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Shared Space and the Post-politics of Environmental Change

Rob Imrie

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Abstract

While the design of urban space provides an opportunity to create places sensitised to the manifold complexities of the body, places continue to be designed with little understanding of the interrelationships between design, disability and space. One issue is the absence of embodied knowledge about impairment in urban design, and the understanding of disability as an aberration, not intrinsic to the crafting of well-designed environments. With the focus on vision impairment, the paper evaluates a popular approach to improving the quality of street environments, shared space, in which pavements and roads are merged into single and shared surfaces. Data from a study of English local authorities show that the diverse needs of vision-impaired people are barely recognised or given a platform to influence shared space policy. It is suggested that this marginalisation of vision-impaired people is part of a post-political condition, in which deliberative techniques, such as public consultation, are part of a process to manage those that dissent from the preferred policy choice—i.e. shared space. An implication is the depoliticisation of shared space policy in which the unequal, and unjust, ways in which urban design impacts on vision-impaired people are neither articulated nor recognised by formal policy programmes.

1. Introduction

Stakeholder engagement plays a pivotal role in the development of shared space. Schemes are more likely to be successful if engagement is inclusive, involving a wide cross-section of the community (Department for Transport, 2011, p. 22).

An increasingly popular approach to the (re)design of urban environments is space

sharing between pedestrians, cyclists, motor vehicles and other users as part of a broader policy objective by governments in many countries to create public places that promote health and wellbeing. One of the main policy initiatives is shared space, a traffic-engineering concept that seeks to reduce physical barriers between pavements and roads. This may include the reduction and removal of traditional design elements such

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as pavements, street signs, controlled crossing points and kerbs (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008). Shared space is part of a genre of traffic calming measures, from speed humps to home zones.¹ It is based on the premise that, by giving pedestrians more freedom to move about, drivers will drive more cautiously and a safer, pedestrian-friendly environment will ensue, including enhancing the quality of public spaces.

The evidence shows that local authorities in the UK are enthusiastic about shared space (Department for Transport, 2011; TNS, 2008). Schemes are being developed and implemented across the country, with many more at the formative proposal and design stages (TNS, 2008). The adoption of shared space is occurring despite the absence of clear, unequivocal assessment of how such schemes operate and their effects on different types of users. Organisations representing people with vision impairments, such as Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDB, 2006), suggest that blind and partially sighted people depend on retention of traditional street design, such as kerbs and pavements, as their means to orientate. GDB (2006) note that vision-impaired people cannot easily know of the presence of other users in shared space, or negotiate how such spaces are to be used through eye contact, as suggested by its proponents. In this respect, shared space represents, potentially, a threatening environment for vision-impaired people.²

There is little evidence about how policies relating to shared space are being developed and implemented, and how far local authority officials are sensitised to observations about shared space by groups representing, in particular, vision-impaired and elderly people (GDB, 2006). Likewise, there is limited knowledge and understanding of how far experiential data, relating to vision-impaired people's patterns of mobility and movement, are drawn upon, and become part of, the

process of developing the design elements of shared space. One danger, highlighted by GDB (2006), is that newly (re)designed urban environments, such as shared space, may constrain vision-impaired people's mobility, unless influenced by their voices and viewpoints. For GDB, what evidence there is suggests that "visually impaired people are not being involved in the development of new schemes nor are they consulted effectively" (Thomas, 2010, p. 2).

The paper seeks to assess the GDB's observation, by considering the extent to which vision-impaired people's experiences of street environments are incorporated into policy processes relating to shared space. Drawing on a study of English local authorities, data indicate that while the problems posed by shared space are acknowledged by some policy officers with responsibility for the (re)design of street spaces, the views and feelings of vision-impaired people are not a significant part of the policy-making process. The data show that their views are only permissible as long as they are congruent with the dominant discourse—that is, the inviolability of shared space. Shared space tends to be presented by its advocates, including government officials, as 'common sense'. It is assumed that there are no reasonable or legitimate arguments against it. Where dissenting views are presented, such as those held by the GDB, they are, in Gillborn's (1997, p. 353) terms, deemed to be "false, insincere or self-serving".

A key contribution of the paper is the understanding of shared space, and the consultative processes relating to it, as illustrative of the marginalisation of disabled people's voices from policy relating to the design of urban environments (also, see Edwards, 2001). While vision-impaired people, and their groups, have pointed out problems with shared space, including feelings of vulnerability by proximity to motor vehicles and an inability to navigate with

ease due to the removal of traditional, way-finding, design features, the evidence suggests that questioning the underlying principle of shared space (i.e. that the intermingling of motor vehicles with other users is a good thing), is not a permissible part of consultations (also, see Edwards, 2001; Imrie, 2012). Rather, consultations are carefully (stage) managed processes, in which the normality of the non-disabled body is assumed and placed centre-stage as the benchmark for shared space design.

I divide the paper into three parts. First, I describe the approaches to consultation relating to the planning and (re)design of urban environments. I suggest that they are redolent of a 'post-political' condition in which, as Paddison (2009, p. 12) notes, the objective of state officials is less to facilitate the opening up of different, often antagonistic or dissenting, viewpoints and more to enable the construction of consensus (also, see Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 2000). Secondly, I relate this framework to a study of shared space and vision-impairment, highlighting how the *diverse* subject-positions of vision-impaired people are neither recognised nor, consequentially, given a platform to influence, with any ease, the shaping of shared space. Thirdly, I conclude by outlining the prerequisites for a politics based on transcending the techno-managerial governance of contemporary consultative practices.

2. Consulting the Public and the Post-political Condition

There are a plethora of legal directives, and related guidance and advice, to local authorities on the importance of consultation, about all aspects of service development and delivery. Since 1997, UK governments have placed increasing emphasis on the role of local democracy and citizen participation as

part of a broader agenda to create a 'reinvigorated local democracy' (DETR, 2000). One of the first actions of the incoming Labour government in 1997 was to pursue a programme of what Giddens (1998: 23) has termed "democratising democracy". The objective was to combat growing disengagement from public decision-making, and diminishing involvement in political processes. A programme of local government modernisation was instigated, with consultation as the basis of "greater democratic legitimacy and a new brand of involved and responsible citizens" (DETR, 1998, paragraph 4.4).

These aspirations have been pursued through a bewildering range of policy instruments, including consultation techniques such as citizens' panels and juries, and focus groups. They are part of a complexity of cross-cutting, overlapping, even repetitive, directives about inclusion of citizens in policy processes. These include the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act Part 5A Public Authorities that requires public authorities to promote disability equality (subsequently repackaged as a public-sector equality duty in the 2010 Equalities Act). In 2008, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG, 2008a, p. i) published a White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Lives*, with an objective to enhance "the power of communities and help people up and down the country to set and meet their own priorities". This was complemented by an urban regeneration document, *Transforming Places, Changing Lives*, stating that "effective regeneration cannot happen without support from—and full engagement with—the people and communities involved" (DCLG, 2008b, p. 3).

These directives were supplemented by Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (LGPIH, 2007). From April 2009, this placed a duty on local authorities to involve local

representatives when carrying out ‘any of its functions’ by providing information, consulting or ‘involving in another way’. This duty did not replace existing requirements to involve people (such as planning), but was considered in addition to them. The rationale was to enlist representatives from diverse parts of local communities to help local authorities to shape their policy programmes, including the provision of evidence during reviews and being co-opted onto panels or task groups. The sentiment here is of consultation as a transformational process, that enables participants to engage in public good thinking and, through this, to influence the form and outcomes of policy programmes (see MacPherson, 2004).

The election of the Coalition government in May 2010, despite repealing directives such as the LGPIH Act (2007), has maintained a broad encouragement of community and self-governance in shaping social, welfare and other policy programmes. The Conservative Party (2010, p. 1), the dominant partners in the Coalition, note that democratic vitality depends upon “participation and social engagement”, a sentiment echoed by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, who, in his Big Society speech in June 2010, suggested that the role of politics is to facilitate individual choice by reducing central government micro management

It’s about liberation, the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.³

The new modes of governance rely less on coercive, legislative programmes and more on voluntary action and codes of conduct in which politics is, allegedly, supplanted by “morally imbued exhortations” (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2007, p. 151).

For some observers, the Coalition’s prognosis of what politics is, or ought to be, is

not dissimilar to previous New Labour administrations, by supporting the development of modes of governance focused, primarily, on process-based issues and the management of individuated views and values (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). This reflects a broader societal transformation from a politics based on social class conflict, characterised by the rule of centralised, authoritarian bureaucracies, to decentred governance involving multiple actors seeking to find common ground (see Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 2000). Oppositional categories, such as state and market, right and left, and public and private, are seen as irrelevant in a world where there is, allegedly, a blurring of differences between civil society and corporate business, and between the interests of different individuals and socio-cultural and civic organisations (also, see Garsten and Jacobsson, 2007).

The dissolution of entrenched (political) differences reflects the emergence of what Žižek (2000, p. 324) describes as a post-ideological era, characterised by the collapse of ideological clashes between socialism and liberalism, and the (re)assertion of capitalism as the underlying basis for the “maturation of humanity”. For Žižek (2000, p. 324), such maturation is characterised by societal acceptance of neoliberal values relating to the efficacy of markets, and rejecting the possibilities of fundamental social change. This has heralded a new era of post-politics, in which a purpose of democratic engagement, including participative processes, is suppression of views that dissent from the market as the major means of organising societal welfare and the provision of goods and services. Post-politics is no less than a means to manage the operations of capitalism in ways whereby there is foreclosure of “debates and contestations around a neo-liberal growth agenda” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012, p. 91).

Such foreclosures are illustrative of a democratic culture propagating a universal

rational consensus, in which antagonistic, oppositional differences are deemed to be irrational, unnecessary and counter to the pursuit of a progressive society (see Mouffe, 1993). What emerges is the attempt, by government, to depoliticise the political by “preventing the politicization of the particular” (Žižek, 2000, p. 23; also, see Mouffe, 1993). This occurs, in part, by political agendas being pre-set around what Paddison (2009) terms ‘fundamental axioms’, in which particular socioeconomic and political relations, such as social inequality, are regarded as natural and beyond reproach. The effect is one whereby dissent is conceived as anathema to the (re)production of the, so conceived, natural social order, hence lacking credibility through posing a potential challenge to what Bourdieu (1998) describes as the ‘common sense of the day’.

The challenge for government is to establish mechanisms of dialogical engagement to ensure that citizens’ viewpoints are broadly commensurate with its policy objectives. This is predicated on supplanting politics proper by modes of managerial governance, characterised by the deployment of techniques to cultivate consensus that Swyngedouw (2011, pp. 370–371) describes as “a para-political inclusion of different opinions on anything imaginable ... in arrangements of impotent participation”. Such participation is not able, easily, to challenge power elites or the prior assumptions about what policy substance is or ought to be. Rather, participation is part of the management of ‘the political’, or sidelining opinion that may disrupt, potentially, the chosen policy trajectory (see Crouch, 2004). What is left, so proponents of the post-political thesis suggest, is to manage the policies being proffered, and public consultation is one of an array of techniques to assure policy development and implementation.

The development of shared space is crafted around post-political discourse, appealing to universal themes such as health, wellbeing and safety, in ways in which it is difficult to disagree. This is because of the non-specific presentation of apparently incontrovertible, progressive values, that do not prompt awkward questions or enable scrutiny about the implications and effects of shared space on different types of users. Such questions might ask how far the motor vehicle can share space with pedestrians without endangering lives, or why the policy maintains, at its fulcrum, the inviolability of the automobile. As the paper will show, consultations foreclose the questioning of broad principles (i.e. the motor vehicle is integral to shared space) and, instead, revolve around points of technical design detail, premised on the co-existence of apparently conflicting modes of mobility and movement.

3. Crafting a Consensus: The Case of Shared Space Environments

A purported principle of shared space is inclusive design or what its leading advocate, Ben Hamilton-Baillie (2008), characterises as facilitating interactions between the widest cross-section of people in public spaces (see Figure 1). This is, potentially, a far-reaching objective that recognises the importance of public space in constituting the citizen, and providing places where people, irrespective of who they are, or whatever their bodily state is, have the ‘right to be’. The ‘right to be’ in public spaces, and be part of an inclusive society, is, however, palpably missing from the lives of most disabled people who are, as various data suggest, excluded from ease of access to places due to disabling values and attitudes that are manifest in the poorly designed nature of the built environment (Edwards, 2001).



Figure 1. Shared space, Exhibition Road, London. The photographs show the recently completed shared space in Exhibition Road, South Kensington. The redesign has cost £30 million and, despite allegations of proponents that it will permit equity of access and usage to all users, motor vehicles dominate. The author, in taking these photographs, was nearly knocked over and horns were beeped, aggressively, by a number of motorists seeking to assert their perceived rights to priority access.

This reflects a broader societal marginalisation of disabled people, in which disability, as a category of/for urban policy design and development, is usually an afterthought.

In developing this understanding, the rest of the paper is based on research in 10

English local authorities in London and south-east England, funded by the Thomas Pocklington Trust, a provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss. The focus was the extent to which public consultation, particularly with

vision-impaired people and their representatives, was part of the policy process and how far it influenced the design and implementation of shared space schemes. The research included interviews with key actors: councillors, vision-impaired people, officials in disabled people's organisations and central government, and local authority policy officers. Thirty-two meetings were held (with a total of 37 people, three of whom were present in one interview and two in another) in the period from July 2009 to February 2010.

While there is no statutory or legal requirement for local authorities to consult specifically on shared space schemes, evidence suggests that consultations are widely practised (TNS, 2008).⁴ All but one respondent authority claimed to have consulted with vision-impaired people, or as a policy officer said, in a place where the process has been protracted, "there's been about eight years of consultation". Despite the plethora of legal directives about consultation more generally, it was not always clear what central government advice was being followed by my sample authorities, or what legal or other directives were shaping the approaches to consultation with regards to shared space. In one town, consultation was part of a broader process of revising the local plan and developing and adopting a new Local Development Framework, while, in another authority, consultation was invoked as part of the Local Transport Act (DfT, 2008).⁵

There was broad agreement, by officers and politicians interviewed, that shared space will enhance people's experiences of the urban environment. As one policy officer said about the high street prior to its conversion to a shared space: "It wasn't a space to stay and enjoy in the way that it could be. That was one of the things that we wanted to correct". Others highlighted the virtues of shared space in enhancing the commercial vitality of their high streets. An

officer commented that shared space had potential to contribute to "one of the most exciting and dynamic shopping areas in the country". Another noted that "We're looking to restoring, if we can, our major town centres and drag them ... into the 21st century". For others, shared space, despite the recognition of its potential to pose difficulties for vision-impaired people, was more or less non-negotiable. As an officer suggested: [our stance was] "we've got a project that we want to deliver. That's what it's going to look like".

These views reflect the political consensus that shared space is a positive approach to urban design, because it encourages a re-aestheticisation of town centres while, purportedly, responding to broader public concerns about safety and wellbeing by mitigating the impact of the motor vehicle on other street users. Shared space has appeal to politicians and policy-makers precisely because it does not destabilise, or challenge, the centrality of the motor vehicle's presence in the environment, or seek to displace or remove it from town centres. This reflects a deeply entrenched politics of automobility that pays lip service to ideas about what safe spaces might entail for vision-impaired people, while ensuring that the motor vehicle remains more or less unchallenged as the dominant form of mobility—i.e. a reaffirmation of auto-cultural values. Consultation of/about shared space is framed within this broader political discourse (see, Imrie, 2012).

In the rest of the paper, I discuss the role of consultative processes in influencing shared space policy. I begin by developing the argument that the objective of consultation on shared space is the creation of a consensus that it is 'a good thing'. At the same time, the process seeks to manage dissenting voices by deploying what Paddison (2009, p. 8) refers to as techniques of consensual persuasion. These serve to

depoliticise debate about shared spaces and do not necessarily foster “participatory parity” (Fraser, 1990, p. 64). Subsequently, I suggest that vision-impaired people’s ability to shape shared space policy is influenced by their status as part of a *weak public*, or what Fraser (1990) describes as publics who are able to voice opinions but do not have the means to make binding decisions on policy. This translates into no more than ‘little victories’ where the views of vision-impaired people may lead to cosmetic changes in the design details of shared space without challenging, or altering, the broader principles that such schemes are based upon.

3.1 Creating Consensus and the Management of Dissensus

Public engagement exercises rarely challenge established social norms. As Tang *et al.* (2012) suggest, engagement is a tool of hegemony in seeking to perpetuate the prevailing socio-political order. It does so by defining, or delimiting, the boundaries of permissible debate. This involves the deployment of a technical rationality that presents the policy process as less about political contestation and debate regarding its substance, and more about processual issues concerning the presentation and management of agreed (policy) objectives. Policies, such as shared space, are presented as ‘fact’ to be deliberated within prescribed parameters based upon inviolable assumptions about what good street design is or ought to be. These include, as already intimated, the right of the motorist to retain centre stage in the urban environment. The point of public engagement is to cultivate a consensus around such ‘received’ principles of policy, colonising and disciplining dissenting or divergent views.

The paramount instrument in seeking to generate consensus about shared space is

Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/11 (DfT, 2011). It is the latest in a series of government publications about shared space, documents akin to what Miller and Rose (1993, p. 79) describe as instruments that “render a realm into discourse as a knowable, calculable and administrative object”. LTN 1/11 deploys a value rationality propagating the virtues of shared space, encouraging its adoption as part of the normalisation of urban street design. For the DfT (2011, p. 6), shared space has universal appeal because it “is a way of enhancing a street’s sense of place while maintaining its ability to accommodate vehicular movement”. It is claimed that shared space creates sociable environments, characterised by “the self-calming effect of the overall design” (DfT, 2011, p. 14). Crucially, the retention of the motor vehicle’s presence in shared space is integral to policy: “it is important that the movement function is retained if the street is to be truly shared” (DfT, 2011, p. 11).

In a section entitled ‘Effective Community Engagement’, LTN 1/11 (DfT, 2011, p. 24) advises local authority officers not to countenance “more conventional street design features”, because they “may compromise the original vision and purpose of the scheme”. Officers are directed “to address any concerns through mitigating measures which are more sympathetic to the ethos behind shared space” (DfT, 2011, p. 24). This is a clear steer to foreclose debate on alternatives to shared space. In one authority, a transport planning officer was reluctant to back down from a shared space proposal

We will consider anything that comes out of that but we’ve spent a lot of money and time on building the scheme and I think we’re at a stage where we think that we’ve got a good scheme.

Some felt that shared space is a radical initiative likely to enhance the quality of the

public realm. For a regeneration officer “the idea is transformational”, and a transport project leader noted that “I’m proud of the principles that it’s established”.

The purpose of shared space consultation is to provide support for such viewpoints. As the LTN (DfT, 2011) suggests, “the engagement process” ought to be *no more* than a “checking exercise” to ensure “that the vision of the scheme is being adhered to”. Here, the point of engagement is not to challenge the vision or suggest alternatives but, rather, to conduct a series of exercises, such as site visits to existing schemes, to ensure that stakeholders’ values are commensurate with the document’s objective of securing shared space environments. Local authority officers are advised that a ‘buy-in’ to shared space is imperative

To secure ownership from the community and other stakeholders ... it will be necessary to express the objectives and design ideas to a wide audience (DfT, 2011, p. 23).

These directives are the basis for manufacturing consensus in which participation is to be limited, primarily, to prosaic matters relating to specific design details to “help identify any operational problems” (DfT, 2011, p. 23).

Such sentiments reinforce the sense of shared space principles as ‘non-negotiable’; alternative policies are not presented or countenanced. Respondents suggested that, even when extensive consultations took place, they were based on the belief that shared space should be the basis of any final design. A former chair of a vision-impaired society commented on his authority’s approach to consultation: “They convinced themselves that it’s wonderful ... they go ahead with it and they haven’t sold the case to people”. A secretary to an access group based in a small rural town also felt that

they had been presented with a *fait accompli* or, as she said

They did consult reasonably widely but they came to us with a scheme rather than coming to us at the initial stage saying ‘this is what we’re thinking of doing’, they actually came with a scheme already on the drawing board ... I felt as though they just wanted a rubber stamp so that they could say the Access Group was happy ... people felt pressurised.

Respondents inferred that the process was less ‘evidence based’ than ‘evidence informed’, and selective in what was presented as demonstrating the workability, and desirability, of shared spaces. An officer said that they justified their scheme to the public by drawing on non-local data from the Netherlands, “showing how well it [shared space] works”. In most authorities, the onus was creating a positive spin about shared space or, as an officer suggested, “we are looking to sell the idea”. Officers did not engage in a systematic or comprehensive review of *all* available data about shared space; instead, there was a rhetorical approach to the conveying of evidence. This included reproducing positive pronouncements about shared space by its leading advocates, such as Monderman and Hamilton-Baillie, as though they constitute incontrovertible proof. Typical of this was one officer noting that shared space will work because “there’s a perception that it’s a space that’s populated by pedestrians so they drive with more civility”.

The manufacture of consent also relies on the deployment of techniques that are, primarily, exercises in the dissemination of information. The LTN (DfT, 2011) steers local authority officers in suggesting that consultation ought to be the propagation of reason based on communicating the preferred policy choice—i.e. shared space.

There are no policy options, just shared space, and the task for officers, as suggested by the LTN (DfT, 2011, p. 23), is that “careful consideration needs to be given to the means by which designs are communicated to stakeholders”. While there was some variation in the conduct of consultations, most followed a specific, expert-led formula. At the early stages of developing draft plans, the process consists of tendering the project, interviewing applicants and awarding a contract to the successful bidder. Subsequently, design proposals are drafted and submitted for comment by local authority officials, councillors and, usually, representatives of local traders.

Consultation, once draft schemes have been developed, is usually a standardised process. Plans are displayed in a public place and comments are invited from the public. Local householders are leafleted and plans are made available on-line and are covered in the local media. In some instances, questionnaires may be circulated to members of the public and access officers and groups may be invited to discuss details of plans. One vision-impaired person described such approaches as

tick-box. Oh, we’ve spoken to someone who’s disabled—consultation with the disabled? Oh, we’ll tick that. Speak to somebody, it doesn’t matter who.

Here, consultation may be conceived as no more than an instrumental process of making policy efficient and effective. For most authorities, consultation is a pragmatic managerial tool based on a process of generating support and legitimacy for programmes of work—or, as a policy officer said, “it’s a balancing act to make everyone as happy as they can be ... you just try to make as many people as possible happy”.

This outcome is predicated on the management of sceptical, even hostile, public

opinion, by creating ‘responsible partners’ to act as consultees to the policy-making process. The DfT (2011, p. 4) describes these partners as stakeholders and suggests that “stakeholder engagement is a particularly important aspect of shared space development”. Giddens (2000, p. 152) refers to stakeholding as “closed and clientelist” in which “decisions are taken by interlocking elites, [and] worker involvement is nominal”. A stakeholder subscribes, in broad terms, to the proffered policy and they are part of an inclusive, incorporative politics seeking to ensure that a consensus about shared space is realised. Stakeholders were described in one shared space scheme as those “having an interest in the project ... frontagers, the taxi trade and council officers”. While this conceivably ought to include disabled people, respondents from the town said that this was not the case and, as a vision-impaired person noted, “There were some strange ideas as to what consultation was”.

This reflects a feeling amongst vision-impaired people that participation is a stage-managed process characterised by a physical and social distancing between them and those (experts) orchestrating shared space policy. As one person said, “They didn’t seem to like our views, and didn’t want to hear much about why we think the policy won’t work [for us]”. Local politicians and officers were unable to envisage shared space in a political way—that is, as one of a range of possible alternative scenarios to the (re)design of street environments. Pluralistic viewpoints were not encouraged and there was no evidence of representation of the potential range of discursive positions of disabled people in consultation exercises. A representative from a vision-impaired group said, “There are quite a lot of people who would like to engage in discussion and argument”, a view supported by a visually impaired activist

who suggested that “We’re a voiceless community. I’ve advocated a regular process of meetings but it just hasn’t happened”.

The management of negative feeling towards shared space was particularly evident in relation to GDB. A senior policy officer, employed by GDB, outlined their stance as opposing shared space “until there is an evidence-based policy that shows that the streets can be made safe for blind and partially sighted people”. This view was, in the words of a local authority officer, “a threat to the integrity of what we’re looking to achieve here”—i.e. shared space. Others saw GDB as focusing on a single interest (i.e. vision-impaired people) and pursuing an exclusive politics that, as an officer felt, was the antithesis of consensus building: “I don’t think they are terribly good at talking to all of the interests” (also, see Mouffe, 1993). GDB was described as unrepresentative of opinion and deploying logic likely to derail a progressive policy. As a policy officer said, GDB “drowned out other members of the community who had points to make ... there was no dialogue ... it was just absolute opposition”.

GDB, as one of the few voices of dissent against shared space, was held at arm’s length from consultations in the sample local authorities and they did not have a formal platform or representation in consultative processes. They were positioned by officers as ‘an external public’ and deemed to be irrational for challenging the alleged popularity and normalcy of shared space (also, see Edwards, 2001). Interviewees, including a DfT official, and local authority officers, saw GDB as unreasonable and irresponsible or, as a government spokesperson said: “Their [GDB] position is flawed and based on unsubstantiated claims”. Such views are part of a political process or system of management, in which GDB were ‘managed to the margins’ of the process, an outcome which appears to be no less than

stifling democratic participation in the name of consensus (see, Miller and Rose, 1993).

3.2 Weak Publics: Influencing the Development and Design of Shared Space

Consultative processes highlight the divide between civil society and the state, or broadly those private citizens whose actions and activities are conditioned and influenced by the formal socio-legal apparatus of government. For Fraser (1990, p. 75), the ensemble of private persons constitutes the public sphere—that is, “the informally mobilised body of nongovernmental opinion that can serve as a counter weight to the state”. Such opinion is, for Fraser (1990, p. 75), illustrative of a weak public or those publics “whose deliberative practices consist exclusively in opinion formation and does not encompass decision-making”. This contrasts with the strong public “whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision-making” (Fraser, 1990, p. 75). These occur, typically, in formal political institutions, including local government, the judiciary and Parliament. In the context of shared space, vision-impaired people may be conceptualised as a weak public, with the potential to form and voice opinions but lacking decision-making powers.

This is not to claim that vision-impaired people cannot influence policy content and outcomes. Indeed, some commentators, such as Habermas (1996), claim that weak publics provide the impetus for public deliberations by identifying those issues that it is incumbent on officials and decision-makers to respond to. As Habermas (1996, p. 352) says, weak publics “ferret out, identify, and effectively thematize latent problems”; they are a “warning system with sensors”. This ascribes an influential role to weak publics in shaping policy discourses yet, as Scheuerman (1999) suggests, there is

limited empirical documentation to evaluate their influence on the actions of their strong counterparts. For Scheuerman (1999), the evidence shows that, where weak publics have influence, "their impact is the exception rather than the rule". For the most part, weak publics are consigned to the margins of political power and are ineffectual in influencing anything other than small, incremental change.

Thus, while Habermas (1996) claims that agenda-setting occurs in the informal networks of the public sphere, or those spaces occupied by weak publics, there was little evidence of vision-impaired people being able to influence agendas relating to shared space. There was no consultation or involvement of vision-impaired people, or any disabled person and their representatives, prior to the principle to adopt shared space being established by officers and councillors. In some instances, vision-impaired respondents were unaware that there had been a consultative process, despite the claims by local authority officers that a process had been set up. In one locale, there was confusion among representatives of disabled persons' groups as to the extent of consultation. While council officers claimed that consultation with groups had occurred, a team leader for a Blind Association stated

I knew nothing about the proposed scheme ... until very recently ... sadly, to my knowledge the Association were never contacted or consulted about any proposal.

This reflects part of the post-political condition relating to the foreclosure of debate and the reluctance of local politicians and officers to open up shared space policy to critical scrutiny and comment. In most authorities, there was little attempt to stimulate opinion and a representative from a vision-impaired group said that "90 per cent of people with sight problems either

have never heard of it or don't know what it means". Others referred to the impossible timetables set for consultation, as though it was a deliberate attempt by officers to discourage them from commenting on proposals. One respondent felt that the process had marginalised his access group, noting that "We do tend to be called in at the last minute on these things". Another person suggested that "this thing has come from nowhere ... we had no time to respond", a view reflecting Crouch's (2004, p. 114) understanding of consultation as a post-democratic/political formation comprising "the maximum level of minimum participation".

The distancing of vision-impaired people from decision-making was evident in the approach of a Heritage Foundation in a medium-sized town. The Foundation, as the major landowner, spearheaded shared space policy. There was prolonged consultation with designers and local retailers, and draft designs incorporating same-surface materials were submitted to the Commission for the Built Environment (CABE) for comment. As a policy officer in the local authority said

To my knowledge, there wasn't a scenario where the Heritage Foundation said, "We've got eight million pounds to invest in Street Scene. What would you like to be in the scheme?" That wasn't the public consultation. It was, "We've got a project that we want to deliver. That's what it's going to look like. What do you think?"

He amplified by noting that consultation was a relatively closed process, a tool of self-legitimation or means to ratify the pre-set policy of shared space: "It's very difficult to negotiate with the Foundation; you don't get them to change anything".

There was little evidence in other places of the opening-up of consultation in ways whereby the diverse subject positions of

vision-impaired people were identified and provided with a platform to influence policy. Vision-impaired people felt that officers pigeonholed them as 'a type', by reducing sight loss to a singular medical condition rather than acknowledging its complexity as a relational phenomenon constituted by social, medical and environmental factors. As a consequence, most officers felt it was adequate for a sole person to be representative of vision-impaired people in their locales. Some respondents queried the legitimacy of this, echoing Saward's (2005, p. 182) observation that there is "no essence of the represented that we can trace to the character of the 'would be' representative". For one respondent, "They [the Council] went ahead without taking steps to getting the views of different blind people". A local activist concurred, noting that the

differing needs [of people with sight loss] are not communicated nor discussed ... they think that as long as they talk to a person with blindness that's enough.

As a spokesperson from GDB stated, "Officers have problems identifying those who could and should be consulted". This reflects, in part, the hidden nature of vision-impairment and the often isolated, and isolating, lives that many people with sight loss lead, without the ease of means to bond with others and to access information that might enable them to form opinions about schemes such as shared space (Nyman *et al.*, 2010). A vision-impaired couple I interviewed, Tony and Ennis, provided a sense of their isolation and the difficulties in constituting part of a public voice

We would be prepared to join a lobby group but do not know who or how to contact them ... there is no method whereby we can pick up local news on council meetings or affairs ... there is no way of getting information.

Tony and Ennis are unable to contribute to deliberative practices and feel that they have no choice but to accept what comes their way. As Ennis said, "We have to put up with it [shared space]".

Ennis's resignation to 'come what may' is an emotion expressed by many people who are unable to access the spaces of participation (i.e. when/where it happens), and feel that their views are less likely to be listened to than those of others (see, Ray *et al.*, 2008). Ennis felt that her opinions, even if she had been given the means to voice them, were worthless or, as she said, "I would probably be a voice in the wilderness". Here, Ennis is highlighting the absence of participatory parity in shared space consultations, in which some vision-impaired people feel weaker than other members of the public to influence policy discourses and agendas. For Tony and Ennis, their reality is what Fraser and Honneth (2003, p. 103) describe as "status subordination" in which, unless there are changes to the social relations of consultation in ways that recognise the unequal capacities of people to participate in policy deliberations, there is little likelihood of them interacting with other participants as peers.

Such inequalities of participation were also manifest in vision-impaired people's lack of influence in shaping strategic priorities or points of principle. Instead, their influence was confined, primarily, to operational, small details of policy (also, see Edwards, 2001). For instance, a vision-impaired person in an outer London borough, who had been part of the consultative process, noted that there had been small changes to the plans. As he said

What's proposed is reasonably safe and reasonably workable. It's not given us everything ... They've taken quite a lot of note and I give them pretty high marks.

Such sentiments were evident elsewhere with a secretary of an Access Group, based

in a small rural town, noting the responsiveness of the key decision-makers to disabled people's views: "I think on the whole the Council behaved responsibly. They did make changes to the scheme".

However, these changes were no more than tinkering with the margins of shared space policy and, for other respondents, the main issue was that they did not know what the outcomes of consultations had been, or were likely to be. This reaffirms Ray *et al.*'s (2008, p. 47) research, in which one of their respondents said that "You talked to people and you've listened to them. Next, what have you done about it? You know. So what?". A representative of a vision-impaired society, who did not know if her views had made much difference to the substance of policy, echoed this: "It was a good open discussion ... the planners seemed to take on board very much what we said. Whether it will be carried out, I don't know". This highlights a dislocation in deliberative practices in which the channels of communication, between decision-makers and those that constitute the public, are poorly developed, even non-existent, or, as a vision-impaired respondent said about shared space policy, "We'll only know what they've done once they've done it".

This almost fatalistic comment does not necessarily resonate with the popular, Habermasian understanding of weak publics as the "primary and immediate architects of society" (Grodnick, 2005, p. 401; Habermas, 1996). Vision-impaired people felt generally estranged from, and unable to shape, shared space consultations and their outcomes. Such consultations were less than democratic by failing to create the socio-institutional means for individuals to respond to, and engage with, the broader political processes (of consultation) and for the failings of the system to assuage vision-impaired people's feelings that their voices were of little importance in shaping the

outcomes of shared space policies. One vision-impaired person summed up the feeling that the process by-passed him

The thing about all of this [consultation] is that it's not done anything to represent my view, or make shared space a better place for me to use.

4. Conclusions

Despite the misgivings of GDB and other observers about shared space, many local authorities in the UK and overseas are adopting it as an indispensable feature of good urban design. Shared space is championed by a range of powerful organisations and is often reported in an uncritical, even celebratory, way in much of the media. A recent feature by the *Guardian* columnist, Simon Jenkins, is typical of the trend in which shared space is presented as unequivocally 'a good thing'. In a series of unsubstantiated assertions, Jenkins notes that

Shared space now operates across Europe. It is no longer experimental. It has led to fewer accidents and shorter journey times. It is a civilised, communal approach to city living that clearly works. Its time has come (Jenkins, 2012, p. 1).

Similar views are held by many government officials who present shared space as democratising by creating a public realm consistent with the liberal ideal of facilitating individuals' freedom of mobility and movement.

The power of this value-rationality is its promise to provide new, liberating, places for public interchange and engagement, in which everyone has the right to gain access to and use shared space environments (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008). Government directives highlight the positive aspects of shared space and present its development and implementation as a *fait accompli* (see,

DfT, 2011). The task for policy-makers is to ensure that this message is conveyed to the public, understood by all and translated into actions and outcomes. Critical to the process is public consultation in which securing consent for shared space policy is characterised by managing dissent to the margins of deliberations and making it inadmissible for people to question the fundamental points of principle. This chimes with post-political behaviour, or the deployment of a managerial process that seeks to siphon off negative comment and minimise pressures to politicise policy.

Shared space consultations illustrate Fraser's (1990, p. 59) understanding that the point of politics is no longer disputations between different, often conflicting, value systems, but instead is akin to "public relations ... and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion". Some refer to this as a new regime of post-democracy in which political decisions are shaped, increasingly, by policy elites and stakeholders, remote from the citizenry whose role is reduced to "a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them" (Crouch, 2004, p. 4). This describes aspects of shared space consultations experienced by vision-impaired people, or what Nancy and Strong (1992, p. 389) refer to as "institutionalised social management". Such management involves the delimitation of participation through representation and the depoliticisation of the potentially political nature of shared space. It is presented as no more than a technical, procedural matter, since everyone, irrespective of who they are, is expected to gain from its implementation.

Many vision-impaired people do not understand shared space in these terms. Rather, shared space represents, potentially, the design of dangerous spaces, or places insensitive to the manifold vulnerabilities of

pedestrians forced into space sharing with motor vehicles. Shared space is disabling design because it fails to respond to impairment as an *intrinsic element* of human-socio-physiological and psychological interactions with the environment and, instead, regards the impaired body as 'not normal'. Thus, far from impairment being conceived as integral to, and constitutive of, the designed environment, it is seen as 'residual', to be dealt with by providing assistive and compensatory design features. A politics of disablement, that might otherwise problematise such assumptions, is not evident from my study. The problem for vision-impaired people is that they do not appear to constitute, in Habermas's (1996) terms, a functioning weak public, or a collective able to define, and politicise, policy agendas relating to shared space.

The difficult, yet inescapable, challenge for vision-impaired people, and others, is to identify and document the social inequities and injustices that ensue from spatial development, such as shared space, and to use their knowledge to challenge post-political ideology. Part of the process will be to assert the universalising principle of equality, in which good urban design ought to respond to the manifold interactions between diverse bodies and the environment. Such responses ought not to regard impairment as an aberration but, rather, seek to understand how bodies interact with(in) designed spaces, and with what implications for policy in pursuing equality of access to and usages of shared space. This understanding is not evident in shared space consultations, nor embedded into policy documents. The priorities for vision-impaired people are to attain a status whereby they can deliberate, meaningfully, about what good design is, and to assert the normalcy of impairment as a category intrinsic to the crafting of the designed environment.

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Notes

1. Shared space is linked to the home zone concept that has its origins in traffic calming measures that date back to the 1920s. Both adopt a range of design measures to facilitate sharing of space by users. Home zones differ from shared space with their focus on creating safer residential areas, whereas shared space is focused, primarily, on space sharing in non-residential, commercial, areas, using design to create viable town centres that will be attractive to all users. Home zones also differ from shared space in identifying the need to create safe places for children to play in what are otherwise car-dominated environments. While home zones have legal status, in the Transport Act of 2000, shared space does not have statutory basis.
2. The evidence regarding people's attitudes towards shared space is limited and fragmentary. Vision-impaired people, and their organisations, have been the most outspoken against shared space, but other groups, like Age Concern and the Cycle Touring Club, seem indifferent or do not express strong opinions. Strong opposition to shared space is evident in blogs by individual cyclists and is expressed on sites such as <http://aseasyasridingabike.wordpress.com/>.
3. The idea of the big society was written into the Conservative Party's political manifesto in 2010. Its underlying idea is to dismantle big government and empower local people by encouraging them to take control over, and responsibility for, the provision and running of local services. The localism agenda, as expressed in the 2011 Localism

Act, is part of the implementation of a big society by encouraging a 'community right to build' and measures to enable communities to develop local neighbourhood plans.

4. The TNS (2008) survey shows that of the 153 respondents, 86 per cent (106) said that disabled people had been part of the process, and 12 per cent declared that they had no knowledge of whether or not disabled people had been involved in consultative processes. Consultations typically involved meetings with planning officers and attendance at committee meetings. There was evidence of authorities (39 per cent) involving disabled people in testing during the implementation of schemes.
5. A local development framework is a key component of the British planning system. It is a series of plans and policy documents prepared by local planning authorities setting out what is permissible in terms of land use development. The planning system is, at present, undergoing a major review and change instigated by the Coalition government. For further details see: www.planningportal.gov.uk/planning/planningsystem/localplans.

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