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Rhetoricizing the Urban
Finding a Living Public in Public Plaza

erin daina mcclellan

The city is a complex and nuanced collection of symbols, actions, interactions, and meanings rife for analysis at any given moment. Rhetorical scholarship adds unique insights into how such meanings are constructed, interpreted, and enacted. Much of the foundational research in the field of communication traces back to McGee's[1] disciplinary transition "from rhetorical materialism to rhetoric's materiality."[2] As Biesecker and Lucaites point out, this critical discussion has led to understanding rhetorical objects as on a "continuum of rhetorical influence that extend from the most concrete incidence of microrhetorical experience to increasingly abstract socio- and macro-rhetorical experiences".[3] It is my contention that by highlighting the interconnectedness of conceptual and material experiences in everyday life, it is possible to engage in a more complex discussion of public place and/or space as both experienced objects of meaning *and* sites alive with meaning-making.

Studying the city as a (set of) complex text(s) "alive" with meaning requires an approach to collecting and analyzing the city (and its "urban text(s)") that enables discussing their dynamically produced and experienced constitutions of meaning. Although rhetorical analysis focuses on specific text(s), such analysis has potential to further explain how a city (or aspect of that city) is understood in consequential ways for people in their everyday lives. Thus, rhetoricians have potential to (re)construct their material surroundings as meaningful; such analysis both implicitly and explicitly persuades others that there are "right" and "wrong" (or "preferred" and "discouraged") ways to see a city as meaningful. Thus, looking at urban rhetorics provides opportunities to critically discuss how emergent meanings in and about a city are consequential for *both* rhetorical scholarship *and* the people who engage those rhetorics in myriad ways. I attempt here to briefly discuss how a rhetoric of "lack" emergent in Boston's City Hall Plaza 1) illustrates the benefits for rhetorical scholarship of studying "living" texts, and 2) reveals how the struggle over what City Hall Plaza "should" be reflects the larger City of Boston's struggle with explaining what a "good" public plaza should entail more generally. Such a discussion has further potential to expose complex power relations that affect the ways in which City Hall Plaza is (re)created as meaningful in both the present and imagined future.

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1 See Michael Calvin McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric," in *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger* , ed. Ray E. McKerrow, 23-48 (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982))
2 As described by Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites. "Introduction," in *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, ed. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 4.
3 Biesecker & Lucaites, "Introduction," 3.

Boston's City Hall Plaza's designation as "worst public place" by Project for Public Spaces,[4] warrants it as worthy of further critical discussion. After engaging in a larger (and multi-site) qualitative rhetorical study that included City Hall Plaza in Summer 2011, I interviewed Boston City officials, CHP workers, tourists, Boston residents, and various entrepreneurs and artists making use of the open public plaza in various ways. Those whose job it was to create policy about the plaza and/or enforce policy decisions in the plaza were targeted. By analyzing individual interviews in addition to observations of the ways that people in the public plaza negotiated its places and spaces while I was there, I was able to identify patterns in how participants made sense of the plaza as meaningful in similar and different ways. The most common ways that participants discussed City Hall Plaza were in relation to its urban aesthetic, ideal use, and (im)possibilities for future improvement. Participants engaged City Hall Plaza as part of their everyday lives (e.g., those eating lunch or walking through it as part of their commute on public transport) and as part of formally required obligations (e.g., government employees working in City Hall or citizens visiting various City offices).

By highlighting the interconnectedness of conceptual and material experiences in everyday life, it is possible to engage in a more complex discussion of public place

City Hall Plaza is a desolate expanse of brick with widespread notoriety for being a barren "place" to visit and an appalling "space" for public engagement. After its controversial beginnings in the late 1960s as a modern architectural symbol of power during the heyday of "urban renewal"[5] the plaza has changed little over the past fifty years. The Boston Redevelopment Authority has optimistically announced a "10 year plan" to change the plaza and its concrete monstrosity, City Hall, and City government officials and citizens alike have openly acknowledged City Hall Plaza's need for change. The reasons provided for its inability to transform into a more desirable public arena, however, vary greatly. Possibilities for improving it are inherently tied up in the ways in which people understand the plaza to be meaningful—in the past, present, and imagined future.

One of the most striking ways that participants made sense of the plaza in both informal interviews, and in the ways they did (and did not) engage in using the plaza, was that whatever might be "wrong" with City Hall Plaza needed to be "fixed." These explanations ranged from the endemic challenges present in working with the CIA and FBI (who have buildings adjacent to the plaza); concerns expressed about security in a post-9-11 U.S.; expense of transitioning from brick to "green"; and problems with the narrow clearance between the bottom of the plaza and the top of the underground train tunnel running beneath it. Even amidst this laundry list of obstacles to (re)building the public plaza as successful, a cohesive rhetoric of what City Hall Plaza is and can—and/or should—become clearly emerged. Participants commonly agreed that somehow this plaza was "lacking"—but the ways in which this "lack" materialized varied greatly, comprising a larger and more multifaceted rhetoric. Thus, analyzing this emergent rhetoric of "lack" reveals a mix of disparate voices and sense-making processes in and about City Hall Plaza that can effect both the creation and enforcement of formal policy as well as the ways that such policy is understood in vernacular ways.

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4 Project for Public Spaces *Hall of Shame*.

5 See Gary Wolf "Inventing City Hall," *Historic New England* Winter/Spring (2009): 1-8.

I, thus, contend that the "lack" of physical structures in a materially extant plaza environment are in direct and nuanced relation to the people who design, produce, and maintain those structures *and* to the people who use, critique, and interpret such structures as meaningful in their everyday lives. Consequently, looking to both official *and* vernacular rhetorics of urban public life enable such public places and/or spaces to be (re)created in salient ways for a city's *publics*—not just a selected, prioritized portion of its publics. (In)attention to what City Hall Plaza "should" look like from a variety of perspectives and positions reveals discrepancies between those who are in positions of influence to bring about change to the plaza and those who are most affected by such changes that may not otherwise be apparent.

One example of this rhetoric of "lack" can be seen in how a "lack" of common understanding about what is (in)appropriate use of the public plaza provides insight into how power relations affect both what we come to understand as the meaning of "public" and how that meaning is reified in everyday life. In a brief encounter between a City Hall security guard and an acoustic group of musicians who set up an impromptu noontime concert for informally gathered City Hall Plaza lunch-goers, it is possible to see both the sense-making process about what is "allowed" in the plaza as well as the resulting "sense" made by those in positions of influence about how such desired use should be enforced. About ten minutes into their performance, a City Hall Plaza security guard instructed them to cease and desist. As they packed up, I asked the young men what had happened. He reported that they were told to leave because of a law that mandated music be more than 200 feet away from a residence, presumably referring to the Veterans Home housed in a building abutting the plaza approximately 200 feet away from where they were playing. Later, during an interview with a senior member of City Hall Plaza security staff, it was revealed that such interventions were not protocol but often a result of relationships established between an individual security officer and a city government official who was able to "phone" that particular individual with ejection requests premised on the perception that such events produced unwanted disruption to "official" city work in the offices above the plaza. This "unofficial" way of requesting "official" enforcement may be seem mundane in the case of the three young men, as passing out flyers for their upcoming appearance at a nearby bar hardly seems threatening. But the larger political and social implications of this same power relation are worthy of further discussion.

The "lack" of uniform enforcement of existing policy seems to be in direct contradiction to the purpose of a *public* place or space. Similarly, the "lack" of formal policy allowing gatherings in the plaza that take into account public safety concerns (like the petitioning processes to "gather" en masse in other public squares or plazas, often with minimal to no fee if exercising advocacy on behalf of a cause or opportunities to exercise free speech), reveals a layperson's relation to those in positions of power to be inverted at best and nonexistent at worst. If the people being ejected were perceived to be anyone other than "mere laypeople" or found themselves to be in a position to hold those ejecting them accountable, the rhetoric of "lack" may find itself turning into a rhetoric of "transformation"—something both official and vernacular contributions to the "rhetoric of lack" purported to be desirable. A "better" City Hall Plaza would presumably uphold its *public* obligation to serve its urban population that uses it in diverse ways; however, a failure to take into account diverse understandings of both aesthetic value and desirable use prevents the plaza from serving a diverse public and attempting to equitably protect the varied people who may choose to use it.

Collectively, participants explained and performed City Hall Plaza to be "lacking" in various ways. In the process of engaging the plaza as a living text, it becomes necessary to treat it

as multifarious and polyvocal. Since "living" is defined as "relating to the routine conduct or maintenance of life,"[6] a focus on "relating" provides rhetoricians new and consequential ways to reveal to a diverse audience the ways in which a particular text, like those that often collectively form larger urban rhetorics, can (and should) be consequential for all of them. In other words, the process of (re)creating life as meaningful *requires* relating to others as a social endeavor to (re)create meaning between and among *people*—not just objects. For that matter, a public plaza like City Hall Plaza must be understood to have been created by people on multiple levels (from design to construction to use) *and* as having various consequences (from use to legal right to accessibility). In this way, analysis of City Hall Plaza's emergent rhetoric of "lack" has the potential to shed light on the (often hidden) ways that relations of power affect its ability to be consequential. But sharing this potential with the *people* who collectively contribute to this rhetoric of lack has the ability to affect those existing power relations that lead to consequences of understanding in the first place.

Thus, a rhetoric of "lack" affects a definitional understanding of the plaza as a *public* arena in the City of Boston while (dis)embodying and/or (dis)engaging particular, material elements of how public-ness can be experienced in City Hall Plaza. Such rhetorical analysis is uniquely poised to identify, explain, and critically discuss the embedded (re)productions of meaning about particular urban environments. By including both the vernacular and official ways that City Hall Plaza is made sense of, particular ways of "living" are revealed to be encouraged or discouraged and thus included or excluded in formal ways of coming to understand the plaza as an (un)successful public place and space. In this way, (non)ideal urban living in Boston can be further imagined as future (im)possibilities. The ability to collectively imagine what Boston's urban experience "should" be like is thus directly connected to the how the tensions between official and vernacular understandings of what public entities "should" be(come) are navigated. In order for the City of Boston to successfully imagine and implement changes to City Hall Plaza that work for its diverse public, it must first openly solicit the varied and often contentious voices that comprise such emergent rhetorics as the one discussed here—not just official rhetorics that are readily available or most amplified.

6 *The Free Dictionary* (2012) Entry "Living."