.

### **2.1. Public Space and Usage.**

Public spaces are the scene for a myriad of urban activities, from shopping and leisure to casual encounters and the development of a city's visual and cultural identity. The challenges of maintaining these spaces are monumental, and require cities to tackle several key issues:

- The multitude of stakeholders involved, from collaborative project managers to municipal service providers, utility concessionaires and neighboring property owners.
- The diversity of spaces, from historic centers to suburban areas and large residential developments.
- Conflicts arising from the competing uses of these public spaces - transportation, parking, commercial activities, employment opportunities and leisure requirements.

The design and development of public spaces requires a delicate balance between functionality, safety, accessibility, comfort and aesthetics. The dynamic nature of these spaces involves a wide range of stakeholders. In particular, four key groups are involved in the design of public spaces: economic entities, politicians, planning professionals and residents, who act as both users and citizens [11; 12].

### **2.2. Managing Public Space in Algeria.**

In Algeria, urban public space is part of the public domain. Law 90-30 of December 1, 1990[13] classifies the public domain into natural and artificial domains. The artificial domain includes roads, freeways and their outbuildings, public monuments, museums and archaeological sites, landscaped parks, public gardens and cultural and sports facilities. Article 23 of this law stipulates that "the departments that assign or own national domain property are required to manage it...".

As we can see, the processes involved in the formation and transformation of urban spaces - the natural expression of the city's life cycle - are entirely coherent. However, the decision-making tools we use have remained static, particularly those concerning public spaces.

In Algeria, the management of public spaces is orchestrated by three main categories of tools:

- a) Technical tools;
- b) Legal tools;
- c) Economic tools.

Managing these spaces requires a multidisciplinary approach. In this context, factors such as usage patterns, historical context, connectivity with the city and urban planning strategies are just as important as considerations relating to infrastructure, roads or building materials.

Public spaces are defined by a plethora of regulatory frameworks, including urban planning rules defined in the land use plan (LAN), civil codes, road regulations, environmental standards, local authority bylaws, guidelines for the protection of monuments and surrounding areas, and various standards. A comprehensive understanding of the interaction and links between these regulatory frameworks is a fundamental requirement to ensure the practicability and sustainability of operational efforts.

### 3. Materials and Methods.

This research strategy combines the study of practices and usages with spatial analysis. It aims to understand the logics and dynamics, as well as the spatial and social forms of urban public space, articulated on an existing street. Accordingly, the study focuses mainly on the changing dynamics of commercial activities and on the changing, evolving and transformative aspects of the street with the accelerated growth of urban development.

The research entailed a survey of traders and residents on Rue Gouarir in Bordj Bou Arreridj (BBA). Through interviews with traders and citizens living in the neighborhood, along with direct observations, the aim was to gather data on the socio-spatial practices of rue Gouarir. The survey took place in June 2015 and was conducted by the authors in two phases:

- The first phase involved documenting the various existing trades on the street and their locations. This phase took place over a full day, involving observation and numerical photography.
- The second phase consisted in creating graphs illustrating the distribution of commercial activities on Gouarir Street in 2015, as well as a map showing the location of these activities. It also aimed to draw the necessary lessons on the changes, transformations and commercial specialization of this street.

### 4. Results and Discussions.

#### 4.1. Different Aspects of the Transformation of "Rue Gouarir in B.B.A".

4.1.1. **Geographic and historic aspect :** According to R. Henri's approach to social geography [14], it is society, social mechanisms and processes, and the interplay of public and private actors, that significantly shape space. The city is directly linked to the configuration of its morphology, with the site constantly influencing the city's destiny and evolution. In this case study, the site has shaped the city of Bordj Bou Arreridj, which is structured around major axes.

The showcase and symbolism of the space are linked to the city's main roads and urban network, representing an important value in the logics of location. Situated between today's Route Nationale 76 and Rue de l'Ecole in a residential neighborhood, Rue Gouarir serves as a link. It connects the neighborhood from west to east. In terms of legibility, the street is linear and narrows (Fig. 1).

Created in 1972 as part of a private real estate development, it is located in Bordj Bou Arreridj, a commune in the wilaya of Sétif. The neighborhood is bordered by two major roads (National Roads 05 and 76). BBA's economic boom after the 2000s transformed the neighborhood with the establishment of a department store by its owner, Gouarir.

Subsequently, the neighborhood has undergone various architectural and urban transformations. Today, the street is managed on a daily basis by economic actors. There is no union, as stipulated in the specifications at that time: "Street and square - all purchasers of the allotment will have all rights of circulation, use, passage, view, daylight and access to the street and square, with the obligation to contribute to maintenance in proportion to the number of syndicates shares they hold and in accordance with the status of the purchasers' syndicate until the day when the entire road network has been taken over by the communal administration".

At present, the municipal administration only deals with waste management and has set up a traffic plan. Natural zoning, generated by the organic requirements of a constantly evolving urban area, imposes a force that urban planners' zoning cannot claim.



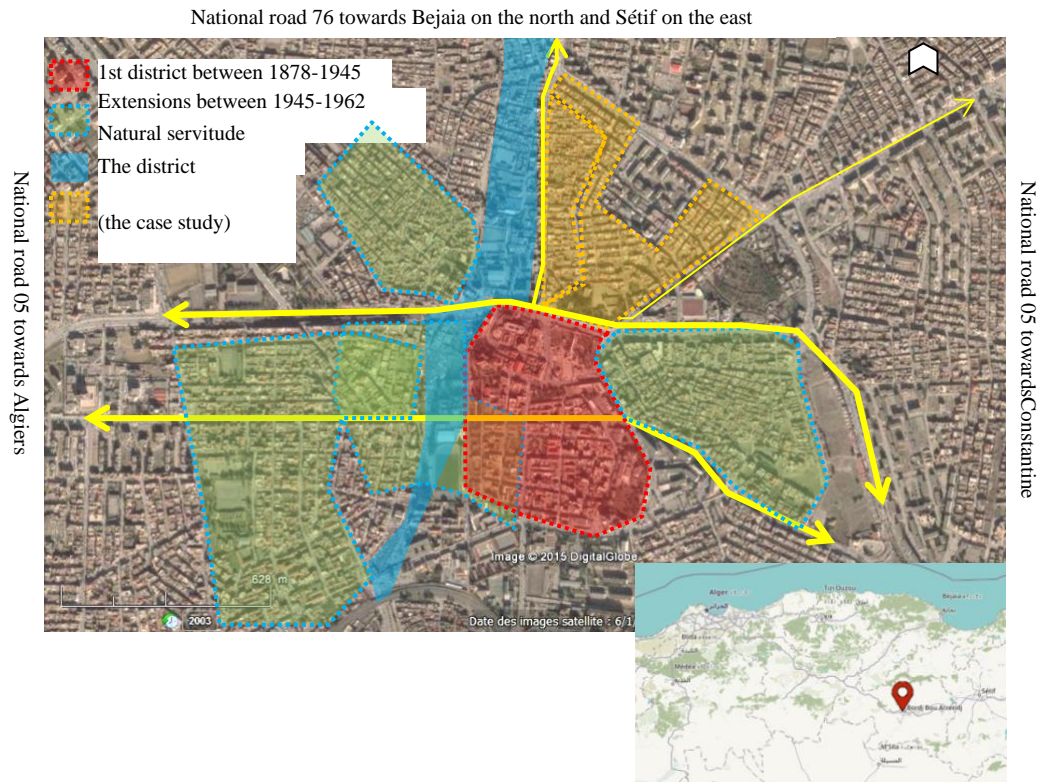


Fig. 1. Situation of the district in relation to the city (Source: Author)

#### 4.2. Architectural, urban, and socio-economic aspects of “Rue Gouarir”.

Historically, the growth of cities has always been linked to commercial dynamism (the mercantile function), as without economic dynamism, cities stagnate. In fact, the driving force behind urban evolution is the evolution of values, which in turn reflect the rhythms of socio-economic change. In addition, the street offers a dynamic opportunity for diverse and enriching encounters, and is accessible to all. It also serves as a showcase for shops and services. Within neighborhoods, the street becomes a convivial place where neighborhood ties are forged. Thus, the presence of residents in the public space ensures the safety of the community, and by overcoming barriers, the street promotes openness and security.

In this case, we can observe that there are 73 businesses in the 36 residences, with clothing-related activities accounting for over 52% of all commercial activities (Fig. 2). Architecture and land use have been transformed several times. Among the 36 buildings on the street, 25 have undergone changes to the floor area ratio (FAR) and the floor-occupancy coefficient (COS) (Fig. 3,4 and 6).

These modifications concerned gardens, courtyards, building elevations and facades. Over 61% of the 73 commercial spaces are leased (Fig. 5). These mutation mechanisms have led to the emergence of new configurations whose relevance lies in strategies of location, grouping and linking to value. Certain locations become opportunities for exchange and value creation. Stakeholders therefore look to meet the perceived needs and expectations of users (the supply-demand formula).

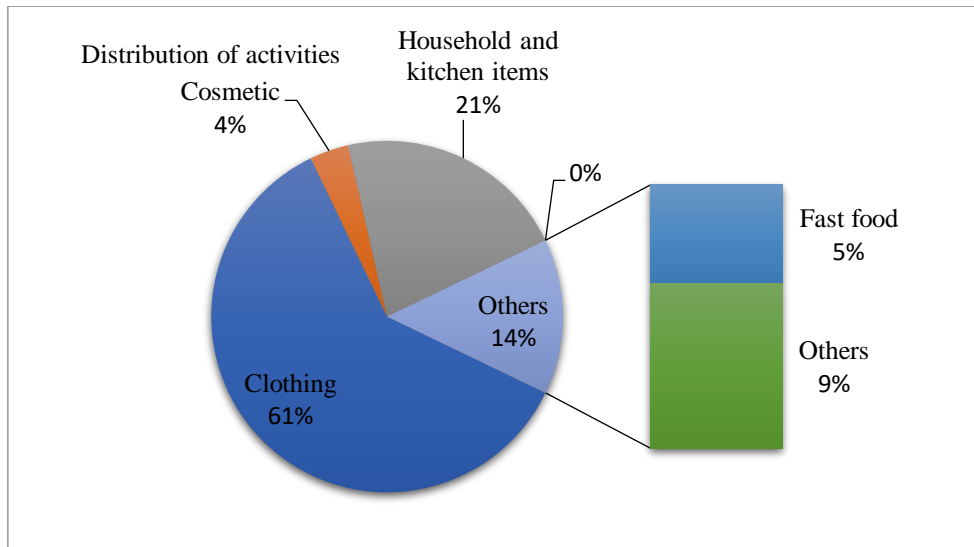


Fig. 2. Distribution of activities (Source: Author)

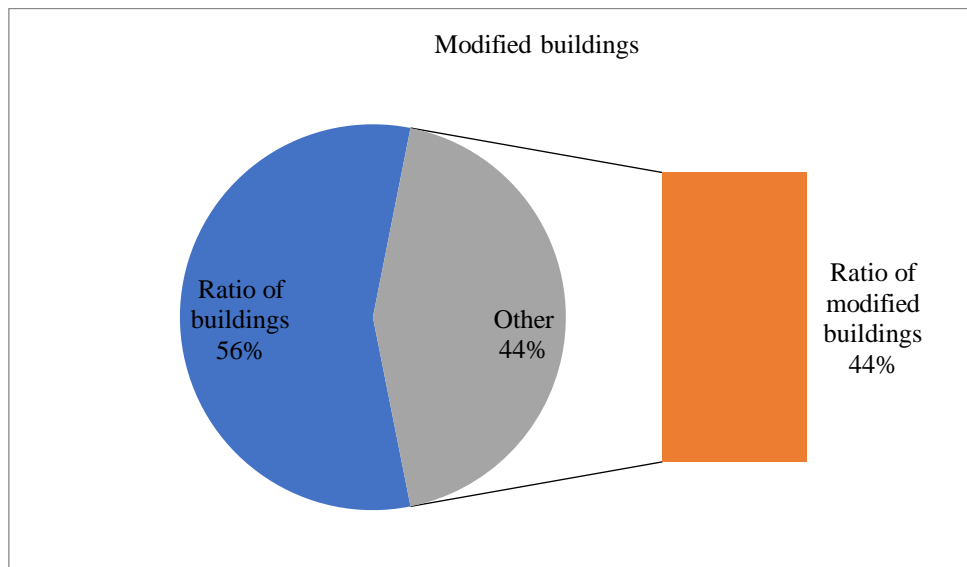


Fig. 3. Ratios of modified buildings (Source: Author)

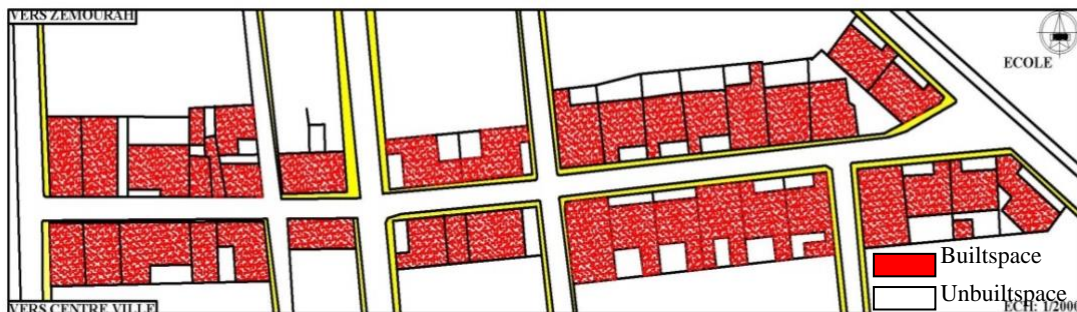


Fig. 4. The state of the street in 1995 (Source: Author)

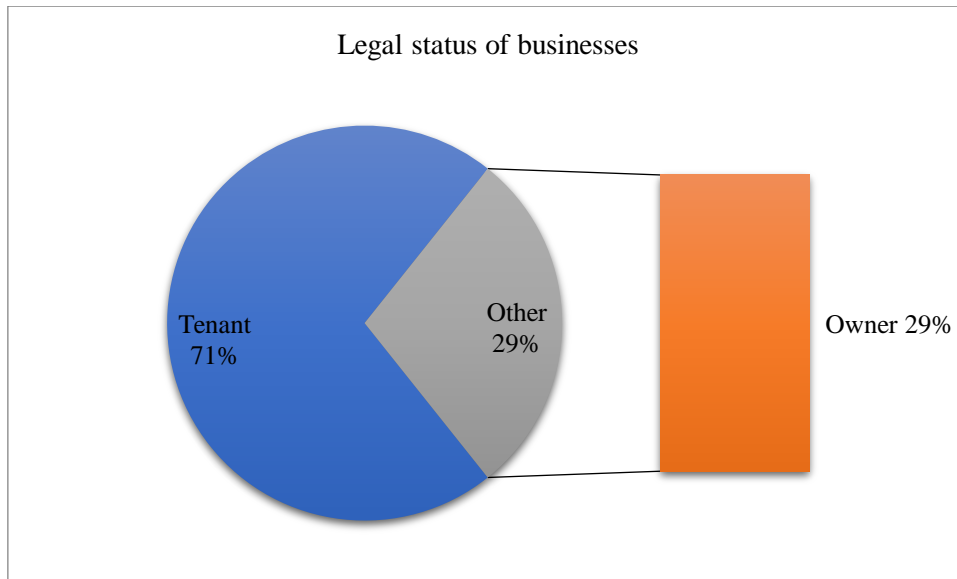


Fig. 5. Legal status of businesses (Source: Author)

#### 4.3. Reappropriation of the Street by Its Users.

In the early 1980s, rue Gouarir served as a thoroughfare and access road. After the 2000s, it was transformed into a platform of identity and significance for retailers. The latter are conscious of this passageway's value, which is why they capitalize on the added value offered by the street in terms of accessibility, visibility and representation (figure 6). The transformation of this street is also influenced by both the morphology and shape of the neighborhood, recalling the mental image that economic players have of working-class districts where women find their place (note that the population frequenting these shops is mainly female). The type of business and the layout of storefronts correspond to users' aspirations. The street creates value, and private actors have well understood this.

In the case of rue Gouarir, we are witnessing the emergence of new settlement patterns that extend beyond the logic of the main arteries. The "oil stain" or contamination phenomenon has been encouraged by the arrival of a major importer who attracts users with promises of "low prices" and "word of mouth". This in turn attracts other economic actors, making public space an object of this economic and architectural phenomenon.

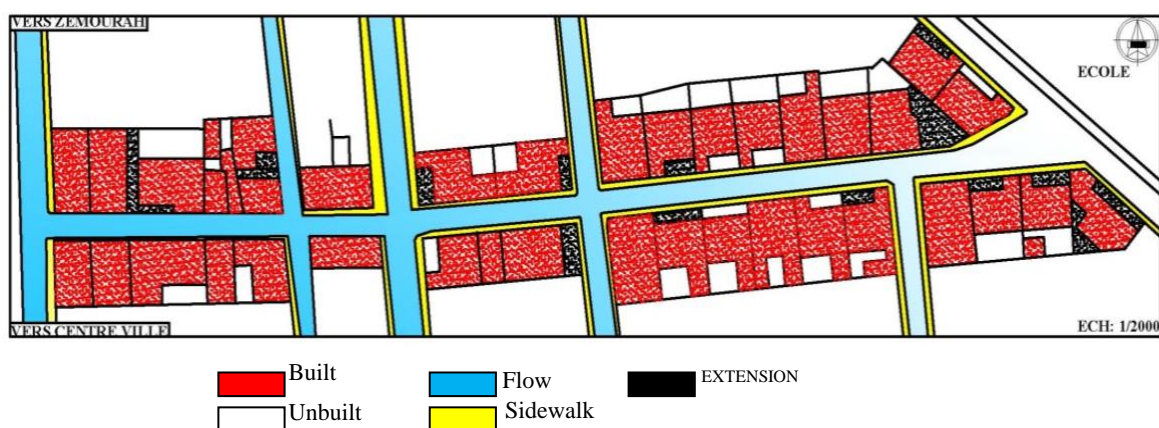


Fig. 6. The modification of the FAR and Ground Coverage ratio on " Rue Gouarir", and urban transformation and appropriation after 2015 (Source: Author)

## 5. Conclusions.

This meticulous analysis highlights the remarkable adaptability of commercial activities, as they evolve in response to changing requirements and demands. Indeed, this dynamic reflects the flexibility demonstrated by the economic stakeholders themselves, whose actions make a significant contribution to shaping the urban landscape. The resulting adaptability and variability of commercial activity exerts a transformative influence on urban spaces, particularly in the distinct context of our study - the busy street. However, these changes are not static; but rather, our examination reveals their changing and dynamic evolution across temporal, spatial and contextual dimensions.

The inherent dynamism of commercial activity leads to a continuous series of alterations, progressions and metamorphoses in the visual and experiential fabric of the street. Despite being initially arbitrary, these changes and transformations nevertheless adhere to their own internal logic, reflecting the nuanced interaction of economic dynamics in the urban domain.

Gouarir Street in BBA, our focal point, is a poignant testimony to these profound changes and transformations. The area is marked by a clear trend towards specialized commercialization and the emergence of innovative socio-spatial practices. These pioneering practices promote a distinctive form of centrality that is reflected in the urban landscape, influencing and redefining the city's spatial identity. These urban mutations represent the adaptive response of urban structures to new usages, evolving into animated spaces of urbanity brimming with diverse activities and dynamic engagements.

Consequently, the conceptualization of the public domain as a social territory requires a complete re-evaluation. This re-evaluation extends to the sociological reconceptualization of legally private spaces, redefining them within the framework of public domains. However, the growing importance of private spaces that promote sociability, exemplified by the prominence of shopping malls, continues to occupy a central place in contemporary discussions. This resurgence also contributes to the current discourse on American critiques of public spaces in the 1990s. Finally, it is essential to recognize that the simple presence of public interaction does not intrinsically ensure the social virtue or inclusivity of a space. Substantial social engagement and purposeful design remain essential to fostering spaces conducive to strong community interactions and societal cohesion in urban environments.

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