On the streets near Yoyogi Park in Tokyo, young musicians defy the official rule and transform the sidewalks into a performance space. In the entrance to the HSBC Headquarters in Hong Kong, Filipino guest workers congregate on Sundays and the generic corporate foyer becomes a festive gathering place. In East Los Angeles, Latino residents have retrofitted streets, buildings and residential front yards to support a culturally richer and more vibrant social life. Every day, vendors from Mumbai to Madrid repurpose city streets into temporary markets — legal or illegal. Across North America, immigrant groups have created sanctuaries and refuges in ethnic malls and multicultural neighborhoods and suburbs. These are just a few examples of how citizens are reshaping public spaces — and urban life — in cities around the world. [1]

But beyond such everyday occurrences, citizen actions in urban spaces can also galvanize transformative political events. Witness the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the recent rallies from Athens, Greece, to Madison, Wisconsin. In each case protesters and activists have taken over urban spaces and transformed them into sites of action, meaning, and possibility. And these instances of personal and collective action suggest not only the capacity of human agency to modify the structure of the city and the society; through individual and collective action, protestors are mobilizing not only themselves but also the very notion of the public in public space.

The distinction between public and space, or actions and vehicles for actions, is an important one as we examine the implications of OWS at Zuccotti Park and beyond. In a series of forums organized at the Center for...
Architecture in New York City to envision the future of public space in the wake of Occupy, two familiar responses emerged: how to make urban space truly publicly accessible and inclusive in the face of diminishing publicness and growing privatization (reflected in the phenomenon of privately owned public spaces, or POPS); and how to create space for protests to take place, with all the necessary parameters, e.g., size, location, transportation, and so forth. [2] The focus on physical space is not surprising, given the traditional interests and expertise of designers. But if the failure of the so-called POPS to offer a meaningful substitution for a true public realm is any indication, then the focus on spaces, on purely physical parameters, will likely lead to more misguided attempts to invigorate the public realm. Here I would like to argue that the making and mobilization of the public as an actively engaged citizenry is what enables a public space to remain public and continue to serve as a vehicle — a building block — of our participatory democracy.
In an earlier work, I distinguish between two kinds of public space — institutional public space and insurgent public space. Institutional public spaces include typical parks, plazas, squares, streets, and some civic buildings, as well as privately owned public spaces — all of which are defined and produced by governments and corporations. These spaces are by nature codified, regulated and institutionally maintained; usually they presuppose a fairly generic public that may be served by these spaces but for the most part is not engaged in their making. In contrast, insurgent public spaces are those created or initiated by citizens and communities, often outside or at the border of regulatory and legal domains. Insurgent public spaces — which might include guerrilla gardens, flash mobs, “third places,” street vending, street theater and protests — are created by those...
who appropriate, reclaim or occupy a particular space to gather, express opinions and engage in various cultural practices. Indeed, the very idea of insurgent public space argues that the making of public space is not the exclusive domain of institutions; it can involve a broader range of actors — and thus reinforce the fact that “public” is not just an adjective but more broadly an active body of citizens.

The Occupy movement, in Zuccotti Park and around the globe, was a powerful example of insurgent public space. Through camping out, making and posting protest signs, setting up temporary libraries and communication stations, collecting and preparing food, conversing with passersby and participating in the General Assemblies, the protesters transformed passive and usually mundane urban spaces into sites of active political expression. City authorities, real estate developers and property owners might have characterized the occupation of Zuccotti Park as an unlawful use of public space (or privately owned public space, to be precise); I would argue that it was actually an effort to produce and protect public space — both physically and politically. More than the police and other law enforcers, it was the protesters who safeguarded Zuccotti Park and other Occupy sites as spaces for political dialogue and democratic expression.

The capacity of individuals and communities to transform urban spaces has received considerable attention in the recent literature of urban design and theory. In *Loose Space*, Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens examine how people pursue a rich variety of activities in unexpected locations, and they argue that it is these actions that make a space loose and a city truly vital, “with or without official sanctions, and with or without physical features that support those activities.” [3] In *Everyday Urbanism*, Margaret Crawford makes a distinction between “everyday spaces” and “the carefully planned, officially designated, and often underused spaces of public use ... found in most American cities. ... Lived experience should be more important than the physical form in defining the city.” [4]

In *Companion to Urban Design*, Kristen Day suggests that women's use of public space can constitute a form of resistance when that use consists of self-determined, meaningful activities that help to define their identities. [5] Similarly, in a discussion of feminists and grassroots politics, Faranak Miraftab explores the difference between “invited” and “invented” spaces of citizenship, with “invited” spaces defined as “occupied by ... grassroots and ... allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions,” and “invented” spaces as those “directly confronting the authorities and the status quo.” [6] The articulation of “invented” underscores the power of individuals and groups to create spaces of resistance and to expand ideas of citizenship. Emphasizing human agency, these discussions counter the now familiar narrative of loss in earlier analyses of public space, and they reinforce the geographer Don Mitchell’s claim that definitions of public space and the public are produced “through constant struggles in the past and in the present ... for it is by struggling over and within space that the natures of 'the public' and of democracy are defined.” [7]

So it seems clear, as we envision the future of public space in North America and beyond, that our focus should be equally on the making of the public as on the making of space. But how exactly can this be accomplished in the everyday life of cities? How can such processes occur with or without other occupations in places like Zuccotti Park? Can we look beyond OWS and Zuccotti Park and find examples of broad-based, everyday practices that would serve to make a socially and politically engaged public?
Experiences in Seattle offer some promising leads. In 1989, with Jim Diers as the founding director of the Department of Neighborhoods, the city launched the Neighborhood Matching Fund, a program that would become very popular and which still exists today. The NMF provides varying levels of support — designated as Small Sparks, Small and Simple Projects, and Large Projects — for community-initiated endeavors, from outreach and mobilization to design, planning and implementation; and because funding can take the form of cash donations and/or volunteer hours, the program incentivizes community building and organizing. From 1989 to 2001, local groups generated more than $30 million in matching resources for projects ranging from public art installations and community gardens to the renovation and development of neighborhood parks. [8] Thus not only did the NMF help to improve neighborhoods; it also strengthened social networks and enhanced local engagement in planning processes. Today many groups remain involved in programming and maintaining projects, and some efforts have snowballed into greater initiatives; Growing Vine Street, for instance, began as a community garden but has expanded to include the preservation of vernacular houses and the greening of streets in the Belltown neighborhood.

Recent years have also seen concerted efforts to expand Seattle's parks and open spaces. In an era of dwindling public budgets, park advocates and citizen groups have not sought private funding (as has happened in many cities); instead, they've worked with city staff and campaigned to put new tax levies on the ballot. In 2000, Seattle voters passed the Pro Parks Levy at a price tag of $198.2 million over eight years to fund parks acquisition and development, environmental stewardship, maintenance and programming. In 2008, despite the economic crash, Seattle's voters decisively approved the Parks and Green Spaces Levy, a $146 million fund over six years to continue the expansion of public open spaces, including community gardens. Aside from projects listed in the proposals, the two levies also included an "Opportunity Fund" for initiatives proposed by citizen and community groups. And just as important as the tangible improvements to the city, these advocacy campaigns have encouraged the rise of an engaged public with significant political influence on municipal policy and planning.
Similarly, throughout North America and around the world, non-profit civic organizations are filling the gap between municipal agencies and local communities. In Oakland, California, the non-profit Unity Council worked with neighborhood groups and design professionals to undertake a transit-oriented development to spur economic growth in the predominantly immigrant and minority district of Fruitvale. The organization was also instrumental in developing a new waterfront park in an area in the city with the highest percentage of children but least amount of open space per capita. [9] In North Philadelphia, the Village of Arts & Humanities started as a community art project with the goal of engaging local youths and improving the neighborhood’s many vacant lots. In recent decades the organization has helped to rehabilitate dozens of parcels of vacant land into parks, gardens and passageways. Today, it offers a wide variety of community services, including apprenticeships, artist residencies and environmental educational programs.

In the Wan Chai District of Hong Kong, citizen activists and social workers have not only secured the preservation of the Blue House, one of the few remaining old-style tenement buildings in the city; they are also using it as a base for outreach and mobilization through the creation of a local museum and guided tour. In addition, to serve the low-income residents in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, social workers have created a swap shop, a grocery store selling local products, and a community currency called Time Coupon that encourages residents to volunteer for community service in exchange for donated and second-hand goods. In the rural township of Meinung, Taiwan, activists from TransAsia Sisters Association have been working with immigrant women from Southeast Asia to create gathering places that host various activities, including language lessons, childcare and social events. And in turn, through their participation in placemaking, the immigrant women have become active community members beyond their traditional roles as parents and housewives. [10] In Guatemala City, the organization Camino Seguro, or Safe Passage, has been working to serve and engage children and families living in extreme poverty around the city’s garbage dump, the largest in Central America. Since 2006, it has brought in landscape architecture students and faculty from the University of Washington to work with local families to create outdoor gardens, playgrounds and classrooms. Not only do these places offer refuge from poverty, violence and despair; the process of constructing them has helped local residents gain confidence and skills, and brought new hope and pride to the community. [11]
The increasing privatization of public space in North American cities today is evidence of a deeper and more entrenched political and institutional crisis — the privatization of our democracy through unequal taxation, institutional loopholes and the overpowering influence of multinational corporations. The root cause of diminishing public resources and the privatization of urban public space today is precisely the privatization of our political system — a crisis that cannot be addressed simply by creating more public spaces or by making these public spaces more inclusive and accessible. This deeper crisis requires the attention and intervention of a much more active and engaged public, a public willing and capable of speaking up and mobilizing politically to change the system.

But to create a more active citizenry, public spaces and communities can play a critical role. Public space can serve as a focal point of collective action and can make such action visible. As we learned at Zuccotti Park, it was the physical occupation of public space that galvanized attention and mobilized people and ultimately a movement.