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Stella Marren

Washington University in St. Louis

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PRIVATELY OWNED PUBLIC SPACES: ARE THEY TRULY PUBLIC SPACES?

Stella Marren

Mentor: Carol Camp Yeakey

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, major American cities experienced rapid population growth and a concurrent growth of commercial development in downtown business districts, leading to an increasing need for open public space. City governments turned toward the private sector to provide publicly accessible space as a part of new construction projects, introducing privately owned public spaces into the urban form. Today's cities face intertwined challenges resulting from the impacts of climate change and urban population growth. Designing cities that incorporate strong public space is one answer to these challenges. This thesis is an exploration of the history, development, and accessibility of privately owned public spaces in American cities, guided by two multi-faceted, multi-layered research questions. How can public space improve a city's functionality and success? Can it serve as a method to respond to effects of climate change and social and economic inequity? Second, has the privatization of public space led to an increase in barriers of access for people based on gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status? Has this, in turn, impacted the success of a city? New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—major cities with diverse populations and high numbers of privately owned public spaces—offer examples of how well-designed public space has an unparalleled positive impact on the success of a city, but that the privatization of public space has led to a mass of inaccessible, unsuccessful public spaces. The results from this study serve the purpose of informing future planning, execution and analysis of inclusive urban spaces.