Private sector involvement in public space management and its varying degree of publicness

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Abstract. This paper aims to get a better understanding on the subject of private sector involvement in the management of public space and the degree of publicness of the space. While public space is one of urban’s essential infrastructure, private sector involvement in public spaces is said to have an effect to the lowering of the spaces’ degree of publicness. With private sectors being involved, certain groups of the public lost their rights to access these public spaces as private sectors often take advantages of the public’s rights for their own financial benefits. This study discusses the importance of a public space in a democratic society and the creation of new types of public spaces with varying degrees of publicness along with the emergence of private sector involvement. This paper will also discuss the dimensions of a space’s degree of publicness and previously made indices to evaluate public spaces in terms of their publicness.

1. Introduction
Public space is a vital element in a democratic society [1]. The availability of a well-functioning public space indicates that the society is democratic and inclusive. A well-functioning public space should be able to raise tolerance between social groups in public, which consists of different individuals with different backgrounds and experiences. Putting one individual in the presence of another different individual, in terms of their backgrounds, experiences, interests, and goals may raise tolerances between them. It allows one to see things from another’s perspective. This is especially important for the people in power, the ones who make the decisions that affect other (different) individuals. Therefore, making public space a space of democracy.

In the last few decades, however, there has been an obfuscation in the demarcation between public space and private space [2][3][4][5]. Private sector involvement in the development and management of public spaces has resulted in the lowering of the degree of publicness in public spaces [6][7][8]. The involvement of the private sector has led to the emergence of new types of public spaces that are not in accordance with the primary objective and functions of public space. In the eyes of business owners, their interest (revenue) trumps public needs (accessible public spaces). The public lost their right to have a public space as a democratic space, indicating the weakening of democracy.

This paper is a literature review of previous researches regarding the subject of private sector involvement in public space management and its varying degree of publicness. This literature review is written to get a better understanding of the current situation on this subject. This paper focuses on the importance of public spaces, the emergence of private sector involvement, and the degree of publicness of public spaces.
2. Theory

To shed a light on the effect of private sector involvements on public space’s degree of publicness, first we need to address the basic understanding of how vital the degree of publicness of a public space is. Many authors before had argued about how important a public space is. One of which is Mitchell (1995:115), who argued that a public space is an essential element in a democratic society [1]. A well-functioning public space enables people to represent themselves as members of the public. By being in a public space, one can express themselves, their opinions, goals, and interests to other members of the public. They will be in the spectacle of others. A public space, therefore, provides a literal space for representation. How a public space is important in a democratic society will be explained shortly after we discuss about the definition of a public space.

A public space is a space that is publicly accessible [9]. Carr et al. (1995) and Young (2000) stated that a public space is where many people from different backgrounds are present altogether, being exposed to, and engage with each other within one area [10][11]. In addition to the argument, von Hirsch and Shearing (2002) also argued that a public space is free of cost [5]. Public space differs from private space as it is owned collectively and managed by the public, while private space is owned by a private party (personal or institution). The public here refers to individuals in a society that have different backgrounds, experiences, goals, and interests [11]. With the space being owned collectively by the public and is made in the public’s best interest, public space is inclusive to everyone without exception. To be collectively owned by the public means that each and every member of the public has an equal right to access the space. In line with meaning of democracy, which Jent (1967) stated means a society where the people have the highest power [12]. The ‘people’ meant by Jent can be interpreted as members of the public. This confirms the statement before that argued all members of the public should have an equal right to access a public space. Young (2000) also stated that a good democracy encourages its people to express and voice their opinions to achieve a collective goal [11]. Being publicly accessible and free of cost enables public space to provide the people for this specific need.

Public space is multifunctional. It serves economical, health, environmental, social, and political functions [10][13]. It is economically beneficial, especially to the public with low financial income, as it provides a space for street vendors to vend their goods. Public space also provides health benefits to the public both physically and mentally by providing a space for sports and recreation. With green spaces, public space is also environmentally beneficial. In Jakarta, Indonesia, public spaces are often used by street vendors, thus attracting other members of the public as they go for an afternoon walk and then hang out at the mini ‘food court’. With a strategic location, public space provides an accessible space during public transportation transits. It also promotes the use of public transportations.

One of the basic functions of public space is to provide a space where social interactions between members of the public can happen. As Woolley (2003) explained, an individual is much likely to meet another individual that is not of one’s acquaintance, each to do their own activities in the same space [14]. Carr et al. (1992) also stated that the meeting of two un-acquainted individuals enables an increase in the relationships of both individuals [10]. This is especially useful when both individuals are from different backgrounds. By being in the same spatial scope, it affirms one individual of the presence of the other individual. A conglomerate woman who goes for a walk in the park meeting a waitress with her son will be forced to interact, either passively or actively. The meeting will make both individuals realize that there are other individuals with different backgrounds living within the same community.

With the ability to freely express their opinions, interests, and goals, public space enables the spectators to get the perspective of the participator. This means public space plays an important role in providing a space for political activities. The public is safe to express their views on the upcoming or newly made policies. Mitchell (1995) mentioned about the collective protest that happened in Tiananmen, China in May 1989 is the perfect example of how important public space is in making a political statement [1]. Mitchell explained that by protesting in the court of Tiananmen, the community succeeded to raise the problem to a larger scale, even to an international level. BBC News wrote, “Tiananmen was a revolution which almost succeeded, it shook the Chinese system to the core.” [15].
An ideal public space according to Carr et al., (1992) is one that is responsive, democratic, and meaningful [10]. In the context of public space, responsive means that space has to cater to the needs of all members of the public. While being democratic means that space allows each and every member of the public to freely express themselves, including their opinions, interests, and goals. When a public space responds to the needs of the people and provides a free, safe space to express and represent oneself, the people will form an attachment to this space, other individuals in the community, and the environment, thus creating meaningful space. Young (2000) also argued that a great public space is a space that is inclusive towards all social, economic, political groups [11]. Inclusivity in a public space means including all members of the public without exceptions. The democracy system highly requires inclusivity as it allows discussion between different views in each problem. With these being said, inclusivity in a public space implies the availability of free, safe space for the public to express and represent themselves, therefore indicates the existence of democracy.

Private sector involvement in public space management has created an emergence of new types of public spaces that are not entirely public [6][16]. One of these spaces is a privately managed public space or what Yarina (2017) called as exclusionary public space [17]. This type of space is publicly owned but privately managed. The other type is a semi-public space, which is both owned and managed by the private sector [3]. Both of these spaces are not entirely public because they are not owned and managed by the public. It means this space may be made not in the public’s best interest. Yarina (2017) also argued that private sector involvement results in public spaces being made for the private sector’s benefit, which is to accumulate as much profit as possible [17]. Lorenza and Gamal (2017) stated that the private sector often makes spaces that are ‘public-space-like’ without being really public to attract customers [18]. These spaces only cater to members of the public that are financially beneficial to the private sector only and excluding those who are not.

Spaces that are categorized as public while not being entirely public creates dysfunction in public spaces. The public now has many choices of public space types to go to. As Amanda and Gamal (2019) stated in their paper, business owners often improve their owned or managed ‘public’ spaces’ facilities to increase visitors' comfort to raise their sale value. The public now has a choice to go the these comfortable ‘public’ spaces or government-provided public spaces that are not as comfortable as privately owned/managed ones [19]. This choice results in segregation. Members of the public that can afford these comfortable ‘public’ spaces will prefer to go there. Meanwhile, members of the public that can’t afford them will have no other choice than to go to the ones that are provided by the government. Hani and Gamal (2018) explained that segregation is not always in the form of physical boundaries, but it may be in the form of non-physical boundaries, like high product prices that prevent certain people from entering the space [20]. The rich and the poor will not meet, negating the function of public space as a space where individuals from different backgrounds to meet and be in each other’s perspective.

Private-sector-involved ‘public’ spaces like shopping malls have boundaries that filter unwanted people from entering. These boundaries, as Madanipour (2011) explained, are physical, mental, and social control [16]. Physical boundaries are those that are physically visible. It might be made of either natural or built elements like gates and walls. Mental boundary is how one perceives the space, which is often in the form of high prices. The third boundary is social control, which is laws and regulations that limit one to access the space. Private-sector-involved ‘public’ spaces filter out their visitors that are unable to afford the goods sold from entering the space. Zuhri (2012) explained through her case study in Central Park Mall, Jakarta that the private sector as a public space provider does provide a space for the public, but with adjustments to benefit the provider and neglecting some of the public’s rights that do not benefit them [21]. This means that space is not inclusive. With these spaces being available only to certain groups of the public, it gives the impression that these groups are the only ones who are considered important. This is exactly why the existence of publicly accessible and inclusive public spaces is important.

Many authors from different disciplines have made different arguments in terms of how to determine how public public space is. Németh and Schmidt (2011), urban planners, viewed public spaces as something multidimensional. They argued that the degree of publicness of a public space has three
components: ownership, management, and use [4]. Németh and Schmidt developed a model consisting of three axes, each representing each component. To use this model, one draws three points on each axis based on how public each component is. The more public it is, the higher the point. They then connect them into a line. The lines between different public spaces are compared to see which one is more public.

Ali Madanipour (1999), another urban planner, emphasized more on the accessibility dimension. He argued most definitions of public spaces lead to the need for access to enter the space and to carry activities within the space [7]. In his next journal, Madanipour (2011) also explained three different boundaries that affect a space’s accessibility [16].

Political scientist Kohn (2004) emphasized more on inter-subjectivity, which is the space’s ability to facilitate interactions between members of the public by placing the space users as participants, not just as spectators [22]. While Young (2000), an expert in politics, argued that inclusive access is the most important dimension in determining a public space’s degree of publicness in a democratic society [11]. A public space that is accessible to all members of the public encourages the realization of democracy, one that puts forward active participation from all members of the public.

Mitchell (1995), a geographer, viewed democracy and inclusivity in a public space as the most important dimension. He stated that public space is the only space where people that are “unwanted” can represent themselves as a part of the public [1]. To be in a public space is to be considered as a part of the public. Public space is owned by the public. All members of the public are supposed to be able to access it freely, therefore public space is supposed to be the space where one can see different representations of different members of the public. When one group is unable to be in a public space, it gives the impression that that specific group is non-existent because they are not in the category of ‘public’ that is allowed to enter the space.

Varna and Tiesdell (2010) synthesized five dimensions in a public space from previous researches: ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation [23]. Ownership is the legal status of the space. When space is owned by the public (government), it will certainly be more public than the one owned by the private sector. After all, the government’s job is to serve the public. Control refers to how strict the controlled in this space. Varna and Tiesdell mentioned that public space is more public when the regulations exist to protect the people, not properties. When space is overly secured with CCTVs, security guards, homeless deterrents, it is not provided for the people but to protect the space’s owner/manager’s properties. It contributes to exclusion. The third dimension, civility, is how space is managed so that it welcomes the public to use the space. It talks about how physical configuration relates to the physical accessibility of the space. The last dimension is animation, which refers to how space is used by its users. Space is more public when it encourages its users to explore the space. Based on these dimensions, Varna and Tiesdell developed an indicator to determine a public space’s degree of publicness.
Németh and Schmidt (2007) also developed an indicator to evaluate the degree of publicness of public space [24]. Their indicator is more general and with fewer variables. Their indicator also lacks the range in scoring. The questions asked in the indicator tends to be more of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. However, Németh and Schmidt made two sections in their indicator. one to measure how actively the space encourages use, and one to measure how the space limits use, in terms of each dimension. Varna and Tiesdell’s (2010) indicator has more detailed variables since it was published 3 years after Németh and Schmidt’s [23]. Their scoring is also more detailed ranging from 1 point to 5 points. However, some variables are qualitative, so scoring tends to be more on the subjective side. For example, in the animation dimension, scoring descriptor uses the word ‘many’ and ‘few’ which is not quantitatively defined.

3. Conclusions

Many kinds of literatures have discussed the importance of public spaces in a democratic society. As the system of democracy supports diversity in discussions, it also highlights the importance of inclusivity. The availability of a well-functioning public space becomes vital due to its main function to provide a free, safe space for the public to express and to represent themselves, their opinions, goals, and interests. With the private sector beginning to get themselves involved in providing and/or managing public spaces, there has been dysfunction in public spaces. These spaces no longer provide free, safe space for all members of the public, but only to those who financially beneficial to the private sector [3][6][17].

A space’s degree of publicness is determined by several dimensions: user [1][8][11][23], ownership and management [8][22], control [23][24], design [22][23][24], accessibility [1][7][11][22][23][24]. Some authors, like Németh and Schmidt (2007) and Varna and Tiesdell (2010), even made indicators to evaluate public spaces’ degrees of publicness [23][24]. However, the indicators still lack quantitative scoring and it is still unclear what base are the scoring descriptors of the indicators made on. Future researchers are recommended to develop a more detailed quantitative scoring descriptor with a clear basis of arguments.

4. References

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**Acknowledgements**

This article's publication is supported by Direktorat Riset dan Pengabdian Masyarakat, Direktorat Jenderal Penguatan Riset dan Pengembangan Kementerian Riset, Teknologi, dan Pendidikan Tinggi Republik Indonesia through its Research Grant NKB-53/UN2.RST/HKP.05.00/2020.