



The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City's Public Spaces

Benjamin Shepard, Gregory Smithsion

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Examines New York City as a paradigmatic example of the tensions between privatization and public uses of space in the contemporary United States.

Focusing on the liberating promise of public space, *The Beach Beneath the Streets* examines the activist struggles of communities in New York City—queer youth of color, gardeners, cyclists, and anti-gentrification activists—as they transform streets, piers, and vacant lots into everyday sites for autonomy, imagination, identity formation, creativity, problem solving, and even democratic renewal. Through ethnographic accounts of contests over New York City's public spaces that highlight the tension between resistance and repression, Benjamin Shepard and Gregory Smithsion identify how changes in the control of public spaces—parks, street corners, and plazas—have reliably foreshadowed elites' shifting designs on the city at large. With an innovative taxonomy of public space, the authors frame the ways spaces as diverse as gated enclaves, luxury shopping malls, collapsing piers, and street protests can be understood in relation to one another. Synthesizing the fifty-year history of New York's neoliberal transformation and the social movements which have opposed the process, *The Beach Beneath the Streets* captures the dynamics at work in the ongoing shaping of urban spaces into places of repression, expression, control, and creativity.

"Shepard and Smithsion constantly remind readers of the myriad ways that the issue of 'public space' is vexing to those who study it. They tackle the complexities by considering the actions/activities of several different groups, all of whom occupy a position on the continuum of subalternity and all of whom succeed in getting their voices heard and their spaces secured ... The author's conclusions are astoundingly profound in their simplicity: 'public space is not the result of conflicts, but rather it is the conflict itself that creates public space.' ... Highly recommended." — *CHOICE*

"This is a thorough review and exposition of public space in New York City. The new conceptualization of public space is useful, and the ethnography of how public space is controlled through protest and play is innovative and brings home the point of how important public space is in our city today. The book is clearly written and will help any reader understand the relationship between public space and democracy." — Setha M. Low, author of *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*

"*The Beach Beneath the Streets* is sure to become a standard book on life in late-twentieth-century New York. It features a series of protest movements that found both their medium and their object in urban space itself. It starts with brilliant research into the ways in which real estate developers learned to design public space so as to repel people. It leads into a series of stories of groups of people who learned to fight them, and who—because of the paradoxical nature of modern space—found that they won even when they lost. Shepard and Smithsion explore the incorporation of creative play as a medium of struggle; they demonstrate people's genius at 'reinventing the carnivalesque.' Even when the first waves of protest are defeated, citizens of the modern city have the power to 'assign new social meanings to spaces' and become a public again." — Marshall Berman, author of *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*



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