

finding
common ground.



Finding Common Ground : An Atlas of Definitions

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Author: Paige Lyons

With much help from: Meghan Kelly & Sarah Bennett

Lambert conformal Conic Latitude of Origin: 43.07

Central Meridian:-89.49 SP1 43.11 SP2 43.04

Open Geoportal University of Wisconsin, 2010 US Census Bureau

The Subjectivity of Definitions

The built environment is both the product of human behavior and the architect of human behavior. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as individuals that shape our own lives with free choice. However, the more that the built environment is studied, the invisible forces driving the human experience become more apparent. The abstract idea

of public space affects many real phenomena in society such as economics, physical & mental health. How should we define such a ubiquitous topic? Furthermore, how can we possibly measure it? This work aims to explore the complexities and importance of public space. Each definition presented has strengths and fall backs. The

accompanying map juxtaposes the complexities of the text, providing a simple and clear representation of the definition.

Civic Spaces

Public squares, City Parks, Public Streets, Sidewalks and Plazas

We consider these spaces ‘free’, but in reality, we give up certain rights to be there. There are rules of conduct; some written into law and others self-governed. Once a space is deemed significant to the public, it is then a privilege to occupy that space. Unwritten & written rules filter ideas, speech and actions deemed private in every public space.

Conflict arises when different groups of people apply competing rules to the same space. One of the most notable conflicts revolving around the use of a public space is the People’s Park in the San Francisco Bay area. In 1969, after sitting vacant for two years, students, community activists and local merchants erupted in riots demanding the space be open to the people. For a time, their

vision came true, becoming a haven for the homeless and an area for hosting concerts and other cultural activities. Wanting the space to be catered to the student and the middle class, UC Berkely called for the land to be developed with volleyball courts and other facilities. Eventually the city and the university used force to reclaim the space. They argued the occupation by the homeless excluded the majority of the population from the park.

A story with a different outcome comes from Copenhagen, Denmark. A group of homeless carved an enclave out of abandoned land to become Christiania. Today the self-governing society is only partially governed by the Danish state. It has become a famous area of the

city, showcasing art and exemplifying the idea of a ‘freetown’. Due to the differences in taxes, services, and laws applied to the area, whether or not it should exist is still contested.

These examples show the complexities that surround the word public. Inherently no space is unbiased. The norms of a space select the population that feel comfortable there.





“We claim a place in it and enjoy the rights associated with that space. In return, we are to adhere to the rules and responsibilities commonly declared in that space.”

Camp & Chien 2000 p1

Buildings

Libraries, Free Museums, Public Schools, Religious Institutions and Community Centers

The indoor space can also be viewed as public. Here, there are more privileges associated with the space and thus there are more rules of conduct. Free indoor spaces offer not only protection from the weather but also can provide access to information and services. In libraries the visitors give up their rights to be loud and disturbing in return for a quiet space and access to information. Free museums have a similar structure in place.

Every building on a campus of a public university is technically public, although portions of the building are reserved for different groups of people. The groups of people that spaces are reserved for range from students, to those in certain programs, to specific faculty. The university itself provides

education at a reduced rate, making education more accessible to the public. The university also enriches the community by hosting a variety of free lectures and events, but most of these are targeted toward the educated.

Religious institutions also provide services that are open to the public. They are often a major resource for the homeless offering meals and even shelter. These spaces select those who feel comfortable in a space associated with a particular ideology.

All indoor spaces are sometimes locked and are limited to those who live in close proximity or have the means to visit them.





“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Public if You Pay

Cafes, Restaurants, Bars, Stores and Theaters

Commercial spaces serve as unique windows into a community's culture. The stores and restaurants are selected by an evolutionary process by the community. The beer and brat culture is echoed perfectly through the restaurants in Madison, WI, just as the urban vegetarian culture is represented in Portland, OR. Cafes and theaters are important cultural hubs that simultaneously reflect the culture and create the fabric of the city. In the modern era these windows into communities have been shaded with a rise in 'clone towns' (New Economics Foundation 2004). In 1976 the humanistic geographer Edward Relph published the book *Place and Placelessness*. The work describes the importance of the sense of place to the human experience.

He divided the sense of place into three tenants: (1) the place's physical setting; (2) its activities, situations, and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place. The rise in large chains, transforms towns to loose identities. Placelessness threatens our modern society. We need to design for the human experience, not the simply human economics.

According to some, unequal access to certain commercial spaces defies human rights. Access to grocery stores with fresh fruits and vegetables should be a right for the public. Food deserts are defined as places where a third of a low-income community lives further than a mile from a grocery store.

These pose serious public health concerns, showing higher rates of obesity. Even so, all commercial spaces select for those who can pay to be there.

 Split Level Space





Health

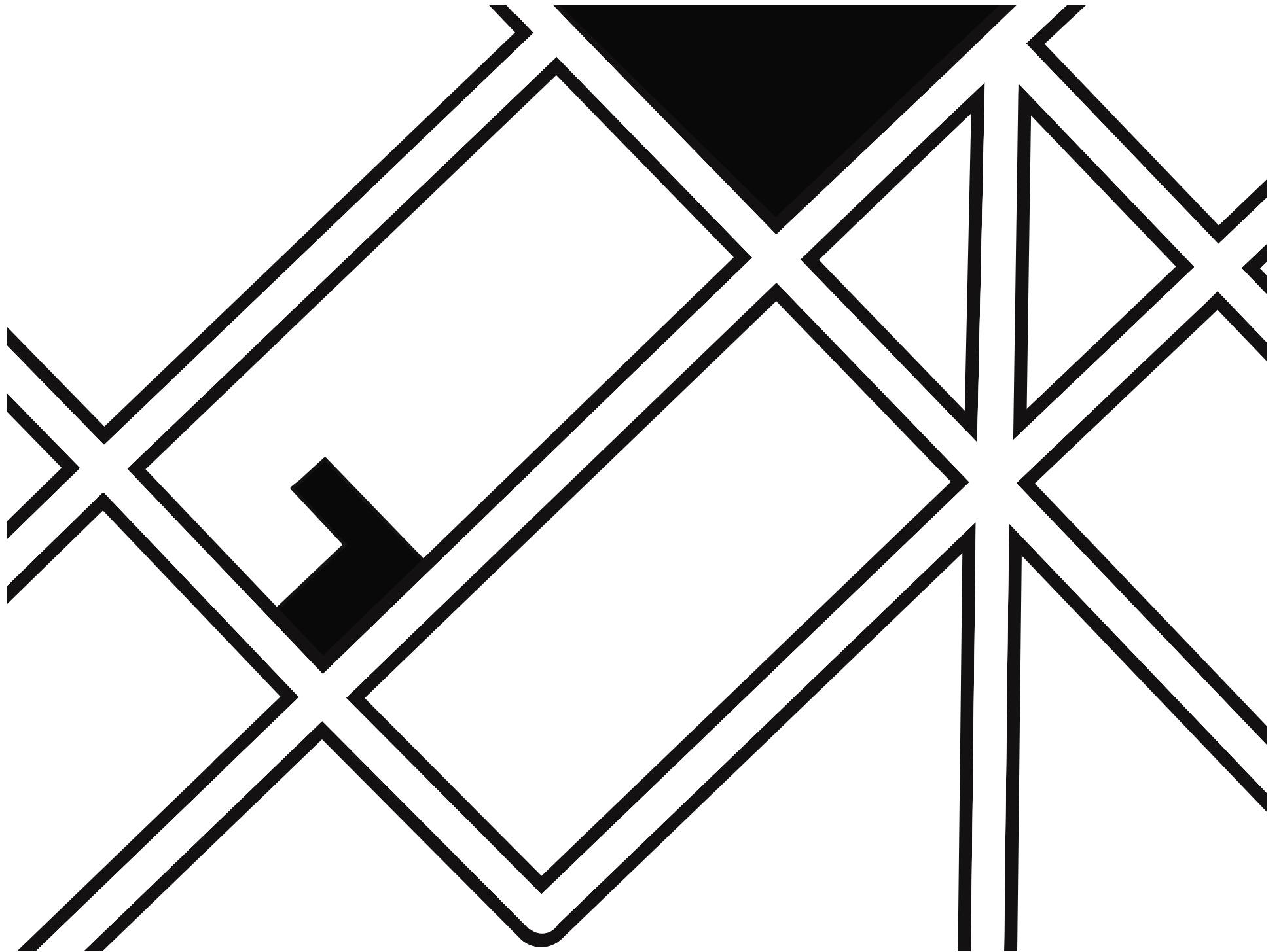
Public squares, City Parks, Sidewalks and Plazas

In the past 30 years an immense body of research has come out that demonstrates the link between green spaces and a multitude of positive health benefits. A decrease in morbidity, obesity, stress and cardiovascular disease has been attributed to these public spaces. This has been attributed to an improvement in air quality, an increase in mobility, and emotional wellbeing. Not all green space is equal. Just because it exists does not mean that people will use it and reap the benefits. On a local level, space need to be designed to provide a sense of security, gathering, and purpose. On a macro level, spaces need to demonstrate connectivity. Parks need to be connected through walk ways and bike paths. Park should also be located on people's every-

day paths. One giant park on the outskirts of a city will not benefit the community as much as small-dispersed parks scattered in the urban environment. The public is not interested in going out of their way, and catering to this through design in necessary.

Furthermore green-space needs to be accessible through active transportation. People are far less likely to drive to a park on a regular basis than they are to walk or bike. If the opportunity to be healthy is to be accessible to all, so should the same design of access to this kind of public space.





Internet

All Space that could possibly connect to the Internet

The Encyclopedia of Geography defines public spaces as: communal spaces where social, political, and economic activities take place. The Internet fits soundly under this definition, although it is a unique public space. The Internet is perhaps the most permeable public space that exists. Access to a network of socializing, economic activity, and politics does not only surpass physical convenience but also political borders around the world. It also breaks down borders in the different social groups of the individual.

In the case of social media, work, family, and friends can now all simultaneously exist on one page. Users are able to carefully craft the image they wish to present to the public. People can also now be two places at once- on the train

and responding to a work email, in the home and watching a course lecture. One of the most notable traits of this space is that rules of conduct no longer apply. Users can choose how public they would like to be- and even if they are public they can be anonymous.

In most public spaces, we are stepping into a sphere where we expect to be exposed to new experiences. Some academics have argued that the Internet has become a metaphorical concave mirror. Instead of showing us information that everyone else in the space is exposed to, users are fed back what information is given to the Internet about them selves.

Assessing the Internet as a public space cannot go without looking at censorship around the world. According to

Reporters without Borders, there are 11 anti-Internet countries that restrict the Internet in a harmful way. Often information is censored for political purposes. Still, this not the main limit of the space. Approximately 60% of the world's population does not have access to the Internet.





“What attracts people most, it would appear, is
other people.”

William H. Whyte

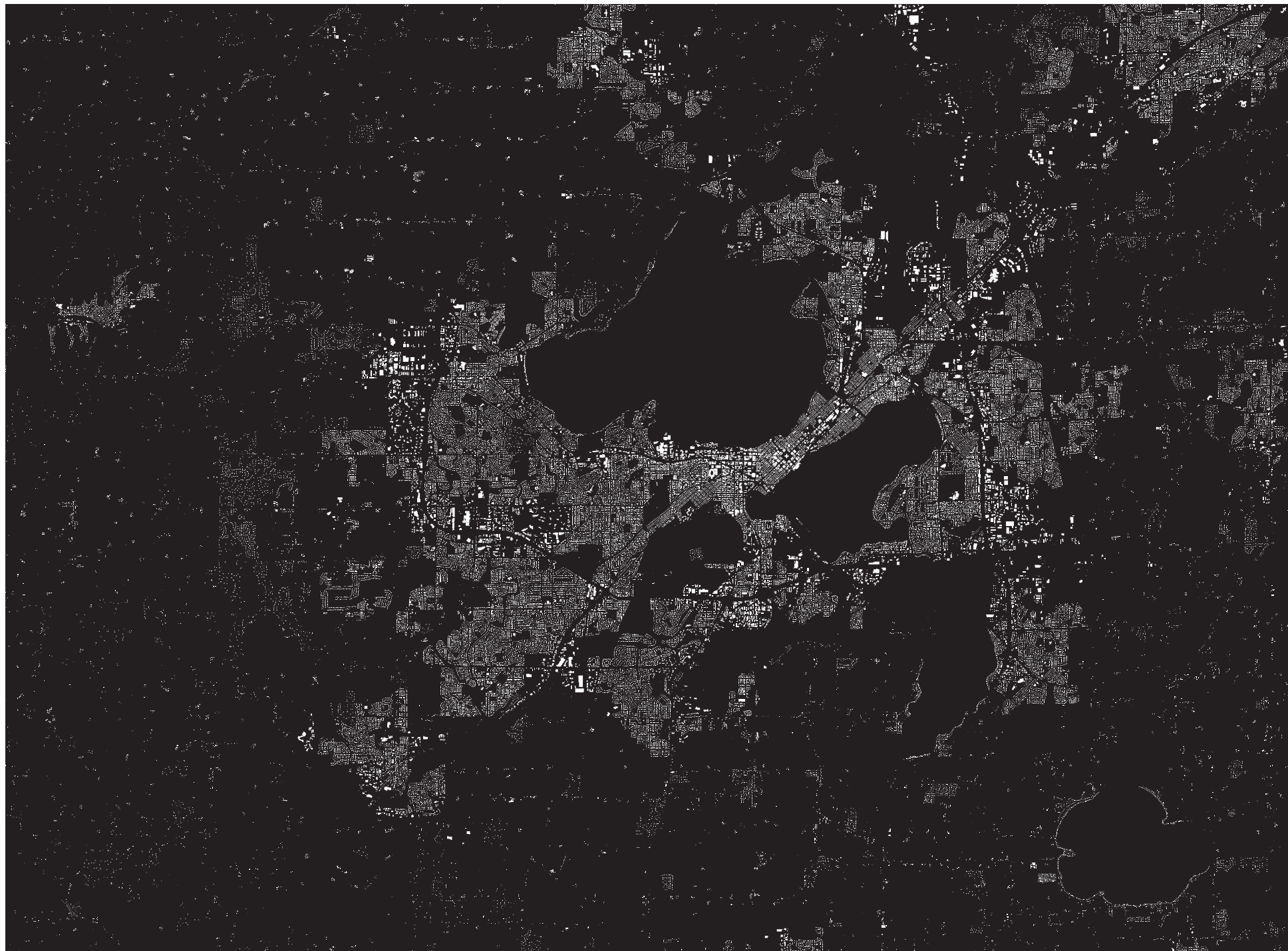
Freedom to Roam

All Space that is not Occupied by a Building

The freedom to roam on private wilderness has long been an assumed right in northern European countries. Because of the vast expanses of wilderness the freedom to roam allows citizens and visitors to hike, swim, ski, skate and cycle on private land while causing minimal disturbance. Hikers are even allowed to pick mushrooms and berries on these lands. In some countries visitors can set up a fire and camp for a night. This sheds light on the cultural definitions of public space. In America, personal property is a way of showing personal identity, and this has come at no small cost. America has been experiencing a privatization of public space. A large amount of pride is found in individually owned property, but

this does not necessarily result in fulfillment. Senator Ralph Yarborough described the problem with the privatization of public space as it pertains to the ocean like this: “In recent years, fences and barricades have blocked the public right to have access to our seas. We are becoming a landlocked people, fenced away from our own beautiful shores, unable to exercise the ancient right to enjoy our precious beaches.” Yarborough said this in 1969, but it still rings true today. Multiple efforts to free up the coast line and return it to the people have failed repeatably. Could it be that our desire to build a fence around our property could be hindering our own human experience?

The map highlights all space that is not occupied by a building; the space that could be available to us all.



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