

# A Delicate Negotiated Condition: The Seminar, The Book & The Teaching Outcome

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*“What form should the contemporary city take in order to restore the distorted equilibrium between the individual freedom and the collective responsibility?”<sup>1</sup> - Siegfried Giedon (1958)*

**The answer to this question is not simple. The collective realm is seen as a basic element in ensuring positive social relations among individuals, as well as a chance for social inclusion in our cities. However, oftentimes these positive relationships take place less and less spontaneously. Private spaces are replacing public gathering, and when this happens, according to Margaret Kohn’s book, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*, “the opportunities are diminished.”<sup>2</sup> This unbalanced situation is the point of departure of a critical teaching methodology, resulting from the conjunction of a seminar’s research titled “Politics of Balance” which has led to a recently published book: *Manhattan’s Public Spaces*, Routledge, 2022. Both this seminar and book unpack architecture as the result of complex and multiple social, cultural, ecological, and economic relations. An idea which focuses on how public spaces manifest larger cultural, socio-economic, ecological and political processes, and how their design and configuration impacts the nature and character of public experience.**

## INTRODUCTION

Today, contexts of impermanence and crisis challenge our role as architects, educators and researchers and question the values that political powers, communities and investors play in architecture and its urban context. This ongoing research and teaching methodology is an attempt to react against the built work as an autonomous apparatus but instead as an urban mediator and political form in collective space, dependent on the social networks, negotiations, participatory practices, and everyday language and imagery. This combined framework affords students a compelling set of connections between the discourses of policy and law, history and place, and their contribution to collective space. The significance of the interrelationship between this teaching enterprise lies in the focus on the evolution

of place through a juxtaposition of visual material with social and political histories. An elaboration that consciously builds on the pedagogical role of the past as an aesthetic experience, so students can learn that the most important lesson of history is to open doors into the present, so we can imagine that other futures are possible.

From this point of departure, this paper defends the need to advocate for mediums to explore shared spaces, new situations, and spaces able to request participation and a response from its inhabitants. Artifacts which fight against an imposed web of habits and acts repeated in our everyday routines. Intentional moments which can create a general need to react against total passive behaviors and create new needs to react to and experience the built context. In this sense, a core belief this paper defends is that architecture is a conversation between the built work and its user, without interaction and feedback, architecture is meaningless. In order to comprehend this idea, historic examples bring a necessary look into ways which invite us to reflect on occasions where a simple displacement brings a break from the routine. These examples do not need to be big interventions and despite a limited scope, they helped to reach an unprepared audience. This ongoing research, composed by an independent seminar which has led to a published book, is an attempt to overcome and question the traditional relationship between the shared built work and its audience. What do we interact with on our daily basis in the streets and sidewalks? How do we interact with it? Do we interact the way we are supposed to or can we do it differently?

## THE TEACHING METHODOLOGY: THE INDEPENDENT SEMINAR

A semester-long course “Politics of Balance”<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1) introduces graduate students of architecture to the awareness of the role that architecture plays as a precondition for political, cultural, and social engagement in the city. Following a process of analysis of the space of the city, its different users and its government, the course presents a series of precedents analysis toward the exploration of the architectural project as an urban mediator and political form. The seminar begins with the acknowledgement of a very basic problem within the collective realm: we are never quite sure what it is or what it is for. We

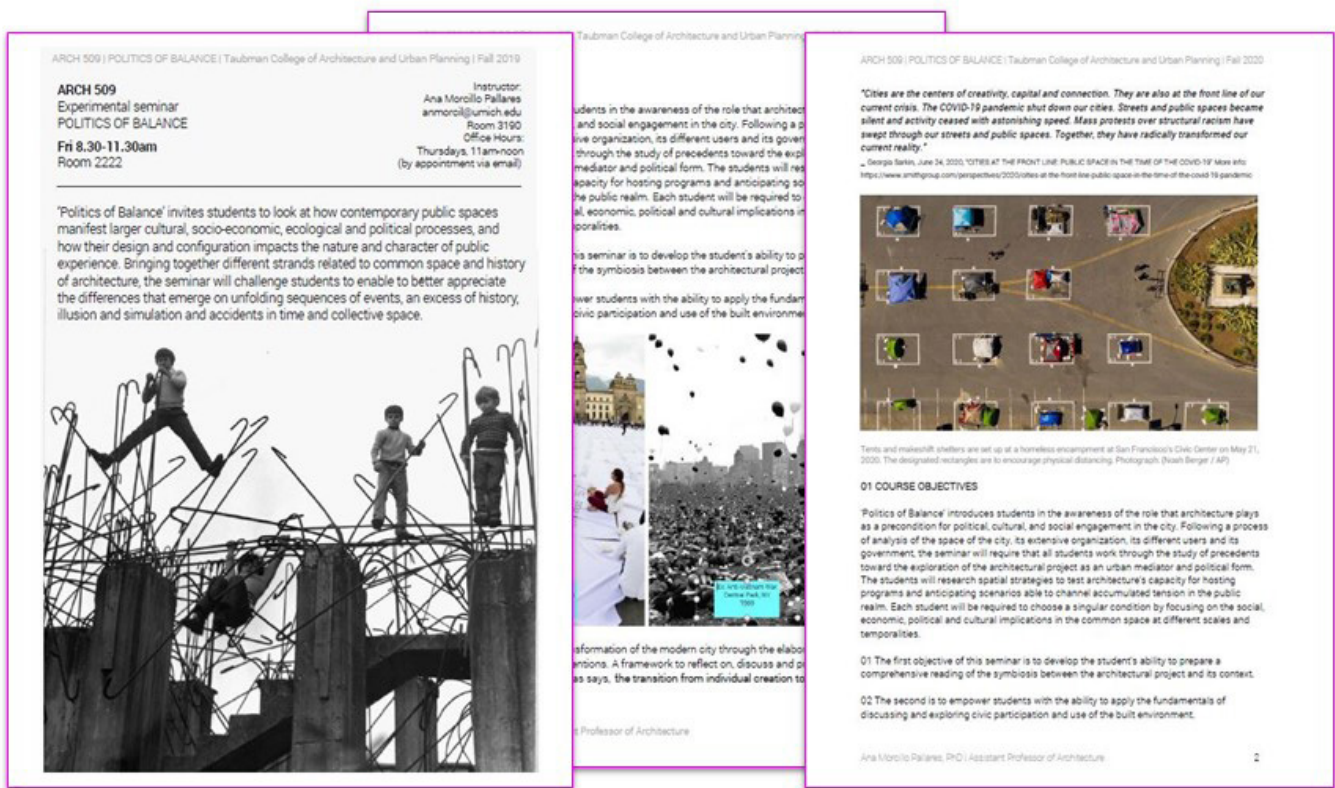


Figure 1. Course layout of the independent seminar *Arch 509 Politics of Balance*. Image credit: Ana Morcillo Pallares.

have this general sense that public space is something open, free, and happy. But the reality is somewhat very different and a much more blurred scenario. In this sense, the “other” and the “diversity” is what is missing from the kind of public space in most of our leftover squares, plazas, and pocket parks, and it is what makes it valuable. In a true public space, you might be offended by something or somebody, or by some behavior that is not familiar but this is the principle of what makes a space public, stands for freedom of expression and the joys of human interaction, according to Aaron Betsky.<sup>4</sup> Similar to what Sophie Watson argues in her book “City publics: the (dis)enchantments of urban encounters”, when she says that “public space is always in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested.”<sup>5</sup>

The learning outcomes of the seminar have two primary goals. On one hand, the first objective of this seminar is to develop the student’s ability to prepare a comprehensive reading of the symbiosis between the architectural project and its context. On the other hand, the second is to empower students with the ability to apply the fundamentals of discussing and exploring civic participation and the engagement within the built environment.

The course focuses on these two objectives, with greater emphasis on learning through a series of architectural precedents and its intimate relation with its adjacencies how interaction is promoted, in cities around the world, through actions which take place in the collective and represent small, yet persistent

challenges in contrast to the increasingly regulated, privatized, and diminishing forms of public space of our contemporary cities. The challenge of this research/seminar rests then, not just in the analysis of the production of good design, but more importantly, in how to understand the mechanisms for production of space for public use and how these interventions contribute or not to a sustainable and inclusive environment anchored in the already existing built fabric. A reciprocity, which has the potential to strengthen, but at the same time loosen, social networks, spatial systems and everyday language and imagery. A window into the present, that others might not have, which highlights that public space is not a concrete reality but a delicate negotiated condition. .

### THE PUBLISHED RESEARCH: THE BOOK

The research/seminar discourse contributed to the publication of a book *Manhattan’s Public Spaces: Production, Revitalization, Commodification*,<sup>6</sup> Routledge, 2022, (Figure 2) which unpacks three periods of the evolution of the collective realm during the past few decades through the lens of Manhattan: its production (part 1), its revitalization (part 2) and its commodification (part 3). The first part of the book explores innovative contributions after a political and socioeconomic euphoria post World War II. Here, the production of public space is understood as a deliberate making of openness in the city, which is possible thanks to the alliance of incentive mechanisms and corporate capitalism: a process which would become key in transforming Manhattan’s urban landscape. The text begins to explore the city in the 1950s,

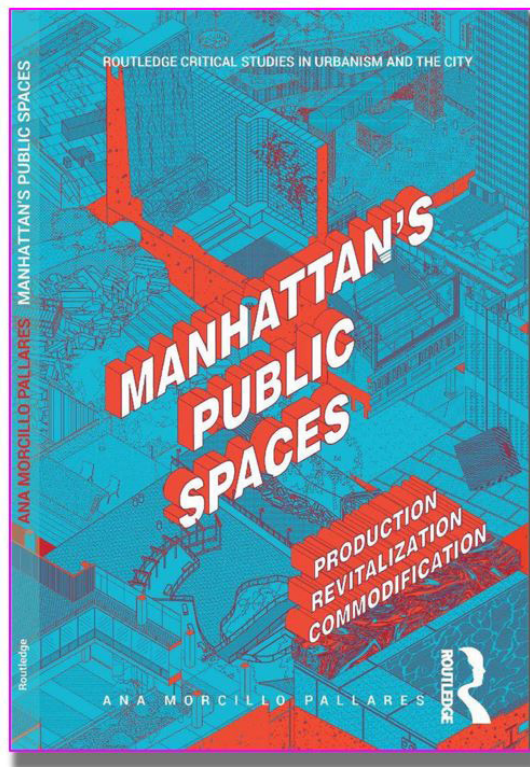


Figure 2. Cover of the publication: *Manhattan's Public Spaces: Production, Revitalization, Commodification*. Routledge (London, 2022). Image credit: Ana Morcillo Pallares.

a critical moment when the monolithic city starts to physically and metaphorically erode. As an example of this, the seminar, research and book dissect Lever House and Seagram Building, innovative proposals that contributed to an important rupture of the urban canyons and obsolete zoning regulations.

The consequence of alliances between incentive economic regulations, corporations and modern architecture lay the groundwork for the sensibility and revitalization of the collective space in part two of the book. This revitalization focuses on a set of examples where participatory processes are key in the critical engagement of recreational demands in the city. This second part delves into a range of proposals at the time of a special focus of the audience these proposals are thought for: from humble collaborative initiatives, such as three pocket parks in an overcrowded Harlem directed by non-profit organizations for a local community input, to sophisticated proposals by private philanthropists such as Paley Park in Midtown. The unexpected success of these projects led to a proliferation of tiny parks in the city, which introduced the students into a new sensibility of spaces where a full spatial experience and sensory stimuli invited citizens to enjoy as a new way to imagine a post-industrial vision for a reinvented landscape for play.

Part three interrogates the commodification of Manhattan's public space. A period of frictional identities where antagonistic encounters take place within the neoliberal city. From the '70s to the '80s, the seminar and the book analyze a post-economic downturn where, against all odds, Manhattan launched an intensive waterfront revival. Continuing into the '90s and burdened by the consequences of a prolonged economic crisis, bold solutions such as the bid to be an Olympic host city took place. The case study of Battery Park City (Downtown) and Gantry Plaza State Park (Queens), displays different results in the challenging waterfront strategies that instead of innovation, privileges the imbalance between public and private interests. From this perspective, the teaching outcomes question celebrated spatial initiatives such as the reconfiguration of Lincoln Center and the High Line. Projects which led the city into a controversial era of very profitable solutions through an accelerated renewal and infrastructural revitalization.

What is the lesson we can draw from Manhattan's Public Spaces? The analysis of these case examples highlights that the reconciliation of conflicting interests among private and public agents opens up an important debate of how to accommodate private property interests while mitigating their impact on the shared environment in the long term, at the time, they can be great sources of economic support for public investment. The complex interlinkages between the production of public space and its affordability have provided interdependencies between the two. What at first may appear as a great opportunity for the city to gain public space from a development transaction was turned into a process of commodification. A process which is irrelevant to the basic needs of less privileged neighborhoods in the city. The ethos of a city whose richness depends on the heterogeneous mix of people, uses and vibrant neighborhoods opens up an appreciation of the value of interdependence in the North American context. A reality which showcases that public infrastructure has a strong dependency on private investment and private goals directly benefit from a healthy and diversified public realm. A fact which we need to reinforce in our schools of architecture, in order to assist in the unlearning of the idea of a "free-granted" public space but a feasible inclusive one, which would depend on a truly diversified body of investors.

#### THE CROSS POLLINATION: THE TEACHING OUTCOME

The cross pollination (Figure 4) of crafting a book while teaching about the impact of conflicting architectural influences, objectives, and interests within the city's public realm opens up an opportunity which is not meant to have a final state but rather to provide a plastic set of tools for students to acknowledge and appropriate. A teaching methodology which is double. On one hand, to identify and critically engage strategies of architectural production deeply embedded in a socio-political, cultural, ecological and economic context. And on the other hand, to acknowledge that these mechanisms are never closed nor completed but open-ended systems which are results of an opaque



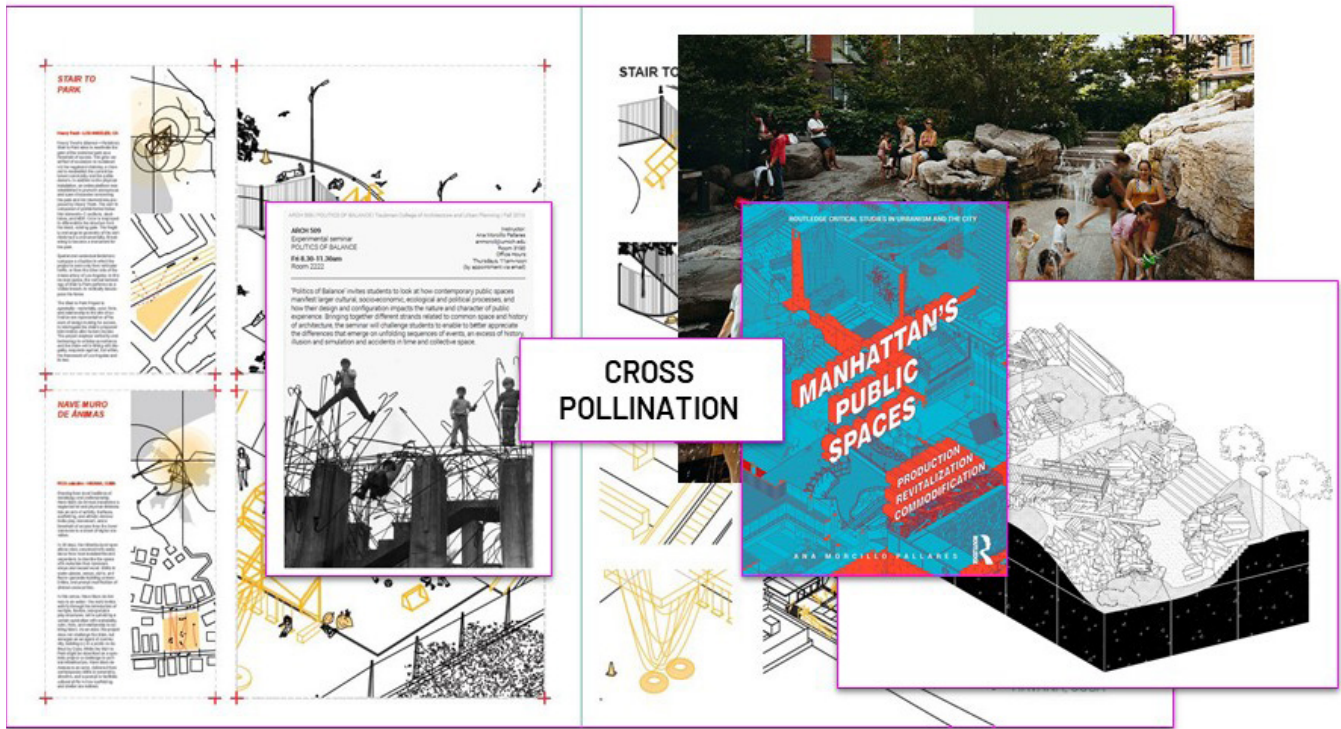


Figure 3. Cross Pollination between the independent seminar and the book's outcomes. Credit image: Ana Morcillo Pallares.

layering of networks among the different agents they are designed by and for.

A framework of study where historical examples or the comparison between contemporary work with historic ones help us understand how to start responding to grand challenges amidst a climate crisis, social inequality, rapid urbanization in our cities. Examples where the reconciliation of the city's intimacy allows for innovation and creativity to grow disassociated from the commercial and the real-estate logic. The production of the book at the time of teaching this independent seminar at Taubman College was a productive and beneficial process for both formats. The seminar acted as a vehicle to critically analyze in depth the set of examples which were included in the book. At the time the book was a collective tool where short questions and group discussions led the students to go beyond the design. But instead, it launched a much more complex set of questions by considering the environmental, political and cultural implications of the architectural proposition at different scales and temporalities.

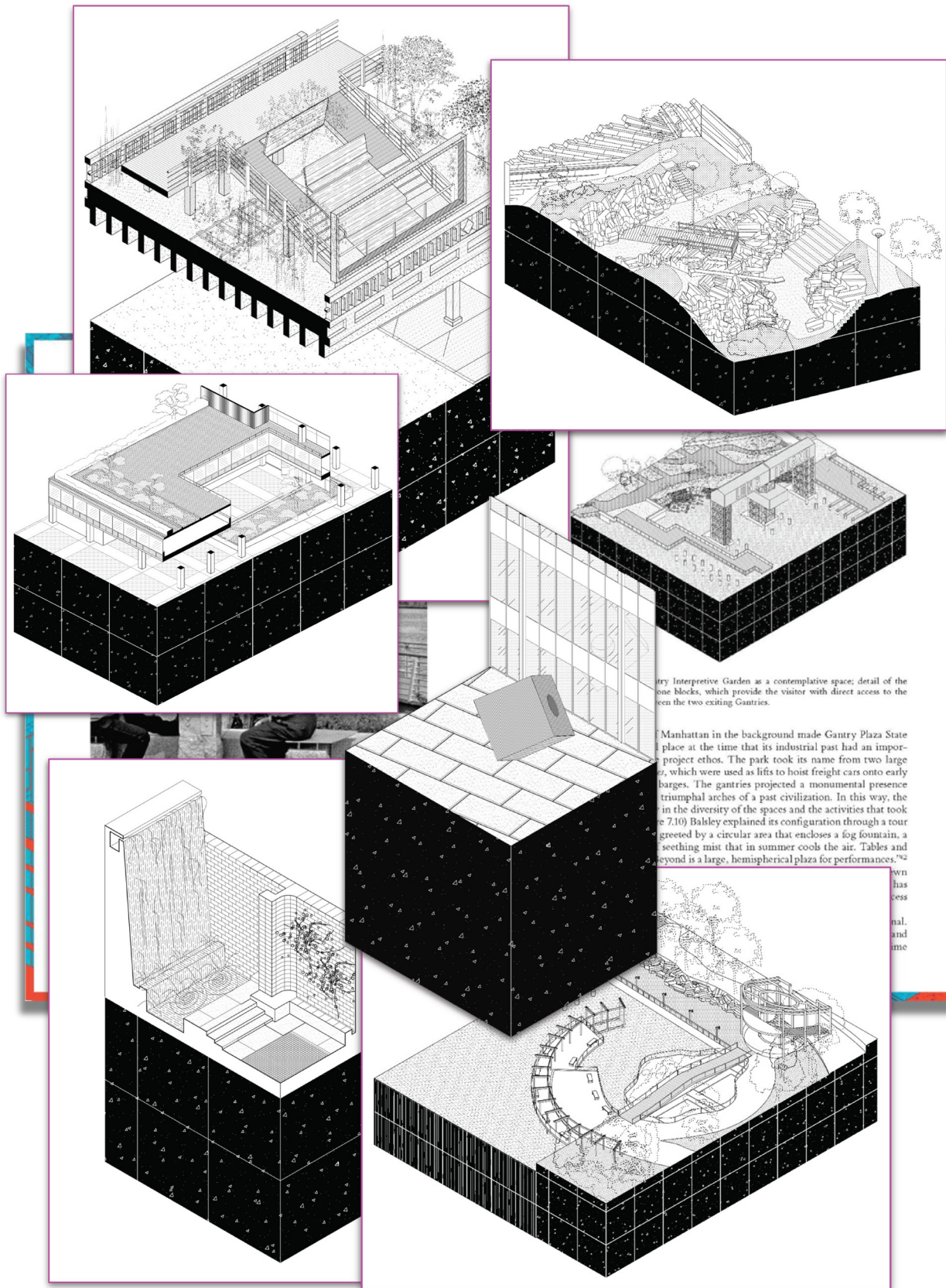
From this position, both the book, *Manhattan's Public Spaces* and the seminar 'Politics of Balance' addresses ways that may allow it to transcend into a not-so-apparent cause-effects relationships: What are the consequences of urban regeneration politics, the displacement of former activities and the resulting increase in land value? How can historical examples provide a more accurate description of the intensely difficult relationships

between contemporary networks of private and public actors? How can the deeper understanding of established relationships in a city positively influence the future success of the renewal of the collective space in other urban environments?

## CONCLUSIONS

What about the future? The next pedagogy of architectural education needs to transform schools into exploring and researching environments for helping students to understand a more accurate take on the not always easy relationships in restructuring the collective realm as a volatile variable. All efforts are in vain if an exquisite designed public venue is not vibrant and does not reflect a true balance between past and present, public and private interests, and does not make any meaningful commitment to its immediate public adjacencies. From this position, rather than thinking in individual specificities about the project, authors as the Spanish architects Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats strongly defend a collective enterprise to ensure the community grow and make everyone to feel that belongs to a neighborhood: "We think that we should get to the project through the building of the context and the culture of the place, working on the relations and articulation among things, slowly projecting the outer open spaces and its qualities towards interiors and living spaces."<sup>7</sup>

In this age of economic, political and ecological crisis, architecture, like every other discipline, requires a fundamental shift. If we acknowledge architecture as a collective, intertwined, collaborative and messy process, as Sevince Bayrak and Oral



Interpretive Garden as a contemplative space; detail of the concrete blocks, which provide the visitor with direct access to the green between the two existing Gantries.

Manhattan in the background made Gantry Plaza State Park a place at the time that its industrial past had an important project ethos. The park took its name from two large gantries, which were used as lifts to hoist freight cars onto early barges. The gantries projected a monumental presence as triumphal arches of a past civilization. In this way, the park's diversity of the spaces and the activities that took place there (7.10) Balsley explained its configuration through a tour of the park: "The park is greeted by a circular area that encloses a fog fountain, a fountain that in summer cools the air. Tables and benches beyond is a large, hemispherical plaza for performances."

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Figure 4. Taxonomy of drawings from the book *Manhattan's Public Spaces: Production, Revitalization, Commodification*. Routledge (London, 2022). Image credit: Ana Morcillo Pallares.



Göktaş, the curators from the Turkish Pavilion at the recent 2023 Venice Biennale, highlight, “architecture can become a tools to handle unpredictability as well as complexity and diversity.”<sup>8</sup> From this point of view, the teaching contribution initiated in the seminar “Politics of Balance” and its outcomes published in the book “Manhattan’s Public Spaces” has the goal to discuss and explore a set of tools to support students’ critical thinking, self-reflection, social awareness, imagination, and activism. A pedagogical approach for a cosmopolitan student of architecture whose future career aims to provide an inclusive, diverse and collaborative awareness of the different ways we interact, use and design our built environment. An agenda receptive to exploring the design process not as a final outcome but as an ongoing negotiation among the diverse networks of actors who are part of the city. The process of production, revitalization, and commodification of public space (Figure 4) has gathered momentum and it is likely to affect more and more cities as the 21st century unfolds. In order to do this, the students respond to the following questions: How your precedent is used, which political implications have its occupancy and how its work adjacencies can potentially change its context. A way to reflect the way we have been designing the world, but NOT the way we should be designing the world. Instead a tool to gain a critical understanding of the ongoing conversation about design and the role of architecture in contemporary politics, economics, and social context.

In outlining the rationale that underpins this conflict, the teaching outcome analyzes a selection of architectural interventions and an embodiment of a complex mix of agents, at a time when the city is becoming increasingly more socially and economically diverse. It is the goal of this pedagogy to identify and critically explore strategies of architectural production at the time of production of events, which can suggest new alternatives to bridge the gap between private and public interests. From this position, diving into a set of architectural precedents and their relationship with their built context, both the seminar and the book address a set of questions that may allow us to transcend this apparent division. What are the consequences of urban regeneration politics, the displacement of former activities, and the resulting increase of land value? How can contested historical examples greatly influence the future success of a new take on a more inclusive, diverse, collaborative, socially aware and active platform receptive to different ways of being, thinking, and making architecture?

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture You and Me*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, 1958): 10.
2. Margaret Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*, Routledge (London / New York, 2004).
3. Independent seminar taught at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning since Fall 2018. The class description can be found here: <https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/course/arch509-politics-of-balance-section-11-fall-2022/> (Accessed July 30th, 2023).
4. Aaron Betsky, “Times Square and the Reality of Public Spaces,” *Architect Magazine*, September 2, 2015. Link: [https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/times-square-and-the-reality-of-public-spaces\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/times-square-and-the-reality-of-public-spaces_o). (Accessed July 30th, 2023).
5. Sophie Watson, *City publics: the (dis)enchantments of urban encounters*, Routledge, (London / New York, 2006).
6. *Manhattan’s Public Spaces: Production, Revitalization, Commodification*, Routledge (London, 2022). The book belongs to the book series Routledge Critical Studies in Urbanism and the City. More information about the book and its purchase can be found here: <https://www.routledge.com/Manhattans-Public-Spaces-Production-Revitalization-Commodification/Pallares/p/book/9781032056401#:~:text=Description,over%20the%20past%20few%20decades.> (Accessed July 30th, 2023).
7. Flores & Prats. *Archives Universum Journal of Architecture*, Issue 01 (September 2021): 39-40.
8. Sevince Bayrak and Oral Göktaş, Extract from the book: *Ghost Stories: The Carrier Bag Theory of Architecture*, Turkish Pavilion, 18th International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, (Istanbul, 2023): 52-53.