

## CHAPTER 4

# The Contested Role of Events in Public Squares: The Case of George Square, Glasgow

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### Introduction

Urban public squares have long been important sites for festivals and events. As crucial features of urban life, many of these spaces were designed to accommodate a range of civic activities, including hosting markets, military events, protests and commemorative occasions. However, in the past two decades, they have been increasingly used as venues for an array of civic and commercial events. This new trend is part of a broader festivalisation of the city (Gravari-Barbas 2009; Richards and Palmer 2010; Gold and Gold 2020), through which festivals and events are employed as tools for the promotion and management of urban public spaces. However, the specific use of civic squares as festival and event sites has generated mixed reactions. Building on critiques of a neoliberal, entrepreneurial turn in public space management (Harvey 1989; Mitchell

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#### How to cite this book chapter:

McGillivray, D., Guillard, S. and McPherson, G. 2022. The Contested Role of Events in Public Squares: The Case of George Square, Glasgow. In: Smith, A., Osborn, G. and Quinn, B. (Eds.) *Festivals and the City: The Contested Geographies of Urban Events*. London: University of Westminster Press. Pp. 59–76. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book64.d>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

1995), commentators have analysed how festivalisation contributes to the commodification (Smith 2016) and privatisation (Gomes 2019) of civic spaces. Others, especially those supporting the benefits derived by the entrepreneurial local state, laud its positive effects, including showcasing important attributes of the city to a watching global audience. In architecture and urban design texts, events hosted in civic squares have been praised as a means of facilitating the ‘activation’ of these spaces (Ivers 2018), creating new modes of conviviality which could contribute to their revitalisation (Gomes 2019).

Most of the recent research on the relationship between festivals, events and public space has focused either on their role in regeneration or revitalisation plans (Smith et al. 2021) or their contribution to broader urban projects (Gomes 2019). Relatively few studies have considered the role of festivals and events in the making, or remaking, of a civic public square by urban planners and designers. As civic squares are conceived as festivals and events venues, participatory planning and design processes are now utilised to include the views of the general public to inform plans (Daoust Lestage 2018; Smith et al. 2021). These processes generate strong responses, both positive and negative, providing insights into how these spaces are valued, and by whom, and for what purpose.

This chapter draws on a case study of George Square in Glasgow, Scotland, to explore citizen views of the staging of festivals and events in a historically important civic public square. Over the past few decades, Glasgow has become a prime example of a European city where festivals and events have been used to regenerate the urban environment and address the crisis associated with the loss of its traditional industries (Gomez 1998; García 2005; Mooney 2004). This strategy led to the intense utilisation of the central spaces of the city – sometimes at the expense of other areas (Paddison and Sharp 2007) – with a particular focus on a few iconic squares and parks central to the city’s image and history. This is especially the case in George Square, a space which has long been crucial for the city as the home for its political headquarters, the City Chambers. Historically, George Square has been the site of many important protests and civic celebrations, and in recent years has regularly hosted a wide range of events. Some of these events have restricted access for everyday use and generated city-wide discussion about the suitability of the space as an event venue, and the appropriateness of its physical design. In this context, Glasgow City Council’s announcement in late 2019 of a city-wide ‘conversation’ to consider the future design of the square was an important moment regarding the future role of this space, and the role that events should play within it.

The chapter starts by outlining the role festivals and events have historically played in the design and use of urban squares, and how this role has evolved and changed in recent years. It then sets out the context of the Glasgow-wide conversation that took place in 2019 to discuss the future of George Square, and the observational and interview-based fieldwork conducted on this. In the second half of the chapter, the results of the investigations are presented, with

a specific focus on discussions related to 'events'. What this process revealed about Glasgow citizens' views on the role of events in the future of the square is explored, highlighting tensions between institutional actors and citizens about its purpose and use, and the sort of events which should be hosted there. The chapter concludes by arguing that the city-wide participatory process for this square revealed two dimensions of the contested geographies of festivals in the city: the contested role of events in public squares, and the contested voices of urban residents about public space.

### **The Historical Relationship Between Public Squares and Events**

Often occupying central locations, and surrounded by major civic buildings (e.g. town halls and municipal headquarters), civic squares represent particularly 'charged public spaces' providing 'a physical, social, and metaphorical space for public debate about governance, cultural identity, and citizenship' (Low 2000, 20). Distinct from public parks, squares connect citizens 'not to manifestations of nature but to the heart of urban culture, history and memory' (Lévy 2012, 157). The history of the urban square is inseparable from its association with festivity. This situation is particularly evident in Europe, where the relationship between public squares and festive occasions represents an important moment in the making of cities. For example, the Roman Forum was historically one of the main event spaces in the city, hosting gladiatorial combats. The Forum was designed with spectacular events in mind, with monuments located at the periphery of the square rather than at its centre; columns less densely grouped so they could shelter silversmiths; and balconies on the upper floors to host viewing audiences (Sitte 1889). In the Middle Ages, civic squares represented meeting and gathering points for urban dwellers, often located in the centre of cities. This was reinforced by their status as spaces of commerce, as host sites for markets (Webb 1990).

Squares have also been the places where popular pastimes were hosted, tied to agriculture, religion and other important markers of identity. For example, the piazza in Italy is often referred to as a civic space for commerce, entertainment and strolling. Carnivals and parades have traversed through, or come to their conclusion in, squares. The Plaza del Campo in Siena represents an archetypal example of a square renowned for its association with events and popular festivity. In medieval times, the square was the centre of many sporting events which included bullfights, battles with staves and stones, and horse races in the streets around the cathedral (Webb 1990). Today, these traditions remain, attracting residents and tourists alike into this city's square during the summer. However, the historic relationship between squares and events has also been linked with the expression of power. In medieval times, many squares originated as extensions of churches, providing places for people to gather

before and after worship, and a site for religious ceremonies (Smith 2016). After the end of the Renaissance period, many squares were also built or redesigned with the idea of hosting events which could showcase the power of royal authority. This is the case for Plaza Mayor in Madrid, which was reshaped on the command of Philip III so it could host major ceremonies, and this function was illustrated by the inclusion of a royal pavilion from which the King could watch spectacles. Similarly, in Paris, the Place Royale was designed by Henri IV as a setting for royal festivities (Webb 1990).

Though some of the traditional festivities that took place in public squares are centuries old, others can be traced to the mass generation of traditions which took place pre-war across Europe (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). These traditions represented the expression of the state's pomp and power and citizens' pleasure, and often took place in public squares as the number and scale of ceremonies and other gatherings grew. This official expression of power through events was often intertwined with more informal and spontaneous gatherings, some of which challenged established authority structures. Squares have been spaces for political demonstrations or protests, providing the focal point for collective action. Mass gatherings of people protesting political, economic or social injustices have been seen across major European and international cities, from the fall of communism across Eastern Europe, the poll tax protests across UK cities in the early 1990s, or the anti-war protests around the time of the Iraq War. In recent years, some scholars have addressed how securitisation and privatisation have threatened the politicisation of public spaces (Mitchell 1995; Low and Smith 2006), but the past two decades have also shown the importance of public squares as sites of collective gatherings. Squares continue to have a central role in these movements (e.g. the Place Tahrir as part of the Arab Spring Revolution in Cairo, the Puerta del Sol for the Indignados in Madrid, the Place de la Republique for the Nuit Debout movement in Paris) (Hristova and Czepczyński 2017). These events have put a new emphasis on the continuous role of the square as a politically contested space (Low 2010), and on the role of civic events as a crucial tool for redefining who has the right to access and use these spaces (Hancock 2017).

### Squares as Contemporary Event Venues

In the second half of the twentieth century, scholars, journalists and commentators forecast a crisis for public squares which, as with many other public spaces, were thought to have lost their central role in urban life. These declarations were attributed to the increasing importance of the car, which changed squares into traffic islands or parking lots (Giddings et al. 2011). With the growth in indoor venues in major cities in the 1980s and 1990s, public squares were also said to have lost some of their importance as places of public celebration. Yet in the past two decades, researchers have identified a renewal of public squares,

often related to their role as a venue for various types of events. Indeed, in the context of increased inter-urban competition, the local state has put more emphasis on making their public spaces attractive to both residents and visitors alike. That has created tensions within urban environments. For example, in Glasgow from the mid 2000's, visitor needs were perceived to be served over local citizens with the introduction of the Winter Festival in George Square (Foley and McPherson 2007). As Richards and Palmer (2010) suggest, cities have become more eventful, and civic squares and plazas have been constituted more intentionally to host a range of civic and commercial events and festivities, some rooted in the unique characteristics of the place, but many 'brought in' as part of wider event-led neoliberalised policy imperatives. Traditional festivities held in public spaces are now increasingly subject to management (in terms of risk, brand activation and media promotion) and planned in the name of instrumentalised, globalised motives when their original purpose was intentionally symbolic and locally meaningful (Foley et al. 2012).

Events are now frequently imagined as a means of 'activating' and 'animating' public spaces, including those like public squares viewed as having lost their appeal. Gomes (2019) shows how hosting atmospheric events in public squares has been part of wider promotional techniques to encourage gatherings of people as an antidote to trends of privatisation and atomisation associated with late capitalism. Yet, trends towards public squares being conceived as venues for events have also been influenced by processes of neoliberalisation and the rise of new public management models, accompanied by cuts to public funding and the need for the local state to act entrepreneurially, identifying new sources of revenue. Because the commercial entertainment and event industry is searching for more iconic, unique venues in (and on) which to host their spectacles, public squares are conceived as assets which can be sold or rented temporarily to private companies, generating much needed revenue for municipal authorities. Indeed, because of their contained nature, squares are perfect for staging commercial events. Audiences can be managed spatially and then mediated to a watching world. The civic backdrop marks the place at a time when urban uniqueness is increasingly difficult to achieve. In Glasgow, for example, tourism imagery often includes pictures from events in George Square (such as fireworks displays), which includes the backdrop of the City Chambers and a building advertising the city's official motto, 'People Make Glasgow' (Figure 4.1).

The contemporary use of events and festivals also influences the design of squares. Historically, squares have changed to reflect the evolution of their function, but new adaptations are now made with the explicit goal of hosting (commercial) festivals and events. Design adaptations take several forms. First, there are temporary interventions to mark off event sites and to limit access to those paying for tickets (Smith 2014). For example, fences and barriers are erected to limit access to events, partly on grounds of health and safety, but also to ensure exclusivity to those paying for the privilege. This demarcation of space in public squares is also intended to manage and control access



**Figure 4.1:** George Square Christmas Lights Switch On. Source: Glasgow City Council.

even when events are free (McGillivray 2019). Free-to-access civic events, celebrating key markers in the year, like Christmas, Halloween and New Year, are now invariably ticketed and subject to extensive regulatory interventions. Second, more and more squares are also intentionally redesigned *for* events, with public authorities adapting their physical design to accommodate a range of uses. An emblematic example is The Place des Festivals (Festival Square), within Montréal's Quartier des Spectacles, a one-square-kilometre neighbourhood which was developed around the idea of embedding culture and creativity in the experience of public space (Harrel, Lussier and Thibert 2015). The Place des Festivals is a square specifically designed to accommodate large events and gatherings (Daoust Lestage 2018). This intention is reflected in the shaping of the square as a slope which allows it to work as an amphitheatre during events, the existence of mega-lighting structures that signify the 'walls' of an outdoor theatre, and the existence of flexible landscapes which can accommodate the various uses of the space (Figure 4.2). In particular, the fountains in the middle of the square can be turned off for large events, concrete benches can be moved, and scaffolding structures, usually dedicated to host art installations, can be repurposed as kiosks (Daoust Lestage 2018).

While the design features visible in public squares are important, they mask the contested nature of discussions that take place in cities to decide who is responsible for, involved in, and left out of, decisions about how public spaces





**Figure 4.2:** The Place des Festivals in Montreal. The left-hand side shows the slope character of the square as well as the moveable benches, while the mega-lighting structures are displayed on the right-hand side. Source: Séverin Guillard.

are designed and managed, including their potential to host festivals and events. While it is possible to ‘design-in’ festivals and events to new public spaces (Smith et al. 2021) it is much more difficult to transform an historical public space into an events venue. However, it is now common to gauge public views on what uses of public spaces are appropriate, before incorporating design features like street furniture, landscaping, lighting and traffic management. Therefore, as we demonstrate through the case of George Square, Glasgow, exercises designed to consult with citizens over the most appropriate use of public space can produce responses that illustrate tensions between the trajectories of political and economic policy and the interests of the public.

### Reimagining George Square: A City-Wide Conversation

George Square is a good example of the contested geographies of urban events. This is a traditional civic public space which has changed dramatically as the city has been reimagined over the last 30 years. The square has been designed and redesigned to be adapted to current uses and architectural trends: it changed from a pond with green water in the middle of a gridded New Town, to a

city-centre square with a private pleasure garden, a Haussmannian-influenced piazza for the City Chambers, and finally a civic square hosting a cenotaph, green spaces, and statues of politicians, warriors, poets and scientists. These are now increasingly criticised for being exclusively male and reminiscent of Glasgow's colonial past (Murphy 2019). Throughout its history, the square has also been the site of many important political and social occasions, such as protests, demonstrations, commemorations and parades. As a civic space it has also hosted many traditional festivities to celebrate key dates in the calendar – including the switching on of the Christmas lights, Hogmanay (Scotland's New Year's Eve), and May Day. In 1990 the square was a central hub for the European City of Culture celebrations. It has also long been used as the starting point for mass running and cycling events, both elite (Tour of Britain) and participation-focused (e.g. Great Scottish Run, Santa Dash, Skyride). More recently, it has served as a Fan Zone space for major sporting and cultural events (McGillivray 2019). In 2002, the square was home to the UEFA Champions League fan zone and fulfilled the same role in 2007 when the city hosted the UEFA Cup Final. In 2014, the Commonwealth Games took over the square to host the merchandising operation and in 2018 it was again used as a fan zone and broadcast centre for the inaugural European Championships multi-sport event.

Throughout its history it has been difficult to secure consensus as to what uses should be prioritised in the square, and who has the authority to make those decisions. In 2013 there was a major consultation on the future of the square that included a design competition, only for the City Council to cancel the entire project at the last minute (Duffy 2013). Since then, the future of the square has continued to be the subject of political debate, leading to a decision in 2019 to commission an urban design agency to undertake a 'conversation' with the city's citizens about the future of the square. This decision was partly informed by concern over the way the square has been hired out for events – several of which were viewed as overly commercial – as well as its unsuitability to host major events because of its lack of proper event infrastructure. As one senior event officer in the city commented in 2019, 'George Square is ... it's a roundabout ultimately just now. So you're doing an event in a roundabout with no power, with no tech, on a slope, with lots of statues in very bizarre places' (personal interview).

The recognition that different types of events can attract different audiences and participants has impacted the way urban planners think about engaging with citizens in the design and programming of their public spaces. However, if squares are to be enlivened by hosting events, then it is imperative that a diversity of interests are included in the design process to ensure it is reflective of existing and potential users of that space. Over the last decade, the practice of urban design has been influenced by a shift towards more participative methods (Aelbrecht and Stevens 2019) which seek to incorporate a wider cross-section of non-specialist voices. These new methods include workshops, open-source participatory mapping, storytelling and related activities that put the user at the



centre (Brain 2019). It is in that vein that a city-wide ‘conversation’ on the future of George Square was initiated over a period of 10 weeks in late 2019. This conversation took place online, and in person via a series of ‘hands on workshops’. Initial responses were brought together for a final ‘co-creation’ workshop with a smaller ‘representative’ portion of the city’s population. This then fed into a final report from the urban designers to the local authority.

During the city-wide conversation, the team were permitted to observe meetings and workshops, and attend public consultation sessions, comprising a total of 15 hours of observation. This enabled the team to identify tensions, conflicts and areas of consensus and assess both the effectiveness of the process and the issues participants felt were important to them, with a focus on events. A bespoke observation template was used to document the findings and research team came together to identify key issues, using a thematic analysis approach. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted. These were with those directly involved in leading the city-wide conversation ( $n=1$ ), representatives from the client who commissioned the work ( $n=2$ ), and the organisation responsible in Glasgow for planning and delivering events in the city ( $n=2$ ). Finally, with the authorisation of the lead consultant, the team were granted access to data gathered through the online conversation, which helped inform the observations and interpretations. In each case, while interest was primarily in participants’ views on every aspect of the square and its potential use(s), our focus was how the public viewed the role of events and the influence of these expressions on the institutional decision-making process about the future of George Square. In the following discussion three key themes are focused upon. First, linking the opening historical account of the role of squares to the documenting of participants’ reflections on how they valued events and their relationship with George Square. Second, the study highlights participants’ views on the perceived commercialisation of the square through event activity. The final theme illustrates how the process of participatory planning created tensions between what people ‘want’ and how this relates to the imperatives of the institutional actors involved.

### **Events and the Square: Perceptions of Past and Future**

As previously discussed, squares are contested spaces, historically representing different functions. Similarly, the study findings illustrated a diversity of opinion on the most appropriate uses of Glasgow’s George Square, informed by both historical and contemporary narratives. Participants in the ‘conversation’ were asked to contribute their views about George Square at present, and what they thought it should be in the future, via paper surveys passed out in the streets, online comments on social media, and individual contributions made on the consultation website. There were 2,267 submissions to the main conversation in total and the majority were online. The conversation included a mix of

open-ended questions ('what brought you to the square?') which were then gathered to find a common set of purposes, and questions based on a predetermined pool of words or phrases ('words and phrases that describe George Square today'). Though there were many important reasons for respondents' visiting the square, events ranked highly in responses. When asked 'what brought them to the square?', the most popular responses were 'walking or passing through', followed by 'open space to relax, meet and socialise' and 'special events or occasions'. Also related to events, a further smaller number of respondents mentioned 'for protests, rallies and demonstrations'. The importance accorded to events was unsurprising as George Square is the location for several civic gatherings that are locked into the city's annual calendar and it has been used as a meeting point or fan zones for many mass sporting and cultural gatherings in recent years (McGillivray 2019).

The regular use of the square for festivities did not, however, prevent participants having contrasting feelings about it. In terms of people's perceptions of the square at the present time, many people expressed negative perceptions, and identified the need for change. They described the square as an overlooked place, containing 'nothing special', being 'undervalued' or 'unattractive'. More positively, the square was described as 'historic', representing a typically 'Glaswegian' place, Glasgow's 'civic heart' and an 'iconic landmark'. Reflecting people's ambitions for the future of the square, attending special events or occasions occupied an important role here, too, being the third most popular response after 'sightseeing the building or monuments' and 'open space to relax, meet and socialise'. Summarising the online conversation, attending special events or occasions were identified as being important in people's perceptions of George Square, but there were also intimations of contestation over the purpose and role of events, which were explored further in the second part of the city conversation, where more the focus was more discursive.

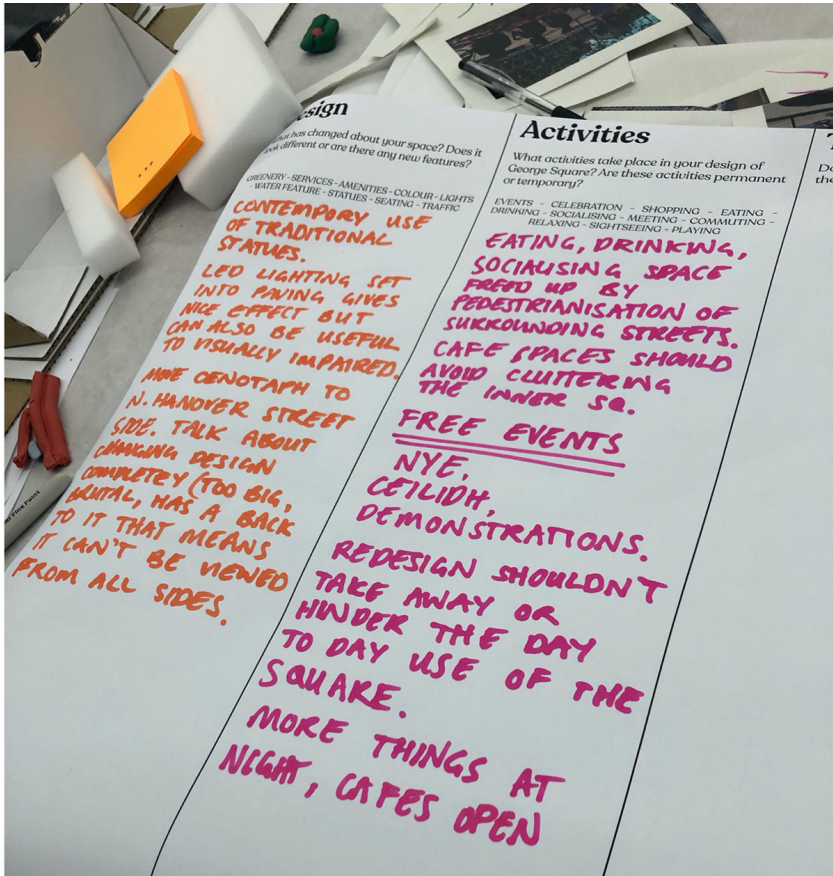
### **Civic, Not Commercial, Event Space**

In the second phase of the city-wide conversation a number of hands-on workshops, and a final co-creation workshop, were held. These discussions highlighted further tensions and contestations over the purpose and role of events in George Square. In these workshops, attendees proposed different uses, often influenced by their personal or professional experiences. On one level, participants were positive about the role of events in animating the square and making it an attractive place for visitors and residents to gather, congregate and interact. This perspective was commonly voiced by participants who supported the pedestrianisation of the square and improvements to the surrounding city centre streetscape and public realm. One professional contributor (with knowledge of the design and architecture field) made the bold statement

that 'George Square's function as an event space is its most important one'. Supporting that perspective, contributors suggested that 'events in George Square contain atmosphere', producing positive feelings. Management of atmosphere using events as a powerful affective component is increasingly influential in how urban places are promoted (Bille, Bjerregaarde and Sorensen 2015). When discussion focused on design ideas and potential pedestrianisation, contributors mentioned the importance of the 'flows and circulation' of people (visitors, for example) from retail and other environments close to George Square. In this context, events were viewed as a means of drawing people in, driving footfall to businesses in the surrounding area.

On the other hand, many more critical voices spoke of the dangers associated with the increasing commercialisation of the public realm, exemplified by the hiring out of the square for commercial events. There was general recognition that some civic events needed to be hosted in the square, like the annual Christmas Lights switch on, and probably had to be ticketed because this contributed to a sense of civic pride amongst citizens. However, there was concern expressed over conceptions of the square as an event space, especially when the square was effectively closed off to everyday use. Participants expressed the view that public spaces should be accessible all of the time for uses like passing through and relaxing. Strong opposition was expressed to the 'barriered marketplace' feel of the square when handed over to commercial event operators, with barriers being erected for commercial purposes, and the square becoming a building site for many months of the year in preparation for hosting events. These tensions between staging commercially valuable events in public spaces and these spaces being open, inclusive and free for all is evident in other cities too (Smith 2020). The George Square conversation reinforced the view that people wanted to access their public spaces without having to pay, to queue, or be searched.

Participants also expressed the need for events to be managed and not 'take-over the square', especially if they produced conflict between different uses and users. Some felt that the square should only be used for not-for-profit events and others wanted the square to primarily be a site for more spontaneous, convivial, pop-up events or cultural expressions that reminded them of their experiences of visiting other European plazas. Strictly regulated event activity tends to give precedence to official event organisers over informal occurrences (Foley et al. 2012). One workshop participant shared the story of a local choir who had performed in the square to entertain people but had been moved on by the police. They felt this was against the 'spirit of Glasgow' and the public use of the square. Some people felt that there were more appropriate public spaces in the city to host some types of events so as not to restrict access to George Square for extended periods of time. The theme of unrestricted access to enjoy this civic space all year round was prominent in workshop discussions (see Figure 4.3). Continuing the themes of informality and spontaneity, there



**Figure 4.3:** Type of events suitable for George Square. Source: Séverin Guillard.

was consensus that the square should continue to be an important space for demonstrations and protests, retaining a tradition in Glasgow for mass gatherings in George Square as a visible expression of democracy in action.

Discussions about the use of the square as an event space also veered into practical design considerations, with participants using terminology drawn from architecture and urban design about the value of events, culture and hospitality as 'interventions' that could 'activate' the square (Ivers 2018). Common to these discussions was a recognition that the physical features accommodated in public space are only part of the solution, with interactions between people and place being crucial in bringing spaces to life. In the final co-creation workshop participants were asked to produce a mock design, reflecting their priorities (Figure 4.4). This process illustrated an expressed view that George Square needed to cater for both events and more sedate uses. Indeed, most designs contained some form of event-space, though it



**Figure 4.4:** Mock design of George Square. Source: Séverin Guillard.

was often a designated area within the square, alongside other more valued elements, like greening.

### **Your Voice Counts: Participatory Rhetoric Meets Institutional Realities**

In the context of urban planning and design, Brain (2019, 177) has identified a shift in the balance of power and locus of agency from professional design expertise to a wider public, looking to ‘ground its practices in the formative aspirations of a community (rather than the technical issues of civic administration)’. The George Square city-wide conversation aligned with this trend given its emphasis on involving the general public in shaping the future of this important public space. However, this outward commitment to the formative aspirations of a community masks power relations and the continuing dominance of institutional actors in shaping the urban landscape. Despite the well-intentioned commitment to engage with the general public, the conversation was, in practice, a selective exercise with particular social groups represented more than others and the short timescales making it difficult to reach out to those less likely to participate because of lack of trust in institutions (Peinhardt and Storrington 2019). While the online activities generated over 2000 contributions, the detailed workshop interventions produced



relatively low levels of attendance, with only 52 attendees at hands-on workshops, 71 visitors at the pop-up exhibition and 39 attendees at the final co-creation forum. In addition, while the conversation was conceived to collect the views of ‘ordinary Glaswegians’ (personal interview, lead urban designer), there is an important role for professionals in the planning and design of urban space. Many participants in the co-creation workshops possessed expertise which justified their interest in attending, including professionals specialising in design or related practice (architects, designers, and transport planners). The cultural capital and social profile of workshop attendees influenced the nature of debate, reproducing power dynamics in the way they tried to exert their authority over how the square should be designed and used; for example, the male voice was dominant in at least two of the workshops. Some issues of representation were addressed in the final co-creation workshop, with a broader cross-section of Glasgow’s citizenry invited to contribute, including people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups and young people. However, the short timescale, ‘snapshot’ approach to the George Square conversation increased the risk of tokenism, of providing merely a veneer of meaningful engagement with citizens about an important civic space (Peinhardt and Storing 2019) when decisions have already been made.

In the context of the (re)designing of a well-loved space like George Square, the city-wide conversation produced a plethora of different ideas. There was evident passion and commitment from participants, whether online or in person, to feed into a process that would help them enhance a space that has lost some of its appeal in recent years. At the conclusion of the process, recommendations to the council included: ‘events that take place on the Square must benefit and be accessible to all citizens’ and ‘George Square should be a place for the common good of Glasgow, so that it predominantly offers free space that can be enjoyed by anyone at any time’. Crucially, it was also suggested that ‘the design process for the future of George Square must be rooted in public aspirations ... designers need to work with Glasgow’s citizens to ensure that their proposals have public support and reflect public aspirations’. This expressed desire for ongoing public involvement in the future (re)design of the square beyond the initial scoping exercise was reinforced by the lead urban designer who suggested that ‘there does need to be a collaborative approach. And it definitely has to be collaborative approach and not a consultative approach, a collaborative approach that ... needs a design team that have that built in from the start and kind of are up for it’ (personal interview). In response to these recommendations, there was recognition from the local authority in its Emerging Area Strategy (January 2020) of the need for a ‘new Event Space and Management Strategy’ (4), that would form part of a ‘wider city centre event space plan’ (4). The need for an Event Space and Management Strategy was confirmed in the Council’s commitment to the recommendations emerging from the city-wide conversation (Table 4.1).



**Table 4.1:** Public conversation recommendations.

Management recommendation	Action
GSq is special: the main civic space and special place in citizens' hearts	Management Plan Event Space Strategy
GSq should be a place for the common good, predominantly with free space available to anyone anytime	Event Space Strategy Common Good
GSq is one of various event spaces and its role/function should be reflected in the programme of events	Event Space Strategy
GSq should offer citizens the chance to showcase Glasgow's changing creativity	Event Space Strategy

However, despite the collaborative rhetoric, the actions following the city-wide conversation ultimately showed a need to 'craft an accommodation with the dominant institutional and ideological arrangements' (Brain 2019, 177). George Square has been subjected to institutional determination for many years based on the need to use it, instrumentally, as a place for hosting events that attract incoming visitors and help project the city to an international audience. As a Senior Officer responsible for events in the city confirmed, the Square is in demand from event organisers: 'when you talk to event owners right, where do they, where do they want to bring their event? ... they want tae go tae George Square ... they want to be in front a' the City Chambers' (personal interview). These imperatives challenged the rhetoric of participatory planning and design processes. In the case of George Square, the City Council's elected members decided that while part-pedestrianisation of the square was possible in the short term, contractual obligations with several major sporting federations means that the square will continue to operate as a major event space until at least the end of 2023 when the UCI World Cycling Championships will take place. In awarding the design contract for the square in April 2021, the Council reinforced the importance of the square as a venue for major events, stating that 'the redesign of George Square will factor in Glasgow's hosting of major events in the coming years'. So, while the George Square conversation clearly confirmed a desire on behalf of the public for the renewal and reimagining of the square as a public space with less traffic, more green space and fewer barriered marketplace commercial events, city leaders decided that hosting events there provides a focal point for the city as a place to draw in crowds and as a space for powerful place-specific mediation.

## Conclusion

Following a history in Europe where squares have long been used as a location for hosting events, George Square is valued in Glasgow as the civic heart of the

city, a place where people want to relax, meet others, walk through and gather for demonstrations or special civic events. However, in the context of increasing concerns regarding the role of events in the commodification of contemporary squares, George Square is an exemplar of contested geographies in action. Since the late 1980s Glasgow has invested in culture, sport, events and tourism as a means of restructuring its economy, and George Square has been an important stage upon which this particular version of urban place-making has been performed. This has led to concerns over the commercialisation of the city's civic heart, and uncertainty over the place of the square in the city's future vision.

While George Square has been structurally and institutionally determined in recent years to suit the urban entrepreneurialism of its governing authorities, the city-wide conversation initiated by city leaders was suggestive of a move towards a wider cross-section of views and interests shaping the future design and use of the square. Indeed, the participatory engagement methods utilised in the city-wide conversation generated diverse views about the square as an event space. This approach suggested a commitment to intentional and self-conscious action, with choices articulated by a broader public and then translated into a visual and spatial order of new design. However, despite the expressed desire for the square to be a public space primarily for uses other than commercial events, economic imperatives and long-term contractual obligations with external event owners means that the public's aspirations are left largely unfulfilled.

Squares, like other public spaces, have long had contested meanings and securing consensus on their suitability for staging events is unlikely to be achieved easily. Civic events with wider historic, social or political meanings will continue to remain a prominent feature of public squares. However, this study has shown a desire from the public for more nuanced urban planning and design strategies to ensure a better distribution of events around the city, reducing the reliance on some historically valuable public spaces and the accompanying negative impacts. In realising this ambition, there is an important place for longer term engagement processes with multi-actor involvement, clear design parameters and management plans. Public squares are important sites of communal celebration, representing more than just another event venue. Reflecting public aspirations in their design and use will ensure that public squares retain their value, providing a space for public debate about governance, cultural identity and citizenship.

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